Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Dave Taylor. Today is April 15, 2005 and I am again in Lubbock and Dave, you’re in Medina, Ohio. And let’s pick up where we left off. You were talking about some operations and kind of movement in the field. I’d like to get your comments on just what your impressions were of the enemy. Kind of general impressions, and then some specifics such as strengths and weaknesses.

DT: The enemy we mostly faced in our area were Viet Cong, not NVA, and the intelligence, it was fairly certain they were part of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion. And I think they had been beaten back pretty bad by TET of ’68, because we seldom saw them. When we did, they were just usually in small groups of maybe two or three. So I think they were beaten back pretty well. And what they did to make up for that was just to saturate the area with mines. But as I said, we seldom saw the enemy other than coming in contact with them through the placement of mines or booby traps.

RV: Ok. What did you tell your men about the enemy? How were you informed? Did you say, ‘Here’s kind of what we’re going to be looking for,’ or, ‘We’ll figure it out when we get there’?

DT: No, I think it was pretty much ingrained in my men before I even got there that the enemy was a wily foe, not often seen, and the key thing was not to get sloppy or lazy in the field where you may walk into an ambush and see them up close and personal.
But I don’t think they had the strength to do much in the way of ambushes either, because they had just been pretty much decimated. So it was mainly to encounter them in groups of two or three and several times when we did see them, they would be fairly far away and the problem there was by the time you called in artillery fire, they were long gone. Or you would have to be very, very lucky to get the first round to land right where they were at. If it did not, usually by the time it took you to adjust artillery fire, they were long gone.

RV: Was that frustrating for you all?

DT: Very frustrating on the one hand. On the other hand, I think my men felt good that they didn’t see the enemy. They had no contact. For me as a platoon leader, it was frustrating because I knew that eventually if we didn’t start getting some of these guys, we were going to see them when we didn’t want to see them.

RV: What did you think were your men’s impressions of the enemy? Did you hear scuttlebutt, or could you observe closely what they thought of who was out there?

DT: That’s a good question and honestly, I don’t recall the men ever talking much about the enemy other than having a grudging respect for them and that they were afraid if they got too sloppy or lazy, then they may get hit hard by the enemy. So they were constantly on alert. They did get lazy once in a while, but by and large they were constantly on the alert so they would not fall into an ambush or hit some mines or booby traps.

RV: Right. What kind of tactics…I mean, you said they would kind of hit and run, but were there any definite tactics you all could count on to face when you had contact?

DT: The only tactics really that were worrisome from the Viet Cong was sitting on a main fire base or sitting in a position for a long time, when they could get a fix on you. And there, the biggest problem was if you were assigned bunker duty on LZ Gator, because our battalion base camp was attacked several times when I was there, either by mortars or by sappers because it was a fixed target, it did not move, the Viet Cong knew everything on the base, and so that was a real danger, is being in a fixed area for so long
of a time, and for that reason I always preferred to be in the field because we could move around and the enemy could never get a fix on us.

RV: What would you say was the enemy’s greatest weaknesses?

DT: Lack of firepower, lack of manpower. They could never really get too much together in terms of hitting us in any way, shape, or form. The best they could muster would be maybe to send ten or fifteen sappers through LZ Gator once in a while. And they did that very effectively, but as far as encountering any main force out in the woods, that didn’t occur. They couldn’t do it.

RV: Did you…you mentioned, this is post-TET, obviously. 1969. So you talked about how they were sparse in number versus before TET 1968. Are you in any kind of position today to kind of reflect upon what you’ve read and studied and learned and talked about with people the people who were there before you got there and the differences between what the Viet Cong were doing and then post TET what the Viet Cong were doing?

DT: Yes, I still had people in my platoon that were there finishing up their tours, and even in TET of ’69, which occurred just before I got there, there was a little action. But by and large, I mean, the Viet Cong in TET ’68 hit the Chu Lai area, they hit a bridge on Highway 1 just north of LZ Gator on the way up to Chu Lai. They hit the Binh Son, and that’s B-I-N…or, B-I-H-N S-O-N. Provincial town south of us on Highway 1, and then even further south the provincial capital of Quang Ngai. They hit all of those simultaneously. And they paid a terrible price for that, not only from U.S. forces but also I was told the South Vietnamese acquitted themselves well down near the Quang Ngai area.

RV: Well, while you just touched on that, let me ask you about the South Vietnamese military forces. What was your general impression and how often did you work with them?

DT: I only operated with them once, and that was after we came out of the Rocket Valley, we ended up on the Batangan Peninsula on LZ Minuteman, which was northeast of Pinkville and the My Lai’s and that area. And our mission was to protect the refugee camp there as well as patrol through the area because the enemy did have a strong base in the area known as Pinkville, which was a very heavily concentrated village
of a lot of people. And it was a bad area. So on LZ Minuteman was a Vietnamese
company of soldiers that helped to man the perimeter with our company, Charlie
Company. And I just, from the casual faces I got to know the company commander there
and that kind of thing. But we never went on patrol together.

RV: Ok. Can you talk about what everybody else, what you heard what
everybody else thought about ARVN and Vietnamese Marines, etc?

DT: Yes. The others that had worked with them and my general impression too,
just seeing them on LZ Minuteman is, they realize that they were there for the long haul.
They knew Americans would come for one year and then leave, and yet those soldiers
were there for the duration, whatever that would be, and so they tended to be much more
cautious, more laid-back, not too willing to get too aggressive unless they had to because
again, I think they knew that their tour of duty was going to be a lot longer than ours.

RV: Ok. Dave, talk to me a little about some more of your basic day-to-day
operations. You touched on some in our last session, but if you could describe one thing
in particular, what was the difference…and you’ve also touched on this. What was the
difference between daytime and nighttime in Vietnam? You hear a lot of things about
that that may be myth or stereotype. What can you say about that?

DT: Well, daytime by and large was used for patrolling. We would stop at noon
for our main meal, whether we used our C-rations or once in a while, a helicopter would
come in and drop off some food for us to eat for our main meal, and then at night
basically you opened a can of fruit or something like that. You didn’t sit around for a
main meal. At night, we always went into an ambush, either together as a platoon or I
would split the platoon up in half and make two ambushes. And that was constant.
Patrol during the day, get your main meal at noon, at night pretend like you’re going to
put in a position and then at dark you move out into your ambush positions. You did not
want them to watch you where you were putting in at night and fixing you at that
location. That’s why we always moved after dark. Not too far, but someplace else just to
throw off the enemy in case they wanted to hit us. The difference was between that kind
of maneuver was when we went out on the Batangan Peninsula. And there, the patrolling
was less aggressive because of so many mines and booby traps on that peninsula. And I
think I mentioned before, the South Korean Marine Dragon Brigade had been there
before our battalion had got there, and they had left a lot of mines in place around their
firebases, so the Viet Cong used this very effectively, particularly on the Batangan
Peninsula. So we had to be very, very cautious during daytime patrols. And night
ambushes. We didn’t move around as much as let’s say, west of Highway 1 out close to
the mountains.

RV: Was there any truth to enemy ruling the night?

DT: I think they did in many respects because of the lack of aggressive patrolling
in the evening as well as the fact that that was their land. They knew the trails better than
us and yeah, they used the nighttime to move back and forth. In fact, just north of LZ
Gator was a village almost set in the shadow of the hill we were on and it was a pro-
Communist village, and the intelligence reports constantly said that the Viet Cong would
more out of the mountains in the west, go through that village at night just on the north
side of LZ Gator and cross Highway 1 out to the Batangan Peninsula, which led out to the
South China Sea and supposedly, they had a small rest and recuperation camp out there.
And they would pass by there constantly, and as much as we tried to put ambushes out in
the area around there, it was very difficult to catch them.

RV: Ok. Dave, could you comment a little bit on the relationships there within
your unit? Particularly those who were career military, the ones who were in it for life,
the lifers versus those drafted or enlisted on their own. What was that kind of
relationship like? Did you sense any tension or was there good cooperation?

DT: I did not sense any tension. At that point in time, I was planning to be a lifer
on active duty. I did not wear that on my sleeve, but I did not sense any tension and in
fact, the only real lifer that we had in my platoon was my platoon sergeant. He had come
out of being a drill sergeant basic training for a number of years. He was a staff sergeant
and this was his first tour in Vietnam, but even as a lifer he was very cautious. It was an
interesting relationship I had with him because even though he had been in the Army
longer, I was better trained and he made a point of telling me once at night when we were
setting up night ambushes and I was calling in defensive artillery fires, dry firing as we
say. He said, ‘You know, I don’t know how to do this. You need to be teaching me this.’
So I taught him how to do that and I taught him everything I knew from Ranger School
and so, no to answer your question, I don’t think there was any tension at all that I could
see in my company. Most of the people were not career soldiers. The first sergeant was, the company commander at that point in time had been. It was his second tour of duty. But there was no tension that I could see.

RV: Ok. Did you ever hear about any incidents of fragging or hear rumors of this?

DT: Not when I was there, I heard from other people that were in the battalion after I left that there may have been an incident that occurred. I think the bigger problem with us were the race, the blacks’ thing with racism and that kind of thing. The black power movement, I should say, and that was mostly for black soldiers who were in rear supply units, that kind of thing at LZ Gator that did not go to the field. They had a tendency to congregate together and develop a kind of an anti-military, anti-U.S. government feeling, and so the battalion leadership had to watch that.

RV: Can you talk about that racism? I mean, what did you see, witness, and hear?

DT: All I saw when we were back at LZ Gator was just that some blacks, not all, would congregate in their bunkers inside Gator and would play a lot of black music, whatever that could be. We didn’t have rap back then, but it was something similar to that. And basically when they were doing that they were probably smoking some marijuana as well, that you know, you basically stayed away from the bunker. That was kind of off-limits.

RV: Was that something stated, or everybody just kind of knew it?

DT: It was kind of everyone knew it. And the battalion leadership understood that they couldn’t let that set, and so they tried to break that up. In fact, the most effective battalion commander we had was the second one we had, who was a black battalion commander, and he made a lot of efforts to make sure that that did not get out of hand, even to the point where we had some military police come down from the brigade and stay at LZ Gator to do some periodic checks for marijuana and that kind of thing.

RV: Talk to me about the drug use. What did you see?

DT: All I ever saw…or smelled, actually. I never saw it, but I could smell marijuana from time to time back at Gator. Never in the field. And when my company manned the bunker line, there were certain soldiers, not all, who I suspect that were
smoking marijuana in their bunkers. I would walk along the bunker line checking, and
they would hide it and put it out, but you could smell that it had been there. And I think
it was more recreational than anything for them. Kind of to relieve the tension I guess
they felt. But it was not used a lot. It was used by a few, is the best way I could
characterize it. And I would also say that even with the black thing, I had a number of
black soldiers in my platoon, and when they would come back from the field, some of
them would be invited to come down to these bunkers where these blacks who were
always on Gator would be, and most of my men would not do that. They wanted to stay
with the rest of their buddies, white guys who they depended on in the field, and they
kind of stayed away from that. As I said, most of that kind of activity where it did exist
existed with people who did not go to the field.

RV: Why was it not tolerated out in the field?
DT: First of all, if you smoke marijuana, your position could be given away. Because that smell pervaded pretty far, even to the extent that when we went out on
ambush, I would not even allow my men to put on mosquito repellant because of the
smell. And that cost us dearly in getting bitten a lot, but…so you were very, very
attentive to that, and I daresay if someone would have tried smoking weed in the field,
they probably would have gotten their shit kicked or something else. That would not be
tolerated, because there you’re putting someone’s life at risk.
RV: Tell me about the smells, Dave. I’ve heard this before that you could smell
the enemy or they could smell you. Is this true?
DT: I suppose, if you had a concentration of those. I know when we would be
working in with Vietnamese in the hamlets; they had a certain smell to them. But the
biggest smell that I recall is the smell of burning wood, and it was like wet burning wood,
so it gave off kind of a rotten odor. And that was a constant smell we had. And the other
one was the smell of incense when you’re in the hamlets. And that smell, particularly the
smell of burning wood, rotting wood just pervaded the whole area.
RV: Ok. I’m curious about a couple of things. What about tension between you
all who were line soldiers, back out in the field, back to the base versus those who were
stationed permanently in the rear. How about any tension or…what was that like?
DT: My sense is that I did not see most...there were a few, but most of the men who went to the field did not congregate with those who were permanently on LZ Gator in our rear. They stayed with their own kind, and it was almost like two different societies, and they did not...there were a few, but that would get together with friends they had in the rear. But for the most part, they would just congregate with themselves in the company area. Or they would visit with people who had rear jobs who had been in the field and were soon getting ready to rotate to the States or maybe had been wounded and could not do field duty and were given jobs in the rear. They would certainly congregate with those folks because they were their buddies.

RV: Ok. How about friendly fire incidents? Did you experience any of those?

DT: Yes. Well, the first friendly fire incident was what I related earlier when the artillery dropped in front of us when we were in the Rocket Pocket. That was the only friendly fire incident that occurred to me. I know there were others that occurred in the battalion, and the most usual friendly fire incident was when artillery was called in, if the platoon leader or company commander did not know their location, they might have called artillery fire close to their position. That was not a problem with me, I was fortunate, I knew how to read maps and I never had a problem with getting lost. The other friendly fire would be helicopter gunships coming in to support and I heard a couple incidents of that, where the position was not properly marked by smoke, and the gunships got a little confused and may have fired on it. And there was one other friendly fire incident that is worth telling. And this just comes in my mind, which I think is rather interesting. We had gone back to the Rocket Valley, my platoon, for several days to look for Viet Cong that were firing rockets in the Chu Lai. And after a couple days, I was told that I would be replaced by a platoon of armored personnel carriers. This was H Troop, 17th Cavalry. And I thought to myself, ‘What a dumb idea,’ putting armored personnel carriers in that valley really restricted their movement. There were only certain areas they could go, and this was just going to make it too easy for the Viet Cong to set up mines for these tracks. In any event, they came about midday into the area. We got on the tracks and we moved around. I showed them where I wanted to go, and that night, which would have been the first and only night we would be together; the next morning my platoon would be picked up and they would be on their own. They went into their
wagon wheel, circular position and we, my platoon was inside the wagon wheel laying on
air mattresses for the evening, and they usually slept inside their tracks. That night, I
looked south of my position and I could see Puff the Magic Dragon, the AC-130 gunships
firing up the area. And they would drop flares and they would fire into areas that there
were no friendlies, and I was just amazed at the show. I could see these miniguns coming
out of the plane and thinking, ‘My god, whoever’s below the ground is not going to be
around.’ It was an awesome sight and I was enjoying the show, and then it moved a little
further north towards our position, dropped some flares, fired up again, and I thought,
‘Well, I hope they’re not going to come any further north, because I called in my
position. Otherwise, they’re going to get too close.’ And then they came further north
again, dropped flares, and were firing just south of my position. And I rolled off my air
mattress and grabbed a flare and shot it in the air, because if he would have come any
closer, we would have all been annihilated. And as I rolled off the air mattress, one of
the…our position was at the tail end of the spray of the miniguns from the aircraft, and
one of the rounds came right across and hit my air mattress.

RV: Geez.

DT: Fortunately, and I remember when I popped the flare, I thought, ‘If this pilot
thinks that this is a Viet Cong shooting a flare, we’re toast.’ But I shot the flare and he
pulled away. He did not fire anymore. It just so happened that one of the rounds that we
did catch across our perimeter went in the top of one of the armored personnel carriers
and ricocheted around inside the carrier, hitting one of the men that was inside. And so
we did have one casualty, and I called in a medevac. My first one in Vietnam, and it was
at night, and I went out there with strobe lights and we brought the medevac in and took
the casualty out. So that was a friendly fire incident. The next day, we had moved…my
platoon had moved to another area for a pickup point while the tracks were going around
in the valley, and the brigade called me and said, ‘We’re sending in an investigation team
on that friendly fire incident, and we want you to take the team back to the night position
where you were.’ And so we popped smoke and in came a helicopter with two
lieutenants from the brigade, and I got four of my men get on the helicopter with me for
security and we went back to the spot where we were the previous night. And these
lieutenants had never been to the field; I don’t think they could read a map. So I showed
them where we were on the map and we triangulated to hilltops and that kind of thing to
make sure they agreed, and they said yes. And then I showed them the coordinates, and
they were exactly the coordinates that I had called in prior to us putting in for the night,
and so I was cleared. The supposition was that I called in the wrong coordinates, and
that’s why I got hit. So somebody did not pass those coordinates up the chain of
command to where it got to the aircraft crew.

RV: Right.

DT: Several days later, my company went for a stand down in Chu Lai on the
beach, and the brigade commander always wanted to come in and just sit with the troops
for a little bit, and so my company commander and the platoon leaders were sitting with
the brigade commander, just having a talk about operations. And the brigade commander
said, ‘Oh by the way, is this the company that got hit by that AC-130 gunship?’ And my
company commander said, ‘Yes, that was Lieutenant Taylor’s platoon.’ And he looked
at me and he said, ‘Oh. Well, I’m sorry about that incident. Fortunes of war.’ And I
thought to myself, ‘Yes, you bastard.’ Had I called in the wrong coordinates, it would
have been end of career for me. But since the chain of command screwed up and did not
get the coordinates to the pilot, now it becomes a fortune of war issue. So that rubbed me
wrong.

RV: Yeah. I can imagine. Are you over that today?

DT: Oh yes. It was not a big deal. It really wasn’t a big deal; I just, I laugh more
at it than anything because the two lieutenants didn’t even know what they were looking
at. I had to tell them. And then I looked at the lieutenants when they agreed I had called
in the right position, and I said, ‘Listen to me. Airborne Rangers don’t get lost.’

RV: (Laughing). Dave, this brings up a good point about communication in the
field and within your unit and then back to your headquarters. What was communication
like in Vietnam? How would you describe it?

DT: Our communication was excellent. I usually would call the tactical
operations center if I needed to get fire support or gunship support and the company –
and this was when I had my platoon by ourselves in the field. The company would
always monitor the frequency so they were kept informed. So support was very quick,
particularly artillery support. Gunship support took a little longer, unless the aircraft
happened to be in the area. But by and large, I thought the communications were very
good.

RV: Ok. What about intelligence? How would you rate the intelligence in the
war for you? For your experience?

DT: For me as a platoon leader, I thought the intelligence was pretty good. They
would give us as much as they could find out on a daily basis if new information came to
the battalion intelligence officer and it was concerning an area that I was operating in,
that they would call us and let us know. So they passed on the intelligence as well as
anything. That was not the case later on, on June the 3rd when I got shot up, which we’ll
cover later. But that was the only time that I think intelligence failed us.

RV: Ok. Did you ever work with any K-9 units?

DT: No. Our battalion did. Other platoons did. I did not have the opportunity to
have them with me. I never requested them. My understanding from other platoons that
used them that they were ok. They were not great and they were not poor. They had
some value, but the dogs would play out pretty quickly in the heat, and so they couldn’t
stay out there too long.

RV: Did you ever work with troops from Australia, New Zealand, the ROK
troops?

DT: No.

RV: How about snipers? Did you operate with snipers from time to time?

DT: We had snipers, trained snipers in our platoon. The Americal Division had a
sniper training program, and those who had shot expert in their advanced individual
training or basic training may be pulled out to get sniper training. I believe I had one
who had been trained before I got there, but we did not have the rifle and never really had
an opportunity to utilize him. I did have a squad leader, a sergeant E-5. Sergeant Arias,
A-R-I-A-S, a Mexican-American who carried an M-14 with a scope, and he was pretty
good with that. It was not a sniper rifle, but he had longer range than our M-16s and if
we saw someone out far out, a VC who had stopped to smoke or do something, I would
always call Sergeant Arias to try to pick him off.

RV: How successful was he?
DT: He hit one once and maybe twice, but as usual, they would crawl away by
the time we would get over to them, and they would be gone. We couldn’t find them.

RV: How adept was the enemy at removing casualties from the battlefield? Or
from the jungle, from the bush? Not necessarily the battlefield.

DT: Yeah, I thought they were very good. I don’t know whether…certainly their
chances of survival would have been better had they allowed us to capture them and then
be treated, rather than crawl away in the jungle. So I don’t know if they were just afraid
of being tortured by the South Vietnamese Army or whatever, but if they could…my
experience was, if they could move at all, even though they were badly wounded, they
would not allow themselves to be captured.

RV: How would you treat captured enemy?

DT: We would take them in to get them fixed up, bandaged up, and then use
them for intelligence. We had in our company, as all companies did, Kit Carson Scouts,
former Viet Cong, and we had some South Vietnamese who spoke reasonable English.
And so we always had those folks available. In my platoon, I did not have one, but if I
needed one to question someone in Vietnamese, I would just call the company
headquarters and they would have their Kit Carson Scout get on the radio and question
the individual over the radio.

RV: Ok. Tell me about working with the Kit Carson Scouts.

DT: My impression is they were pretty good. Again, we did not have any with
my platoon. We did have a boy whose parents were killed by the Viet Cong. We
nicknamed him Sammy, and I would suspect he was probably about twelve or thirteen,
and he went to the field with us sometimes, and he learned English very quick. It was
broken English, kind of like American-Indian English. ‘I go, you come’ kind of talk.
But even he proved useful in interrogating suspects, and he would tell us in broken
English what they were saying. We did not take him to the field very often. We realized
that this was not a good thing to be doing, even though he wanted to go to the field badly.

RV: Why do you say that it wasn’t a good thing?

DT: It was just, to have a child like that in the field with all the danger just didn’t
make sense. It was not the moral thing to do. He wanted badly to go to the field with us.
We were his family. This is all he knew, but we tried to keep him in the rear as much as possible.

RV: Your unit was his family?

DT: Yes. We kind of adopted him as, every once in a while he would go down in the village by Highway 1 where our road led to from the base and would you know, get food and see some relatives. But my understanding was, his mother and father had been killed. I often wondered about Sammy, what happened to him after the war, and a soldier had told me who was in our company after I left, that some time in 1970, one of our soldiers grew close with Sammy and was able to adopt him and take him home with him to the United States.

RV: Really?

DT: Yeah.

RV: Wow. So you don’t know where this young man is?

DT: No I do not. But I’m happy that he did, because if the Viet Cong would have ever gotten to him, they would have killed him.

RV: Could you trust Sammy and the Kit Carson Scouts?

DT: I trusted them. I did not fully trust the Popular Force or our Regional Force, the PFs, RFs that were in some of the villages nearby. Just north of us, of LZ Gator, were two subhamlets called Tri Binh I and III. The I just north of LZ Gator, in the shadow of Gator, had Communist leanings. The one further north of that was ninety-five percent pro-government, and I spent a weekend there with my platoon as a show of force, because the Viet Cong were supposed…had said they would attack it. And there were some PF soldiers in there, and whenever I would be going over things with my men with the map, sometimes they would come over and look, and I would just kind of fold the map up. I did not trust them.

RV: Was that common, do you think? Or was that unique to your experience?

DT: I guess I can’t say. I don’t know.

RV: What about the Ruff-Puffs? Can you talk a little bit about them? What you witnessed?
DT: They were not…I mean, one had a Thompson submachine gun from World War II. They were lightly armed. Other than maybe being policemen in their village, I don’t see where they were very effective.

RV: Can you talk a little bit about the medevac? The dust-off pilots, helicopters, missions. What can you say about what you witnessed and the faith you had in them?

DT: In most cases, our dust-off or medevac was actually just a resupply helicopter or the battalion commander’s helicopter, his command and control helicopter that did all of the medevacs. A standard medevac helicopter I did not see very often. It was usually someone on a resupply mission that heard that someone was injured, and they would immediately go and pick up the injured person and get them back. So in a sense, every helicopter in Vietnam became a medevac.

RV: Ok. Dave personally, did your spirituality fluctuate, change during your war experience?

DT: No. I was raised as a Lutheran. We went to church every Sunday. I had a strong background in religious upbringing. But in Vietnam, it really…I guess I kind of lost it. I think where it helped was the Christian-Judeo ethic of morality helped me in terms of avoiding any possible war crime. And the opportunity for that was always present. And that’s what religion did for me. It gave me a strong sense of right and wrong that I could make good decisions. I did not participate in religious services or pray on a daily basis or read the bible or anything like that at that point in time. That took place later on after I got back from Vietnam. Then I had a religious conversion of sorts. So.

RV: When you say atrocities and had the opportunity to commit them, what do you mean by that?

DT: Well, I remember one time, we were south of LZ Gator, operating as a platoon in one of these so-called free fire zones. And I think free fire zones are misunderstood by many people in America. These free fire zones were set up by the South Vietnamese government that said, ‘Look, all the villagers in an area have been removed to refugee camps, so there are no friendly villagers. If you see anyone that fires at you, then you can fire back without calling for permission.’ And some people may think this is crazy, but that in fact is what it was. It was just a method to help clear
calling for fires, artillery support, or allowing you to fire yourself. It was just a means that gives you some confidence that there are no friendly forces in the area. Now having said that, in war, there are screw-ups like anything else in life. We were walking through an area that was a free fire zone, and up ahead of us my point man said there was a village, a hamlet with people, women, children, and so forth. And I said, ‘Well, we’re not going to go near it. We’re going to go around it, and if we get fired on from inside that hamlet, I did not want to be calling in artillery or gunships, knowing there were women and children there. So we just avoided it.

RV: So you just could walk around it, basically?

DT: We walked around it, and that was a screw-up in coordination, because there was a village there. That area never should have been called a free fire zone.

RV: Why do you think it was?

DT: Oh, I think it was just probably a lack of coordination. But when you get that, and you get that in war. In all wars. That’s why it’s incumbent on the junior leadership to use their brains and make good judgment.

RV: Right. Dave, do you want to talk a little bit about My Lai? Your impressions?

DT: I never operated in My Lai. Our company did not go down there. We were north of that on LZ Minuteman. Usually, Alpha Company would go into My Lai because they were used to it and the battalion commander wanted to…rather than send in a unit that had not been in that area, he kept sending in A Company. They had a strong company commander and they knew the area well, so it was better that they go in, unfortunately for them. It was a very tough area, and as a matter of fact, and the time I was in Vietnam the first half in 1969, one of the soldiers in Alpha Company that would go to My Lai was Tim O’Brien, the famous author. So he was with us.

RV: He was actually…

DT: He was in Alpha Company during the time I was there with the battalion, and he writes of his experiences in that area in the book, When I Die in a Combat Zone.

RV: Yes. How closely did you know him?
DT: I did not know him at all. Since then in writing my book about the
Batangan’s history in the war, I have talked to people that knew him from Alpha
Company.

RV: Ok. What have they said?

DT: They said he was highly intelligent, somewhat reserved, a deep thinker. He
was the company commander’s radio operator and kind of kept to himself a lot, but was
not a recluse. But I guess the general feeling was he was just kind of a deep-thinking
kind of a guy. But he had a lot of talent, and that’s why they used him as the company
commander’s radio operator.

RV: Why do you think he’s written so much about his experiences? I mean,
obviously he has success and it’s his income, his trade. But he’s quite prolific and his
stuff is read quite widely by different age groups in the United States. Why do you think
he’s writing so much, and why the success?

DT: I would suspect it’s a catharsis for him, first and foremost. And his love of
writing, and it’s something that he…it formed a basis so early in his life that he kind of
gravitates towards the Vietnam experience whether it be fiction or nonfiction, and he’s
written both. He takes it out of the Vietnam experience and the experience of the ‘60s.

RV: Yes. Dave, some general questions about life in the field and life in
Vietnam. How much contact did you have with home and the United States and your
family?

DT: As I recall, I may get a letter every two or three weeks, and then I would
send a very short letter. Sometimes I would get some foodstuffs and that kind of thing.
My letters were always very short. I would try to write the letter before nine in the
morning because it got so hot, the sweat would actually drip onto the ink and smear up
the ink, it was so hot. So I’d try to write my letters early in the morning. And there
wasn’t much I could say, other than, ‘It’s hot, I’m ok, I’m well,’ and you know, talk
about the weather.

RV: Right.

DT: And you know, that was it.

RV: Did you try to protect those you loved back in the United States by kind of
not telling them the dangers you were in?
DT: Yes, I did. And particularly my mother and father, because they had already
had three other sons—or, two sons go over to Vietnam. My brothers of course knew that
as an infantry officer, I was probably seeing a lot more than I was mentioning in my
letters, but they did not say anything to the parents.

RV: Have you—or did you since after you got back, talk to your parents about
what you did?

DT: Yes, my mother’s first words when she met me at Ft. Dix hospital, when I
was shot up and medevaced to Ft. Dix, she said, ‘I never knew you were exposed to this.
I always thought you were in the rear because your letters never mentioned anything.’
And I said, ‘Well Mom, what did you expect? I wasn’t going to tell you that we got hit
by mortars at night or anything like that.’

RV: Right. Right. Ok. Did you ever make any MARS phone calls?

DT: I did not. A couple of my men, I think when they had a chance to go to Chu
Lai, they would make those calls in Chu Lai.

RV: Ok. What about news from the United States? How did you keep up with
what was going on back in the ‘world’?

DT: Good question. I think we used to get a mimeographed newssheets from the
battalion headquarters from time to time on just some snippets of what was happening in
the world, with sports scores, that kind of thing. Other than that, as I recall it basically
came from the men receiving magazines from home. *Time*, *Newsweek*, that kind of thing.
It wasn’t something that really we paid much attention to. I basically had divorced
myself from the rest of the world, and I think a lot of my men did. What was important
to them was what was happening at home with their families, not what was happening on
the national scene. It was just what was happening at home with their families and then
what’s happening to them in Vietnam. The days just ran so close together, I never knew
whether it was Monday or Sunday or Saturday or anything. We just never knew. It
wasn’t important to us. Every day was the same.

RV: That’s a very interesting comment. What are the dangers of losing touch
with that kind of reality that you’d been used to all your life? Or were there dangers? Or
was that necessary to do over there, kind of divorce yourself from that?
DT: I don’t know, it just...to me, it did not seem important what day it was. It was just another day to go out in the field. I may have known the date. Let’s say the 4th of April. But I didn’t know if the 4th of April was a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, nor did it matter. It was just the dates. Here’s today’s date, and by such and such a date, you’re going to be doing this and this.

RV: Did you keep up with when you would be going home?

DT: No. I was in the early months there, that was the furthest from my mind. I think after three months, I was already thinking in my own mind that I would probably extend my tour. After my time in the field, I did not want to get stuck with sitting in the rear at LZ Gator. I was planning to volunteer to get advisory school training in country, and I was going to ask to be a Vietnamese advisor for six months.

RV: Why?

DT: It was just that the war was kind of an exciting thing, and I wanted to witness all aspects of it, and I thought an advisory tour would give me another side of the drama that was playing out. So my plan was, if I could stay healthy six months as a platoon leader when I was told to come out of the field, I would try to go to advisor school and be an advisor with the Vietnamese, and then maybe after that if I still wanted to stick around, then I would volunteer to be a company commander.

RV: Dave, was disease a problem within your unit?

DT: Yes, in a sense of infections and heat. We had a big problem with heat illness, heat casualties. I remember one time in the Rocket Valley, one of my men really came down with a lot of heat problems. We took all his clothes off. Fortunately, there was a stream nearby and we were able to put him in the stream to bring his body temperature down. I don’t know what we would have done had we not had that stream there. But he had suffered from heat, and so we put him in the stream and cooled him down, waited a couple hours to let him cool down, and then as I recall we got his clothes back on and we moved out. So heat was the biggest problem. Infections every once in a while might be an issue that would take a man out of the field. And then the other thing we had to guard against was malaria.

RV: What was that like? It was a constant threat? I know you were taking malaria pills, but what about...how else were you dealing with this?
DT: That was basically it. The key was taking your pills on time, and truthfully I don’t think I had been taking my pills on time, and that’s probably one of the reasons I got malaria. When we were in the Rocket Valley on ambushes one night, it was one of our last nights there. We were in an ambush and again, no one put repellent on because we didn’t want that smell pervading in the air, and the mosquitoes just ate us alive. Several days later, I think about the time of incubation, we were out on the Batangan Peninsula and I came down with malaria. So I think it was a combination of not having mosquito repellant and maybe not taking my malaria pills faithfully that caused me to get malaria.

RV: Tell me about your experience with malaria.

DT: Well, we were on LZ Minuteman, and it was at this point in time that I alluded to earlier, that the word had gone out to the Army in Vietnam that General Abrams wanted night patrolling. He wanted more night patrolling. He wanted to own the night, and I was the only Ranger-qualified platoon leader in our company at that time, and so the company commander asked me to start night patrols. And I had…and the Batangan Peninsula was bad enough to patrol during the day with all the mines, let alone at night. But I went down to the mortar platoon that used to be mine, and made prearrangements with where I was going and call in mortar fires at certain positions, and I codenamed those Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and so forth. And so our mortars were registered very well. So I was prepared to go. We were not going to do a lot of walking, but we’d move short distances from one position to another throughout the night. And my men were ready. They were not comfortable with doing this at night, but they were ready to go out, and it was at that night that I came down with malaria, and I was running a hundred and four degree temperature, which was getting too high, so they called in a medevac to take me to Chu Lai, and I remember my medic coming to me saying, ‘The men are sorry that you’re coming down with malaria. We don’t want to see you leave, but on the other hand, we’re not going to have to go out on patrol tonight.’ And so that’s what happened. I was lifted off to Chu Lai for several days. They put me in an ice bath and some other things and got my temperature pretty much back to normal. While I was there in Chu Lai, and I think this was maybe two days alter after I got there, my platoon leader – my platoon sergeant, who had been a former drill sergeant, had the
platoon, and in combination with another platoon, they went out with a captured Viet
Cong who was going to show them a hidden cache. So they had this Viet Cong and they
were going up a hill on a trail, but they thought it would be ok because the Viet Cong was
walking the trail in front of them so they wouldn’t trip any booby traps, and as they were
going up the trail, the Viet Cong were waiting for them. And there were no booby traps,
but they were command-detonated mines. And so, the mines exploded. I believe there
were two that exploded and the Viet Cong were so sinister, the booby traps were put off
the side of the trail, realizing that as soon as a bomb went off on the trail, the men would
instinctively jump to the side of the trail for cover. And that’s when they hit all the
booby traps. My platoon sergeant stepped off the side of the trail and actually hit another
command-detonated mine, which took off both of his legs above the knees. And my
medic took care of him, and then there was another…that explosion created kind of a
little crater, and so my medic went down into the crater to get someone else that had been
wounded. So here I am in the hospital, and one of the orderlies came in and said, ‘Hey,
Lieutenant Taylor, what…did you say you were with the 5th of the 46th?’ And I said,
‘Yes.’ And he said, ‘We’re just bringing in a bunch of men that were hit with…heavily
hit by mines.’ And I said, ‘Well, what company?’ And he said, ‘Charlie Company.’
And I said, ‘Well, what platoon?’ And he said, ‘Well, I don’t know the platoon.’ And I
said, ‘Well, give me some names.’ And then he started naming off my platoon sergeant,
two of my squad leaders. One had lost a leg; one had lost a forearm. And I believe there
were two or three that were dead. So I got out of my bed and I got in a wheelchair. We
weren’t allowed to walk on our own at that point, and wheeled myself down to the
emergency recovery room and went inside. My men had already come out of surgery,
and so there they were, laying in cots side-by-side. And behind a curtain were the two or
three men that were dead. And they asked if I’d identify them, and I did. And I just
spoke briefly to the men, and I was struck by how positive they were. And I think that’s
because they were just happy to be alive, and the thought process of how this is going to
change their lives just didn’t enter into it yet. There was no way they could process that
far. So they were just happy at that point to be alive, and they were upbeat and cheerful,
and I was very surprised at that.
RV: What was that like for you, emotionally and psychologically to be there in the hospital while they underwent this and then to actually see them right there inside the hospital?

DT: I was very angry, because I thought maybe had I not gotten malaria, I could have been in the field and we would not have done what they did. Maybe we would have done something different and we wouldn’t have fallen into that trap. So I was very angry that I was in the hospital and I let my men get into that situation. I do remember also on my way back and forth to this recovery room, we passed by the Vietnamese ward, and inside the Vietnamese ward were not only Vietnamese civilians that were being taken care of, but they were also prisoners of war. And they had a Viet Cong…not a Viet Cong, they had a military policeman at the entrance to the ward. I asked an orderly, because I felt very strong that we should not be giving the prisoners that kind of care. And I asked the orderly why they had the MP there, and he said, ‘You know the reason as well as I do.’ He said, ‘We have too many wounded soldiers passing back and forth, and we had to make sure they wouldn’t go in and do something to these men.’ So they were protected under the rules of war with the military policemen. And I talked to one of the nurses later who happened to work in that ward, and she had told me it was probably the toughest assignment that they had in the hospital, not only with the enemy prisoners, taking care of them, but also the Vietnamese civilians, that they simply had never seen things like sinks or toilets before, and the one gal they had in there had just given birth to a baby premature, and when it came time for her to urinate, she would actually climb up on the sink and urinate in the sink because she had never seen plumbing before. And so it took a special kind of person to work that ward, for both reasons. For the cultural reasons and also the fact that they had prisoners of war there. And at that very time that I was there in that hospital, one of the nurses working in that ward was Lieutenant Sharon Lane, who was killed in June, just a couple months later, when a 122-millimeter rocket was fired from Rocket Valley, where we had patrolled, into Chu Lai and hit the hospital. And she was to be the only female soldier in the war killed by hostile fire.

RV: Do you remember her?
DT: No, I never met her. She lives nearby – lived nearby in Canton, Ohio. I’ve met her mother since then. But...she caught a tiny fragment in the throat, I think. Carotid artery and died from that fragment.

RV: How did you feel, Dave, about those prisoners being in there? Did you have any thoughts about, ‘If that MP wasn’t there, I’d like to get in there and have some words with them,’ or coming back from seeing your men?

DT: I don’t...I felt bitter. I’m not sure what I would have done. I don’t think I had it in me to just kill them. Probably I wanted to beat on them, but not shoot them or anything like that. It was just, I just felt bitter. And bitter that I was in the hospital probably more than bitter at the enemy that were using the hospital. I do remember another time when I was there with malaria, we got some rocket fire at the Chu Lai base and they came close to the hospital. I had no weapon and there was a master sergeant in the bed next to me, and so we both went underneath the bed, and this nurse came into the ward and I was screaming at her, ‘Get me an M-16.’ Because I looked at the other end of the ward, which had a door that went out into the open, and I could just picture some Viet Cong sappers coming through that door. Now we were probably the furthest in the base as anybody could be, but still. I felt naked without a weapon. And she said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll protect you.’ And she had a helmet on that was over half of her eyes; she could hardly see. And she had an M-16, and I don’t think she knew even how to use it. And I just felt so frustrated, and the master sergeant under the bed next to me said, ‘Don’t worry LT, you’ll be all right.’ I was just, it was a situation I was not used to being in. I’d rather be in the field where I had rifles and grenades and machine guns, and here I had nothing.

RV: Right. You’re in your hospital gown under the bed.


RV: Dave, have you dealt with that incident, your men being wounded and all that since the war? Or was that something you never really had to overcome?

DT: I never...it was something that I could manage and I never had any depression over it or anything like that. More sadness at times. But no, I never had any lasting effects from that.

RV: Ok. Dave, let’s take a break.
DT: Ok.

RV: Ok Dave, continuing now. Let me ask you a couple of other general questions before we continue with what happened to you when you returned to the field from the hospital. If you could comment on R&Rs...did you take an R&R?

DT: No, I was not there long enough. I only lasted about four and a half months in Vietnam. And so I was not eligible for an R&R. That usually occurred after your six months of field duty for an officer, but usually around the six-month period. Some of my men had been on R&R and came back to the company and I would ask them where they went and one went to Australia, another went to Thailand, and based on what he told me about Thailand and Bangkok, I had decided that when it’s my turn for an R&R, I would go to Bangkok, Thailand.

RV: Why?

DT: Well, he said there was a lot to do. You could go down to the beach. Lots of pretty, young girls around. And you know, being in the city, there was a lot more to do, and so I decided that that’s probably where I wanted to go.

RV: Ok. Tell me a little bit about entertainment. What would you all do when you did have down time and you were able to kind of just sit back and relax a bit?

DT: All of my men had tape cassette recorders that they played music from the States, the music from the ‘60s, particularly the Motown music. The Temptations, that kind of thing.

RV: Do you remember specific songs that you hear today that take you back there?

DT: A lot of The Temptations kinds of music. Their favorite hits, that kind of thing. And so...now, the other favorite song of course was when an entertainment group would come through on LZ Gator, we had a little bit of an amphitheater on Gator. I may have said this earlier in the interview, I’m not sure. But either a Filipino group or a Korean group, I think I saw one of each. And then they would sing a lot of the rock tunes as well. But the most favorite song they would sing would be, \textit{We Gotta Get Out of This Place}. And so that was always...and it’s amazing to me that people would tell me later that these singers who sang in fluent English did not speak English. A lot of these groups
would literally memorize the songs and sing it, but they couldn’t speak a word of English. And it was amazing how fluent they were when they were singing the songs.

RV: Did they sound pretty good? Did you guys…maybe you didn’t care, you just wanted…

DT: Well, they sounded good and then the females in the singing groups really looked good. They wore low-cut dresses, tops, and mini shorts. Which is probably not a good thing for GIs because when you’ve been in the field, even those old mamasons with the Betelnut teeth started looking pretty good. So this was not good to be looking at these entertainers, but it was quite a treat.

RV: But wasn’t that good for morale overall?

DT: Yes it was. I was always uncomfortable sitting there because I looked around in this amphitheater with so many soldiers and thought we were just sitting ducks for a mortar fire, and I was always uncomfortable about that. And of course we used civilians inside Gator as part of the winning the hearts and minds and paying locals with currency. They would fill sandbags; they would do odd and end jobs. At least half of them, if not all of them, were Viet Cong and I remember…

RV: How do you know that?

DT: Well, it was just…we surmised that first of all. Second of all, the incident a little later when the battalion was overrun, some of the men that were killed inside LZ Gator we recognized as being the laborers that were used. In fact, one of them was the barber. We had a little barbershop inside Gator and the Vietnamese cut hair. He was one of the Viet Cong sappers that was killed. And I remember when we had this entertainment troupe – and this would have to be I think about maybe late April ’69. We were back on Gator, and I was watching the show and one of the soldiers who was kind of the guard for these civilian laborers brought the laborers to watch the show. And I was sitting back kind of halfway up the amphitheater where the officers sat, and this group of Vietnamese laborers were brought up and they were to my left. And I’m watching the show and I glanced to my left, and instead of watching the show, the Vietnamese laborers were surveying the bunker line. And one was talking out the side of his mouth to another one. And I really got pissed over that, and I had my M-16 because you always carried your weapons with you inside Gator. And to make a point, I took my M-16 and I pointed
it towards the Vietnamese. And the one Vietnamese looked at me with these eyes that could kill, you know. And he’s kind of a glaring eye and then he took his eyes off me. I never forgot that. And I just…it wasn’t my place to say anything, but I just, it pissed me off that we were doing this. That we had them inside the wire. It was common sense told us it was not a good thing, and it just rubbed me wrong that we were doing this. And sure enough later on, a few weeks…a couple weeks later, the perimeter was overrun by sappers and our battalion commander was killed.

RV: Wow. And you think it’s a direct result of these folks?

DT: Oh absolutely. They knew the bunker system probably better than some of our soldiers knew it. And when they came through, they came through the right spot. They went directly to the tactical operations center and the battalion commander’s bunker and before he could get out, they threw a satchel charge…actually, he got out of his bunker, his sleeping quarters, and he went into a bunker that was next to his sleeping quarters, which was the proper thing to do. And he was wounded getting out of his sleeping quarters, then when he went into the bunker, they just watched him go in and threw a satchel charge in the bunker.

RV: Geez.

DT: And they were peeling pieces of him off the wall when they finally got to him.

RV: Yeah. Dave, how do you feel in a situation like that? A war where you literally can’t officially particularly tell, you know, that this is the enemy sitting right beside you, right inside your own lines, working for you guys. What do you do in a situation like that? How do you deal with that psychologically? It has to be frustrating. As a warrior, it has to be frustrating.

DT: Yeah, it is very tough. It was probably the toughest war we’ve ever had for that reason, and it required certain precautions that at times were taken, other times were not taken. Such as allowing people to work inside your base camp. And we did the same thing in Chu Lai. There were literally hundreds if not thousands of Vietnamese civilians that worked inside the Chu Lai complex every day. And a number of them were Viet Cong, and they were spotters for the rockets that would be fired in from the Rocket Valley. They would walk in the next day after rockets landed and probably take a look at
where they landed, and then at night they would get back and send the messages back, ‘Ok, you were off by so many meters from where you last shot, so adjust your fire.’ I know when I was at the battalion division combat center for my in-country training when I first arrived in Vietnam, we had received some rockets that hit the beach by the long-range reconnaissance company headquarters. The next morning, the company commander looked out the window of his orderly room and saw one of the Vietnamese workers actually walking off the yardage of where the round landed to where their ammunition point was. And I knew that because I would go down there every day as I mentioned earlier to see if I couldn’t get assigned to the LRP unit. And after the rockets fell one night, I went down there because I knew that they had landed on the beach, and fortunately they missed the company area, and the company commander related the story that he had seen the Vietnamese marking off where the rounds had landed, and I asked him, ‘Well what happened to the Vietnamese worker?’ And he said, ‘Well,’ and I’m quoting now. ‘Well, let me put it this way. He didn’t go home that night.’ So that’s the kind of thing you had throughout South Vietnam and in my judgment, when you had forward operating bases out in the boonies like we were at LZ Gator, that was the wrong place to put civilian workers.

RV: Do you think that kind of thing is going on in Iraq for example today where you simply can’t tell if these are insurgents or allies?

DT: Yes, I think a certain part of that is going on. Absolutely. And as witnessed by the camp that was blown up in Mosul, where there was an insurgent in an Iraqi uniform, and he was strapped with lots of…and he got inside I guess the mess area or something and blew himself up. So.

RV: Ok.

DT: Had we had some Vietnam-era commanders there, maybe that could’ve been prevented, because that was…they should’ve at least been searched before being allowed to go in there.

RV: Right. Dave, a couple of other general questions. How much alcohol use did you witness? I’m guessing little in the field, but back in the base area, back at LZ Gator?
When we were assured that we would not have to go out for a couple days, we drank. We got all the cold beer we could muster, and certainly that was true when we went for a stand down, which was only once at the Chu Lai beach. The beer couldn’t come fast enough. I also remember that when we came back from the field once on LZ Gator, we were told we were going to be there a couple days. One of my men got a Dear John letter, and so what you did in a situation like that is you immediately took his weapons, his grenades, all his ammunition away from him. Our company, the commander’s jeep driver was going into Chu Lai to the PX, and I gave him some money to get a bottle of bourbon. He came back and I gave the bottle to the guy and just told him to have at it, and we kind of kept an eye on him so that…usually they would just get plastered drinking if they got something like that, or just to be back in the rear if we were assured we weren’t going to the field, yeah. We would drink lots of cold beer and play cards and have a good time.

What other kind of entertainment? You mentioned music and you mentioned the drinking and cards. What else would you all do?

That’s about all I could remember. For me, it was you know, having a few cold beers was a real luxury. And cleaning my weapons, making sure my platoon got their weapons cleaned before anything took place. Because maybe we would be told we would be back on Gator for a couple days, but that didn’t always turn out. I remember one time, we got back to Gator and we were told we would be there for two days, and later that afternoon the company commander sent me back to the field with my platoon. So we always cleaned weapons, turned in ammunition, extra ammunition, extra grenades. I did not like grenades being in our platoon tent, so we would turn those into the supply room until it was time to go out to the field again.

Right. Dave, what kind of contact would you all have with women in Vietnam?

The only contact we had…well, we had contact with Vietnamese women when we would be passing through a hamlet, and every once in a while you would come across a young Vietnamese girl. By girl, I would say in her teens or early twenties possible. And so I’d have to just keep an eye on my men. They would always want to try to strike up a conversation, that kind of thing. The other contact with Vietnamese
women would be on LZ Gator. Sometimes they would be at the base of the hill, beyond
the bunker line, selling themselves. They would make motions of why they were there,
and sometimes you would find some GI that would just go on down there, go through the
wire to go down to get satisfied. I was walking my bunker line one time and I saw a cut
in my wire in front of one of my bunkers, and I looked down and I saw a guy come out of
the bushes, a small bush with this Vietnamese girl, put his pants on and start coming up
the hill right through the opening that he made in my wire.

RV: Wow.

DT: And this man was not part of my company. He was with another company.
And I just stood there watching him, and when he finally got up to the top of the hill, he
was pretty out of breath. He said, ‘How are you doing, sir?’ And I chewed him out for
making an opening in my wire. And so I got his name and I walked over to his company
headquarters and talked to the first sergeant, and I was pretty pissed. And so the first
sergeant took care of this guy. I think the greater problem was putting a hole in the wire
rather than going and getting laid. But then he sent some men over to repair the wire. So
that was another kind of contact. And that happened all the time. That happened all the
time with these women selling themselves. The other one would be at the village on
Highway 1 that connected the dirt road leading from LZ Gator down to Highway 1 right
at the intersection of the dirt road and Highway 1 was a little village called Nuch Mau.
That’s N-U-C-H and then M-A-U is how that was spelled. And it was always interesting
because just before you got to Highway 1, while you were still on the dirt road, there
were some hooches there, and one of them was a whorehouse. And so when we were on
Gator, every once in a while, I would be tasked to take a patrol at first light in the
morning with a portable minesweeper and sweep the dirt road from LZ Gator out to
Highway 1 to make sure the VC didn’t put any mines in the road the night before.

RV: Tell me about a portable minesweeper.

DT: Right.

RV: What is that?

DT: It’s just basically a hand-held, kind of looks like a broom but at the end of
the broom instead of a broom there’s a flat metal surface that detects metal under the
ground and gives off a static noise like a Geiger counter. And the soldier using it would
have earphones on, and so he could hear that. And so basically, you just walk very slow
and you move the detector from left to right across the dirt road and just move slowly as
you swept the road, kind of like sweeping with a broom. It was a slow process, but you
just took your time. Sometimes we could speed it up if we had two metal detectors, and
so…but at first light in the morning, not every soldier really wanted to get up and do that
kind of thing. I could understand that; if I gave them orders to do it, they would do it.
But in order to incentivize them to do it, I would go through my bunkers when it was our
turn to patrol and say, ‘Ok, who wants to get laid this morning?’ And some people would
say, ‘I’m up for it, I’m up for it,’ and that’s how I would get my patrol together.

RV: (Laughing)

DT: So I didn’t have people grousing. There was a purpose for them being out
there. And I remember the first time we did that, we swept the road down to the village
and the military police from LZ Bayonet, which was the brigade headquarters up across
from Chu Lai, would always try to get down Highway 1 at first light to go into the village
to keep the GIs from using the whorehouse. And so what I did is when we got to that
point where we were still on the dirt road but we were entering the village and the
whorehouse was right there, I would keep the man with the metal detector out on the dirt
road going back and forth, but he wasn’t going anywhere. My men, I would tell my men,
‘Ok, go in and do your business.’ And I remember after the men had gone into the
whorehouse once, I looked down at Highway 1. I could see visually, and here came the
military police. And I waved at them, ‘Don’t come up here, I haven’t swept the road
yet.’ And they said, ‘Ok,’ and they took off. And then I remember going in with my
platoon sergeant, into the whorehouse, which was a series of rooms, and I went in and I
locked and loaded with my M-16, thinking there might be Viet Cong in there. And I
went in there and the mamason got upset that I had my rifle pointing around. There were
two Vietnamese males in there. I don’t know if they were local soldiers or what. And
the mamason was kind of upset that I was pointing my rifle, and my platoon sergeant put
his hand on my right soldier and said, ‘Take it easy, LT, these are friendlies.’ And so
then he went ahead and did his business, and then when everyone was done, we came out
and…I did not partake, incidentally. I was afraid of catching disease. So when my men
came out, then we all walked back to LZ Gator. And then the only other female contact I
had was during the one stand down at Chu Lai. We were having a good time on the
beach, frying steaks and drinking beer, and there was a gal from the…I think she was
either the USO or the Red Cross. Most probably the USO who came over kind of
flaunting her stuff. And my men, who hadn’t seen a white female for a long time were
kind of just hanging all over her, and I suppose if we were back in the States, they
wouldn’t have given her a second glance, but she was a queen in that environment. One
of my men wanted to get a photo and he put his arm around her to hug her and
everything, and she snapped at him and pushed him away, and that really got me mad.
You don’t do that to my men. I mean, you brought it on. So I cursed her out. And just
then, a staff sergeant walked over who had been working with the USO, and I cursed him
out too for allowing her to come over and enticing my men and then rebutting them. And
now you understand, I had a few beers as well, so they walked away, and I just
thought that to be extremely unfair.

RV: What ended up happening?
DT: She never came back, and I don’t know. I mean, we went on with our
business of drinking beers and eating steaks.

RV: Right, ok. What about homosexuality? Did you ever encounter that in
Vietnam?

DT: No, not a bit.
RV: Didn’t hear about it, see it, nothing?
DT: No, never. Never, never. That was not even thought of or…I never heard
anything about that whatsoever.

RV: Ok.
DT: We always thought…and it was strictly culture. The Vietnamese men would
walk holding hands.

RV: Yes.
DT: And some of the guys, particularly from the country and everything would
always look at that like, ‘That doesn’t look right, they must be queer.’ And I would tell
them, ‘No, that’s simply the culture.’ But no, homosexuality never entered my radar
screen the whole time I was over there.
RV: Ok. Dave, when you’re out in the bush, did you come across any wild animals that you remember?

DT: No. Only the one time in the Rocket Pocket when we were on an ambush, we had a wire going...it was an L-shaped ambush, so at both ends of the L I had a wire going across to each of the two men that were on the end that they would pull at night to make sure the other was awake. And apparently an animal ran through our ambush and broke the wire, and I remember a black soldier that was there on ambush at night, and he was so scared he kind of screamed and I could see the whites of his eyes. But other than that, never ran into...I could hear them at night sometimes, and I thought it was most likely an animal, but we could never be sure if it wasn’t a sapper or someone like that. But we never ran into snakes or tigers or anything like that.

RV: Does that surprise you now, looking back that you’re in this tropical area out in the jungle in the mountains?

DT: Yeah, it did. I think the more likely time you would run into that would be at night with ambushes, and I guess I just lucked out. Lots of leeches of course in the water, but animals, I never had an experience with them.

RV: Ok. Did you or anyone in your unit keep pets?

DT: I believe we had a dog. And I believe another platoon may have had a monkey.

RV: Ok.

DT: And I think we did, one of the guys had a dog, but I didn’t pay much attention to it.

RV: Ok.

DT: The dog, the pets did not go to the field. They always stayed back with the company.

RV: Sure. Sure. Can you talk about any civic action that you all participated in while you were out in the field?

DT: When we had time, if we were passing through a hamlet and if we had the time and if we had the supplies, my medic wanted to work with the local people and find where there were some sores or cuts or anything like that, where he could bandage them up and I would allow him to do that, regardless of how friendly the village may have
been or may not have been, I thought that it was just a human thing to do. And so we
would do that. The battalion itself, we had a battalion surgeon, a captain who would go
out on what they called MEDCAPS. And they would go to local villages with a lot more
supplies and that kind of thing. So that was the right kind of thing to do in terms of
winning hearts and minds. Having Vietnamese civilians come on your base and working
inside the base was not the right thing to do.

RV: Ok. How did the villagers treat you all when you would come to a village?

DT: Usually they were very friendly. Sometimes they would just stare at you.

You got to a point after a couple months of Vietnam, you had a sixth sense of whether a
village was friendly or not. First you would, if you were near a village, you could call
that in and the battalion intelligence officer would call you back and tell you to the best
of his knowledge whether that was a friendly village or not. But you could also sense it
by the way the people looked at you and the way the village was. If you saw a village
that had a lot of animals in it, dogs, that kind of thing, it’s possible it was a pro-VC
village. If you saw a village that was somewhat impoverished that didn’t have a lot of
animals running around, it may have been a pro-government village and the VC would
just take the animals from them.

RV: Ok, can you explain that for people listening to this, we’re not going to
understand why.

DT: Well, because if you did not support the VC, then they would take all of
your rice supplies, your animals for eating and that kind of thing. If you supported the
VC, then they would let you stay healthy as it were as a village because you were
providing them active support. Now that was not always the case. As you got closer to
the major towns, then the hamlets that had a lot of animals and that kind of thing tended
to be pro-government. But I’m talking about further out near the mountains. That’s
when you could tell which villages were supporting the VC and which were not.

RV: That’s interesting. I’ve not heard that before.

DT: Yeah.

RV: Dave, could you briefly or at whatever length talk about something that
civilians might not understand and often when I speak with individuals at reunions or
students, they don’t understand the closeness of the relationships formed within a military
unit. And I’m talking about personal relationships with the men to your right and to your left. Can you comment on that? And how that comes about and how strong that is?

DT: Well, this is a fact of our humanity. I remember in the business world, I lived in Venezuela for three and a half years for BF Goodrich, and down there, your friends became your family and we because very close to other expatriates who spoke English, and we’re friends to them today. And so that’s even magnified more so in war. Your family is not there, so your comrades become your family and you depend on them. You depend on their willingness to be in the field with you, their willingness to expose themselves to danger in order to protect each other. And so you become close, and close in an interesting kind of way, where you criticize each other, you have lots of jokes, you call each other names, you have nicknames for everyone. You rarely called anyone by their name. It was always a nickname, and it was easy to find a nickname for someone based on their characteristics or based on something that happened or based on their name itself that would lend itself. So they were your world and you didn’t see much outside that world. They were with you day and night. You didn’t have much contact with anyone else, and so they became very important to you. I mean, very few of us have a mindset of becoming a monk, taking a monastic existence. We need other people, and when you’re placed into a war situation, those other people are your fellow soldiers that are out in the field with you every day.

RV: Right. What about the discussion amongst veterans after they returned from a war experience saying that the reason that they fought was for the people they were with, their unit. Not first and primarily for the country or for the cause, but it was really for those who were in that foxhole with them. Is there any truth to that?

DT: Absolutely, and I think that goes with every war, even World War II, where the reason for the war and the objective of the war was a lot more defined than an unconventional war such as Vietnam. But when you get with the soldiers on the ground, they don’t think of things in terms of geopolitical considerations. It’s far beyond their capacity to even be concerned about that. All they know is what is in front of them and what they are told to do day by day. They don’t generally get caught up in the grand scheme of why they are there, other than the fact that by luck or happenstance or in some
cases by their own way that they are there and that’s their reality. So they deal with their
reality every day on a very localized level.

RV: Dave, while out in the field, did you ever come across areas that had been
sprayed by defoliants? What kind of contact did you have with defoliants, if not there out
in the field?

DT: Fortunately for me, my platoon had never been in an area that had been
sprayed. Usually, those areas were further out in the mountains where members of our
battalion would go from time to time. I was fortunate not to be sent into any of those
areas when I was in Vietnam. And I don’t know of any time that they sprayed in any of
the areas during the four and a half months that I was there in Vietnam. But it did
happen, and in hindsight I talked to veterans of our battalion who actually operated in
those areas. They may have been called in to assess the damage after a B-52 strike, and I
remember one soldier telling me that he went in there and they were out of water and
they could see that the trees, the leaves on the trees were starting to rot away from the
spraying. They didn’t think much of it and they put their canteens right down in the
water to get something to drink because you know, they just didn’t think of that being a
danger. And of course the official word was that it was not harmful to humans.

RV: What do you think about that now?

DT: Well definitely it is. And I know in the two trips that I made to Vietnam
since the war, one of the things that came up from a former Viet Cong that I talked to was
how badly the Vietnamese people suffered after the war from the effects of Agent
Orange. And I know that Americans suffered from that, but the Vietnamese people
suffered more because they were left there.

RV: You know that the U.S. government’s official position here is that based on
long-term studies, especially of Air Force personnel, that it does not cause these severe
deformities and whatnot. Why do you think that is?

DT: I don’t know. I don’t know whether the government looks at it in terms of
liability. I’m a strong believer in cause and effect, and I can’t think of any other reason
for that to occur other than the use of defoliants.

RV: Ok. Dave in general, tell me what Vietnam the country looked like.
DT: I think Vietnam is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. It was always a pleasant escape from the war to be up on a hill looking down through a valley, looking at rice paddies and especially in the evening as the sun started to set, what a gorgeous country. It was just beautiful. Of course we could not…what marred that vision for us was the fact that we knew down in that valley that looked so pretty, there were lots of mines and booby traps and a possible ambush. But to be able to once in a while just to have a view of the country and look out over the South China Sea and see the Vietnamese fish in the ocean and everything…just absolutely gorgeous. Just beautiful. Breathtaking.

RV: What about the weather? I know you described the heat, but what was the weather generally like during the months you were there?

DT: During the months I was there, I escaped most of the rainy season because I arrived in late February and I left in mid-June. So it was always hot, very hot, and it would get hot to…I think it would get to be about 95 degrees by ten o’clock in the morning and it would pretty much stay at that the rest of the day. It was just the unbearng heat.

RV: Ok, getting back to your specific tour. Once you finished at the hospital and you get back out to your unit, tell me about what you all do and what happened?

DT: Well, two things happened when I was in the hospital. First was the mine incident with my platoon sergeant and those men, and then a little later on – and I believe the mine incident occurred around May the 2nd or 3rd. And then on May the 12th was when LZ Gator was overrun by sappers and our battalion commander and a number of others were killed. Shortly after that, I returned to the battalion. The protocol was for people who suffered from malaria, we were supposed to be sent down to Cam Ranh Bay for rest and recuperation and physical therapy, just to get our bodies back in shape and I refused to go. I told the hospital to just send me back to my unit. I was not going to go down to Cam Ranh Bay. I wanted to get back to my platoon. They had lost me, they had lost the platoon sergeant, and so I needed to get back to the field, which is what I did. Shortly after that, our company was tasked to go far south of our area of operation under operational control of the 1st of the 52nd Battalion, which operated west of Quang Ngai. The intelligence was that there was an NVA regiment that may be on the move coming...
out of the mountains to attack Quang Ngai or the Binh Son district town. And the 1st of
the 52nd needed some extra help to cover that area. So we went out as a company since
we were going to work against a possible NVA regiment, we were allowed to go in
company size. And we maneuvered in an area that was mostly hills, low-lying hills with
a lot of scrub brush. Not a lot of jungle, but very, very hot. And we worked our way
through that area for a number of days. We came at the end of one day, close to the end
of one day, we were getting resupplied with water. It was extremely hot. One platoon
leader asked the company commander, because of the heat, if he could turn in their
helmets on the resupply chopper that was bringing in the water and wear their soft caps,
or boony caps. The company commander left that up to each platoon leader as to what
they wanted to do. One of my men saw the other platoon turning in their helmets on the
helicopter and ran over and asked if we could do the same, and I said, ‘No.’ And so he
bitched about that, but I wasn’t going to change my mind. That night, we got up on a
small hill for our night position, and my platoon led the company. We always pointed the
company when we worked as a company because I think my company commander had
confidence in me. And that night as we got up on this small hill, my point man saw two
NVA soldiers on a trail in front of us and just saw us coming up on the hill and then he
took off. The soldiers took off. And so he reported that to me, and I reported it to my
company commander, and I was not very happy about this. The enemy definitely knew
where we were and they were NVA. The next morning, we took off, and because of the
situation, we had to walk on that trail. We had to be at a certain point at a certain time,
and in that area the country was very rugged, so we basically had to walk down this trail
that was in a ravine with the sides going up on both sides of the trail. I was not very
happy about it, but we had to do it. And so I spread my men out as far apart as possible
and told them to walk on rocks and stones as much as possible to keep from hitting a
mine. We walked down this trail and all I could think about is an NVA regiment that
might be on either side of the trail up on the ridgelines. We were sitting ducks. We got
through most of that to where we started coming out to a vast expanse of rice paddies.
We came out of that rugged terrain. Let me go back. My point man, before we came off
that trail, had stopped and the whole company had stopped, and I called ahead to my
point man to find out what had happened and he had just stepped on a Bouncing Betty
mine, and the mine had shot up (bounced), but it was an old one and it did not go off. So in a fraction of a second, he stared death in the eye. And his shotgun, his bird dog, the guy that protected him, told me on the radio that they needed to take a five minute break while he collected himself, and I told him to take ten. Then I called the company commander and told him what was going on. He was getting – the company commander was getting unsettled because we were kind of stuck there and I agreed with him, so after ten minutes, we took off and it wasn’t too long after that that my point element came out finally out into this open area. The point called back and he said that they saw a bunch of North Vietnamese across the field over by a wood line. I radioed back, ‘Did they see you?’ And he said, ‘No.’ And I said, ‘Well, take some cover, I’m coming up to call artillery fire.’ So while I’m going up the trail with my radio operator and my – I had a grenadier behind me, I told the company commander what I was going to do. As I came out of this trail, there was some scrub brush around that allowed us to get behind the brush so we could not be seen. Now the point man and his shotgun had moved out, and they were hiding behind some scrub brush. And then I came out of the trail. My radio operator came out behind me, and then this grenadier with an M-79 grenade launcher had come out behind him. All five of us were stepping over a mine, but my grenadier had stepped on it and tripped it. It was a small anti-personnel mine that the rest of us had stepped over and had not tripped it.

RV: Did he just not see it or was he careless, or…?

DT: It was just by luck or lack of luck that he tripped it and we did not. We must have just stepped over it.

RV: Oh, so this was not seen at all?

DT: No, it was not seen, and we all stepped over it and he hit it. And so the anti-personnel mine went off and my point man and his bird dog, his guard, and myself, we all got shrapnel in the head and the neck and the ear and everything else. And the man of course had tripped the personnel mine got hit. It just so happened that the bird dog, the point man’s guard caught a piece of fragment, of metal shrapnel in the side of his helmet to put a dent in the helmet.

RV: And, oh my gosh, your decision earlier.

DT: Well, he is the very man that complained. That wanted to wear soft caps.
RV: Gosh. Wow.

DT: And so my medic came forward and patched us up, and we certainly had to get a dustoff for the man that hit the anti-personnel mine. He had received fragment wounds in his legs and on his foot. I was going to stay, I just had some shrapnel, a little bit in my temple and my neck and ear, and I was patched up and I was just going to stay out there, and my medic tried to pull rank on me and give me orders to go out. And the company commander said, ‘No, you better go out.’ So Sergeant Arias, my E-5 squad leader, came up and took over the platoon and we were medevaced up to Chu Lai.

RV: Dave, what does it feel like to get hit with shrapnel from a mine?

DT: I didn’t – I heard a bang and I didn’t feel much. The fragments were fairly small and fortunately they didn’t hit my eye or anything. I was bleeding from the neck and the ear and the temple, but I don’t recall…it didn’t hurt me that much. And certainly the individual who hit the mine was hurting. And the other two that were hit in the head with the same kind of wounds as me were not hurting that much. It was just small fragments. So we were lifted off by dustoff and went back to Chu Lai, where we were sent in for…the man who hit the mine was being prepped for surgery. I’m not sure if he lost a toe or what. I do not think he lost a leg or anything. But they were prepping him because he had more shrapnel in his legs than us. I remember being on one table and this doctor was picking out shrapnel out of my head and ear and neck with tweezers and the man who stepped on the mine was being prepped for surgery. He had two nurses prepping him and he was feeling kind of low, moaning and that kind of thing. I looked over at him and I winked at the doctor working on me, and I told him, I said, ‘What are you complaining about? You have two nice-looking nurses working on you, and I got this ugly doctor working on me.’ And immediately, that just changed his attitude, and all of a sudden he started saying, ‘Well, some of us got it sir, and some of us don’t.’ And it just changed his attitude just like that. And so they got him ready and he went in for surgery and after this shrapnel was picked out of me, then one of the nurses came over to finish the job of patching me up, putting a few stitches in my head. Nothing major. And I remember her as very cute, had short hair, which was the style in those days. Dark eyebrows, and just cute. And she had a little hint of perfume on her. And coming out of the field, I would have married her on the spot. She was just gorgeous.
RV: What happened to the gentleman you were talking to who was being
prepped for surgery? Do you know?

DT: I never saw him again, so I think…my take is he probably was injured bad
enough to be sent back. I don’t know for sure, but I never saw him again. I assume that
was his ticket home. My point man and I were not hit that bad, and so we were released
from the hospital with bandages on us and we had dried blood on our faces, but we were
stitched up. We were ok. And so we called by radio at the hospital to
have a jeep come up to Chu Lai and pick us up, and while we were waiting, we decided
to walk around a little bit. There was a…the hospital was very close to the division
headquarters, and that was the reason why it was always in danger of being hit by
rockets. They weren’t trying to hit the hospital; the Viet Cong were trying to hit the
division headquarters, but it was very close. There was also a major PX nearby, and so
my point man and I walked over to the PX and they had a hot dog stand out there. We
looked at each other like, ‘Can this be for sure?’ And so we walked over to get a couple
hot dogs, which were like…we hadn’t had them since being in Vietnam, and the rear
echelon people looked at us walking. We were filthy dirty, we had our weapons, dried
blood with bandages, and they looked at us like we were the dark side of the moon and
stayed away from…I remember one guy looking at me. I could read his eyes like, ‘There
must be a war going on somewhere.’ So we had our hot dogs, and later we were picked
up and brought back to LZ Gator and I had…the point man, because he had stepped on
that Bouncing Betty like a half hour before we got hit by the mine, he was pretty well
spent, mentally. And he had been my point man for a number of weeks and he was very
good at it. He had been in Vietnam longer than me, and he talked to me when we got
back to LZ Gator and said, ‘If you want me to go out the walk point again, I’ll do that,
but I’m married and I really need to get something else.’ And I talked to the first
sergeant. He certainly had done his job in the field, and so we got him a job at the
helicopter pad back on LZ Gator.

RV: How hard was that to do?

DT: The first sergeant, I had worked closely with the sergeant major. All of the
first sergeants did, and when they saw someone who had truly done their job in the field
but was losing their effectiveness, they always had rear jobs they would give to those
men. And I told the pad to let me know when the resupply chopper came in that was going out to Charlie Company, that I would go back out to the field in the evening. And for whatever reason, I was not told when the helicopter came in, so I missed my ride out that evening and I stayed the night at Gator. As it so happened, that evening, the company got mortared heavily by the NVA, and I believe one platoon in particular, the mortar rounds landed in their part of the perimeter, and I think that we had about twelve casualties.

RV: Wow.

DT: So I missed that that night.

RV: Dave, it sounds like fortune was with you. Something was with you.

DT: Yeah. So the next day I did go out to the field and we continued on with our mission.

RV: Ok. Let’s take a break just for a minute, Dave.