Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview for the Vietnam Archive Oral History project with Mr. Steve Dant. Today is May 5, 2005 and it’s 8:20 a.m. Central Standard Time. I’m again in Lubbock, Texas and you, Steve, are in Colorado Springs. Let’s continue with discussing your time in country.

If you would, Steve, could you describe what it was mentally, emotionally, also physically when you walked point? You mentioned that you did this. Can you tell or describe in general what this was and what kind of affect did it have upon you?

Stephen Dant: Well the guy that was walking point, I guess the first thing I got to say is that was the first guy in line or the guy who was in front of the line, usually it was some type of patrol. Sometimes you were walking a trail. Sometimes you might be in the middle of an open area. Sometimes you might be walking through the jungle or the woods someplace, but it was the guy that was responsible for a couple of things. Trying to make sure that the path that you were taking was safe or trying to identify problems or the enemy in front of you or trying to….in many cases for instance when we were operating out in the Batangan Peninsula it really became a job of, more than anything, spotting mines.

RV: Right. That was one of the heaviest mined areas.

SD: Yes, right. Or at least it was a lot more heavily mined then we were operating out west at Chu Lai.
RV: Was walking point a position of honor or respect?  

SD: I guess I never really thought about that. I’m not sure. The word ‘honor’ comes into play but I think there was a lot of respect that was given to whoever was walking point. You know I think that sometimes guys thought the guy who was walking point was nuts. (Laughter)

RV: Right. I think maybe people listening to this are going to think, ‘Wow.’ I mean if you don’t want to be somewhere you don’t want to be out there.

SD: But on the other hand I mean it’s…I don’t ever remember anybody, you know, being told they were going to walk point and I don’t remember anybody volunteering to walk point. It was just kind of a job that got assumed. Somebody, you know, you just kind of all of a sudden that’s where your orientation was towards.

RV: How did it affect you when you did it?

SD: Well, let me say something else here. If you’re going to take that position you have to have a certain amount of self-confidence. If I can use a sporting analogy.

RV: Of course.

SD: If you’re playing quarterback or you’re playing halfback on a football team you want a guy who you’re going to hand the ball off to who has got the ball, who’s got a lot of confidence that they are going to get the play made. So, you know, if you don’t have a lot of self-confidence in going into that kind of position then it isn’t going to work. For the same reason that it isn’t going to work if you hand off a ball to a halfback who has got in the back of his mind, ‘I don’t want to fumble, I don’t want to fumble,’ well sure as hell he’s going to fumble. It’s almost an automatic.

RV: So you’re saying that you’ve got a…not only do you have to know what you’re doing tactically but you need to have in your mind that, ‘Okay I’m going to do this and I’ll do it well.’

SD: Right. I hesitate to use the word cocky but you kind of almost have to be that way. You have to believe that you’re good at it and you’re going to do a good job.

RV: Was that the case with you? Was that how you were?

SD: I guess so. I mean I thought that I – although I was always apprehensive and adrenaline was flowing a thousand miles an hour, but I felt like I knew what I was doing
and that again the cockiness comes out but I felt like in some cases it was better off that I was doing it than somebody else was.

RV: Like you could control your own destiny.

SD: Right.

RV: How long would one need to be out in the field before they would have confidence in themselves, I guess this is personality dependent as well, be confident in themselves to walk point or to be able to be appointed or kind of rotated into walking point?

SD: Well I think I was out in the field for a few months at least. I got there in February and I think I was walking point, I was point man of my squad I think in about, boy it’s hard to remember, probably May or somewhere in there. No, it was later then that. June. So a few months, so I was probably in field a few months before I was walking point.

RV: Do you remember any incidents that specifically happened to you while on point?

SD: Well yeah I…that’s when I got wounded.

RV: Yes.

SD: That’s probably the most significant. (Laughter)

RV: It’s pretty significant. Do you want to talk about that incident?

SD: Sure we can.

RV: Okay.

SD: We were out west of Chu Lai someplace. Part of this relates to a story I was telling earlier about some sergeants who I thought didn’t have their act together. We had a new squad leader. A guy who had been transferred up from, oh man I forgot, I think it was 4th Infantry but don’t hold me to that. He had been operating down south and I think they were starting to shift part of his unit home. Don’t hold me to that either. That’s kind of recollections I have, but I could be totally wrong. Anyway he came into the squad. We were coming off the…we had been operating off of some hilltop. I think we had been out there for a couple of weeks and patrolling the areas during the day and going off the hill and setting up ambushes at night. We were operating in platoon strength. Our squad was the point squad. I was on point that day. We were looking for a trail to take us up to
another hilltop and I think there had been some activity reported by some helicopter. A
huey had been flying over some place, somewhere. Anyway we came off the hill and
came down into this valley. We were walking across this valley, we were walking across
this valley and I wanted to…we walked into the middle of this kind of wide open field
and the grass was about knee or thigh high. I wanted to get along the tree line because it
would provide more, I thought it was safer and would provide more cover whereas we
were just kind of sitting out in the open. So I remember getting to this….so I stopped and
I went back and told the sergeant that I wanted to maneuver back along the tree line and
still head the same direction but it felt like we would be a lot safer and for whatever
reason he didn’t want to do that. I almost felt like he wanted to see some action and draw
some fire and whatever his reasons were. We got into a big heated argument and you
know he just finally pulled rank and said, ‘Move it right down on the line that you’re at.’
So I had lost my cool and my temper and I wasn’t thinking as well as I should have been
because I was so hot under the collar. It came to a point where we were, it came to a
hedgerow and on the other side of the hedgerow was a trail. I thought that there was a
trail there but I didn’t know for sure. Anyway I was so pissed I just went crashing
through this hedgerow followed by the, we had a dog team with us that day, so the dog
and his handler were behind me and I got onto this trail and took about two or three steps
and a mine went off underneath and behind me. It blew me up in the air. I landed on my
stomach. You just kind of lose it for, oh I don’t know, 10 seconds and so I remember
getting up and running about five or six yards. And then falling and then thinking what
the hell are you doing. I feel down on my face and had my rifle down in front of me and I
was pointing it trying to figure out okay what’s going on and whose coming at me where
and so on. At that point I could hear people start coming up behind us going, ‘Okay what
happened? Who’s hit? Where’s Dant?’ I guess I had gone through a little, I had gotten
blown up the trail a little bit and then I ran five yards and so I was kind of a little out of
sight of when the people came through the hedgerow behind me. Then the guys found me
and they set up a little perimeter and the medic started working on my leg where I had
cought some shrapnel and my back. I was lucky in that I mostly got hit by the concussion
of the thing. The dog took most of the shrapnel. If the dog hadn’t of been there I probably
would have been much more seriously hurt.
RV: Do you know what kind of booby trap it was?
SD: I have no idea. My bet is that it was some kind of Chicom grenade of some kind but it could have been, I mean I don’t know. It could have been some handmade thing.
RV: Nevertheless it doesn’t matter.
SD: Yeah, right.
RV: It worked.
SD: It worked. Whether it was trip wire or hell, it may have been just something that just had been laying in that hedgerow waiting for somebody to bump it to come out. Maybe it wasn’t a mine at all; a piece of ordnance that never went off and you know, we just rustled it free. But my bet is that it was some kind of mine that had been planted near that hedgerow next to the trail and you know I still believe to this day if I hadn’t lost my cool and I hadn’t been pissed off at the time I would have gone much more carefully through that hedgerow and maybe spotted something.
RV: Right. So what was the result there? You’ve come to a rest your days, what’s going on?
SD: What do you mean, after I’m hit?
RV: Yes. I mean, are you evacuated? What’d you do?
SD: Yes. I had a bunch of scrapes and cuts in my back and two pretty good sized holes in the back of my left leg. I was lucky it didn’t hit an artery or anything, so it ended up kind of being big flesh wounds.
RV: Right.
SD: And so they tied those off and the dog handler had been hit. The mine had gone off in front of him. I think he lost an eye through the whole thing. So anyway they called for a dustoff and happened to be a LOH flying over the area. I think it was probably the same guy who had spotted the activity on the hillside that we were headed for. So he radioed in that he was in the area and that he would pick up us. So we had to walk a couple hundred yards to some place where he could land. They put us on a LOH helicopter and flew us back to Chu Lai.
RV: When you got back to Chu Lai what happened?
SD: Well they met us with a couple of, well they weren’t gurneys, I don’t know what they were, some kind of cots that they put you on and that’s where I lost touch. The dog was pretty beat up. I noticed that when we were riding back in the helicopter. I asked the handler how he was doing. He goes, ‘Other than my eye, I think I’m okay.’ He was kind of stunned. We got off on a tarmac and a couple of…I guess it was a doctor and probably a nurse and a few orderlies or whatever hauled me into the operating room and they wanted to know where I was hit and I told them and so they had kind of gone over the whole area. At some point I noticed in the operating room that everybody kind of relaxed. I kind of thought well that’s a pretty good sign. It must just be something that they’re going to sew me up and set me free and that’s pretty much what happened. I remember the doctors that were operating on me, it seemed like one of these guys was coming on to the nurse.

RV: Oh really. One of the doctors? You remember this.

SD: Yes. I thought it was funny and she was kind of cute. You know I hadn’t seen a round eye in a while so that was kind of neat. But they patched me up. I think that the wounds were big enough that they really couldn’t do much in terms of stitching. They had to wait a couple of days before they could do that. So they put a lot of gauze and disinfectant and wrapped a good part of my upper back thigh and sent me back to my company, oh what do you call it, back to the compound. The top sergeant was kind of surprised to see me. He thought I would be in the hospital for a couple of days. After I had been back there a couple of days he started putting me on guard duty and I don’t think he was supposed to do that because I was having to report like to an aid station like a couple times a day to have these bandages changed because they were more afraid of anything, like a lot of things over there. The biggest problem with my wounds is the danger of getting infected and trying to keep them clean. So he sent me out on guard duty one night and my wounds started oozing and the bandages were getting all wet and leaking and so he had to call back to the rear to get somebody to replace me. He was pretty pissed about that. But then when I went back to the medic station and they’d found out that I had been put out on guard duty that doctor who was there really went after Top and told him, ‘This guy is not to be on any kind of duty like that, very light around the compound and if he ends up getting an infection I’m holding you personally responsible.’
RV: Wow.

SD: So he left me alone after that. I think that Top had a little more respect for what had happened. I think I was in the rear a month or so.

RV: Steve, hold on. What was it like being in the rear versus being in the field?

That’s got to be a pretty big difference.

SD: It was especially different for me because I was recuperating. I really didn’t have a job. I mean it was wonderful being in the rear and not being out in the field but I was also bored as hell.

RV: What did you do with yourself?

SD: I did have some light duty that I had to perform, like helping the company clerk out with some stuff, you know typing and some filing and that kind of thing. I would run errands. I would clean up the compound. I went every night to the EM club and drank about 18 beers. I read a lot.

RV: Do you remember what you were reading?

SD: No, just picking up novels. Just kind of killing time.

RV: Did you want to get back out there with the unit? Or were you good to go?

SD: Ultimately I wanted to get back to my unit. I kind of felt between being bored and I felt guilty after a while. I would see these guys come back and, well it was just good to see them again. I did end up going and spending a couple of weeks as I remember. You know I wasn’t quite ready to go back to the field but I could go someplace where I could have some fairly heavy duty. So they sent me out to some firebase to pull guard duty for a couple of weeks. At that point I said, I think it was at that point I said, ‘Look, I want to get back to my unit.’ So a couple of days after that they flew me back to Chu Lai and my unit was coming in on stand down and that’s when I rejoined them and I went back to the field.

RV: Okay. What was your reception like when you got back out there?

SD: They thought that I was out of my freaking mind.

RV: (Laughter) Because you wanted back or you came back?

SD: Because I came back, yeah. Maybe I was. You know I don’t know why I did it to this day but it just felt like it was the right thing to do at the time.
RV: Well when you got back out where you as aggressive, less aggressive, were you the same? What were you like in the field? Were you kind of looking a little more carefully or trying to not lose your temper or focus more?

SD: I don’t remember, you know, being any different in the field than when I was before. I guess, I don’t remember this, but I guess we all learn our lessons. I do remember that that sergeant wasn’t around anymore. I don’t know what happened to him and I don’t even remember who the sergeant was. I must have been walking point again, but you know your most vivid memories are probably kind of like the rest of life. You remember a lot of times when the places that you really screw up are the things that really stand out in your mind as opposed as the times that you were doing things, doing something and walking point and nothing happened. And there were a lot of those days.

RV: So that was the most common day basically?

SD: Pardon me?

RV: That was the most common day basically?

SD: The most common day of being out and walking point as I said earlier is a lot of adrenaline and the focus that you have is just very intense. Your eyes are just; well just everything about you is very intense. You’re trying to see everything, hear everything, notice everything that’s out in front of you and on your periphery. I mean just taking care to make sure that you’re not walking into an ambush or that you’re not about to hit a mine.

RV: Right. Well are there any more incidents that come to mind? I mean that’s major one. What else after this point as far as contact or just things that happened that come to mind now that you remember?

SD: There were a couple other incidents that come biggest to mind. One, and I think I mentioned this earlier in this meeting, in Dragon Valley, which was…and if you were to hand me a map I would probably have a hard time finding it. We walked into this area and I wasn’t walking point by then so I was probably in country maybe three months. In fact come to think about it walking out of there was the first time I had walked point. I had forgotten about that. Anyway, a valley that China’s hills on, as you’re walking in, hills up in front of us and to the right of us, kind of almost a semi-circle of hills that you’re walking into. We started taking a lot of incoming. We set ourselves up in
a defensive position. We called in artillery on the hillside that we thought the fire was coming from. And that calmed down for a while and then I remembered we decided to stay there for the night. Why we decided to do that when we weren’t on the high ground was beyond me. Sometime that night we were taking more incoming off and on and the next morning there was a lot of commotion because in the early morning hours or during one of the exchanges of fire discovered that a guy that was about three foxholes down from mine had been shot in the head and killed. We had a couple of other people that were wounded and then sometime after we had discovered that and people were moving around, then I think we started taking fire again. A guy from, I was in 3rd Squad, a guy in 1st Squad got shot in the stomach so we were calling in a dustoff. I still see Jerry at these. I met Jerry for the first time in 30 years at this reunion a couple of years ago so we called in a dustoff and a helicopter came in and landed probably 25, 30 yards in front of the position that I was in. Me and I think two or three other guys were ordered to get Jerry onto a poncho liner and a doc was still treating him and when the dustoff landed we were told to carry him out to the helicopter and none of us were very happy about that. We were taking fire and we knew we were going to be running him out there in the middle of this open field. We all loved Jerry to death but we weren’t sure we liked him that much.

RV: What did you say to him when you saw him at the reunion for the first time?

SD: God I don’t know. We just kind of hugged each other for a while. I said, ‘How are you doing?’ He said, ‘I’m doing fine.’ He remembered…I had a nickname in the field. My last name is Dant and Jerry hung this on me. There’s a bourbon that’s made in Kentucky, a small distillery called JW Dant and they make mostly bourbons but they make some other stuff and apparently Jerry used to drink some of the stuff in his wilder days and so when we first met he started calling me JW. Pretty soon the whole company was calling me JW. So that’s the name I went by for the entire time I was in the field. So when I saw him 30 years later he goes, ‘JW, how you doing?’ and my wife goes, ‘Honey, you told me that but I really didn’t believe it until somebody called you that.’

RV: (Laughter) How did that make you feel after that long hearing that again?

SD: Strange, very weird. You know you get away from this for 30 years and you go did I really go through this all again so when you hear something like that it kind of validates the fact that, okay I guess I really was there and I did do all this shit.
RV: Do you look back, are you sometimes amazed at, ‘Wow, I survived that. I made it through something intense.’
SD: Every day.
RV: Really?
SD: Yes. You know after…I still can’t believe I did some of the things that I did in Vietnam.
RV: What, the crazy stuff or just the fire fights?
SD: Well just the experience in itself. I mean that I actually went through that. That I actually was in a firefight, was walking point, was pinned down in a valley, all of that. Life in the United States of America is a very good place to be. After you have been through an experience like Vietnam.
RV: I can only imagine. I want to talk about that when we get to the point chronologically, after you come home and spend doing some reflection. Did you think at the time in Vietnam about something like that, that, ‘God, I just want to get through this and get on with my life,’?
SD: Absolutely. You know it’s why I turned down a number of times that I could get out of the field. You know where the Army would come offer you to come back to the States to go to school if you’ll reup for another two years or something. You know join…go back and go to officer candidate school which would have gotten you out of Vietnam for a while or go learn to fly a helicopter or whatever. But you know I think I said earlier I just you know wanted to get this obligation over with as quickly as I possibly could. You know I think if the times had been different…If, if the military wasn’t held in such disgust by a lot of people, especially my peer group.
RV: And you’re talking about the media?
SD: Well I’m talking about the media. I’m talking about the way you got treated when you came home. I think I mentioned about…people like Senator Kerry didn’t help. The military was just you know not held in high regard. I think if that had been different you know I could have seen myself as staying in the military. And looking back on it now there is no way I could have seen myself doing that at the time but as I look back at it now you know I think the military should have been held in higher regard and it was a
shame that the country treated its military forces the way it did in those couple of decades.

RV: Well did you all feel negative effects or rather, what effects did you feel if any from the anti war movement while you were in country?

SD: I guess there was, oh boy a lot of mixed emotions. You know I had friends back in the States who were very anti war. I think I said this earlier, they were trying to convince me when I was about to get drafted that I should go to Canada and I understood their viewpoint. Before I was getting drafted I wasn’t thinking that this war was some place we ought to be and we ought to be working our ways to get out of it. So I understood where those folks were coming from. But on the other hand I never understood why you would hold it against…you would hold the politics of the Vietnam War against the soldiers that were fighting it. So there were a lot of us who were very confused about that issue. You know I didn’t understand why if I had gone and done what I thought I was supposed to do that I had supposedly done something wrong.

RV: Right. Did you know that, ‘No; I had not done anything wrong, what’s going on?’

SD: Right. And I also understood how you know I think, at least it hit me hard, I mean when I was over there Kent State happened and I just couldn’t believe that it had gotten to the point back here in the States where you know National Guard were firing on students. I mean Jesus Christ. It just blew my mind that a guard unit would find a group of students intimidating. And I guess that’s because I had been in the field and I was up against some real people who were intimidating. How can you fire on your own folks? It was just absurd.

RV: Steve let’s talk about a couple of things in country. You were made squad leader. Can you tell me about that and why and how that happened?

SD: Can I go back to Dragon Valley for a second?

RV: Of course you can. Absolutely.

SD: Because the guy that got put on the helicopter ended up getting a Silver Star out of that. After we got him on the helicopter the helicopter got about 15 feet off the ground and it was shot back down. So we had to go back out and get Jerry out and get the helicopter crew out and get them back to our perimeter line. At that point we were taking,
obviously we were taking incoming if the helicopter got shot down, but at that point the
helicopter gunships came in. We had, I think they were F-14 fighters dropping napalm on
the hillsides while we were attempting to get another helicopter in and get Jerry out of
there and get the helicopter crew out of there. So as the second helicopter crew…the
second helicopter came in to land on the other side of the first helicopter, my squad went
out and went out in front of the helicopter between the helicopter and the wood line, were
laying down a base of fire along with the gunships that were in the area. But the gunships
had to kind of lay off for a little bit because they wanted to make sure they didn’t hit the
helicopter. And we started taking fire again. We got the helicopter up in the air and Jerry
got a Silver Star because he had his M-16 with him and he’s firing at the wood line from
the helicopter with a bullet in his stomach.

RV: Wow.

SD: Which was a rather amazing feat I thought…and so then we got back and
then we got another helicopter in to take the broken helicopter out and then we spent one
more night there and we started walking out of the valley with I think a lot of gunships
overhead trying to protect our flanks. The first squad that Jerry was in at that point had
been walking a lot of point. Their point guy hit a mine as we were coming out of this
valley. So I think that they had between Jerry and a couple other guys that had like, one
guy killed and two or three guys wounded during this whole thing. So at that point we
decided that we needed to get off the trail and they brought my squad up and that’s when
I started walking point. So we cut our way through this pretty heavy jungle probably for I
don’t know a quarter of a mile until we came out into an open area and we could see a
village down below and lots of people running away from us. A couple of guys said,
‘Open fire, open fire,’ And I couldn’t tell…as far as I could tell I would have been
shooting at women and I didn’t want to do that so we went down to the village and ended
up looking for weapons and found a lot of weapons and tunnels and the whole nine yards.
As I remember they brought another company in and they kind of took over from there
and they kind of flew us out of there at that point. I remember Dragon Valley a lot.

RV: What else happened there that you remember?

SD: Well that’s pretty much…it probably was the biggest sustained, off and on
sustaining firefight that I was in during the time I was in Vietnam. One guy killed and a
few people wounded. I had heard later that a number of companies had gone in there and
gone out of there and had gotten out of there having received the same kind of treatment.
It was another example to me of why don’t we just, if that valley is so bad why don’t we
attack it with force?

RV: You all were discussing that or you were thinking this?

SD: I was thinking that. What are you dragging us in there for to end up being
where you’re at a disadvantage because they got the high ground? You know you’re
almost like you draw the fire and we’ll bring the gunships in and you know, we’ll wipe
them out by heavy artillery. Well they’re shooting from, you know, inside jungle
canopies. It’s hard to see those guys. You got to go in there with enough force to clear the
whole thing out.

RV: What would have done that? What kind of force would have taken care of
that?

SD: Well I would think a couple of companies where you can really work your
way through the jungle. There was another incident where I was in country, we’re
operating out in the same area and you we stumbled across what ended up being an NVA
base camp. It was the only time that while I was in country that the tactics of how we
were going to approach this place changed. In that we, and I wasn’t walking point that
day, the squad who had been the point squad found this. They were on the periphery of
what they thought was you know a number of hooches that looked like VC or NVA. We
got on line, switched to go on line; do you know what I mean by that?

RV: Yes, but go ahead and describe that for people who will not know.

SD: If you’re facing up a hill, which is what we were and it was a pretty heavy
wooded area but it wasn’t really jungle. To my right if I’m facing up the hill there would
be a line of soldiers, we would be spaced going out probably the nearest soldier to me is
probably five, six yards away on my right and the next soldier is on the right of him
another five or six yards and so on and so forth but on my left the line strings out just the
same way in the opposite direction. So we’re going to march up this, not march, we’re
going to go up this hill in an on line attack position. And you use to see a lot of that stuff
when you watch World War II movies and you know World War I movies, but you didn’t
see a lot of it in Vietnam because normally you’re walking in a vertical line as opposed to
horizontal line and it’s a lot of guerilla warfare so you’re getting attacked and laying down. This was really taking an offensive position. So none of us had ever really done this, except for back end in boot camp, never had done it in Vietnam. We were all very nervous as what we were going to find at the top of this hill. We got up there and a few shots were fired and I think we killed, it wasn’t my squad, but a squad down a, I don’t remember if it was right or left, but killed a couple of what turned out to be NVA and suddenly we were upon a…there must have been, oh I don’t know, 15 or 20 hooches that were all very well kept. One of them was a hospital with all of the operating tools and gurneys and IVs. And there were tunnels everywhere. So this was a pretty big deal. I think we were operating at…I don’t remember if we were operating at company or platoon level. But we suddenly realized in being amongst all these hooches that, at least in my mind, that there weren’t enough of us. (Laughter)

RV: Right. You could sense that basically.
SD: We could sense that we had stumbled upon something that was bigger than us. We were trying to blow stuff up as much as we possibly could with the ordnance that we had but I…at least I did and I know the guys in my squad wanted to get the hell out of there before all the people who obviously had been here earlier came back and wanted their stuff back. So we called in artillery but I think what was ultimately decided – and we heard it because it was getting towards nightfall so we started coming off the hill.

This thing was on top of a very big hill, but it was probably a single canopy jungle. It wasn’t really thick. So we came off this trail, came off the top of this hill and found a trail and really humping it down this hill. When it got dark everybody sat down, laid down on the trail. We had never done this before where we didn’t have enough time to set up positions and we slept on that trail that night, just along the lines of that trail. Every other guy was awake and then every other guy was asleep all night long but I think that they eventually brought in that night…they bombed that place with B-52 bombers.

RV: I presume you heard that, felt that?
SD: Yes we heard and felt that.
RV: Can you describe what that felt like, what it sounded like?
SD: Well you know it’s like…boy, if you’ve ever had, you know you’re in a good thunderstorm and you’ve had a bolt of lighting go off outside your window with it in your yard. You know that thunder and it rattles the whole house?

RV: Yes.

SD: That’s as close as I can come to describing it because when those things hit the ground man they rattle the ground.

RV: How do you deal with that, Steve? Or is that just part of the reality of being in that war?

SD: (Laughter)

RV: I mean that sounds like a silly question but do you just get used to that?

SD: You don’t ever get use to it.

RV: I don’t see how you could.

SD: Well you don’t. I’ll tell you a story. I was back in country, back to the States for a couple of years and I was living with my girlfriend who is, I’m not sure if we were engaged at the time or not. We were in bed one night. It was like one o’clock in the morning or something and just such a thunderstorm as I described to you came along that evening. We had a large bolt of lightening and a huge thunder and I was under the bed. I mean I was off the bed and looking for a hole to crawl into.

RV: Wow.

SD: My wife kind of looked at me I mean she was a little frightened and angry all at the same time. It’s a funny story. I said, ‘What are you mad at me for?’ She goes, ‘Well, how come you’re not taking me with you?’

RV: (Laughter)

SD: ‘If you’re so afraid, why are you leaving me up here for?’

RV: (Laughter) She’s got a point.

SD: But the point is that I guess you don’t ever get use to it.

RV: Yes.

SD: Although thunder claps these days I’m not crawling under the bed anymore.

RV: How long did it take you to get away from that?

SD: Well it took me, you know for a while, for a few years I didn’t want to go to July 4th fireworks. By 1976, 200th anniversary of the country I guess I had been out of
country for four or five years and I remember going to some fireworks on that July 4th. You know it took…I don’t think that you and I could have had this conversation ten years ago.

RV: Why?
SD: Because I just, I worked so hard for so long to just kind of put it behind me. I really didn’t talk about it very much at all. Until just a few years ago I had never been to my unit reunion and had no urge at all to go.

RV: Why not? Is it part of the effort to put it behind you?
SD: Yes, part of the effort I think to put it behind you.
RV: What prompted you to go?
SD: 9/11.
RV: Really? How so?
SD: Yes. When that happened I just, the first thing that came to my mind was ‘incoming’. I just couldn’t believe that somebody was attacking our country.

RV: Emotionally did you just, ‘Okay, I need to reconnect,’ or how did you make the connection to, ‘I need to go back and deal with this issue,’?
SD: Well it just made a whole lot of things just come flooding back. The last thing that I think that anybody who’s ever been in combat, who has ever been in a war zone, wants to see is that war zone come to where they live. You know most Americans have no appreciation of what that can be and what that can mean and what a terrible situation that it is. So when I saw those planes come over those buildings and people running for their lives in New York and people jumping out of buildings, you know, I am seeing a war zone. Really it just all came flooding back.

RV: How did you deal with it?
SD: Well you know I got on the Internet and I found Americal website and I found the pages on that and I found the 5th of the 46th. I found 198th and I found 5th of the 46th. I don’t know if you’ve been on there but on that website it has all these notices from guys who have served in the units in Vietnam. You usually start with something like…can you hang on one second?

RV: Sure.
SD: Needed a glass of orange juice.
RV: That’s fine, go ahead.
SD: Usually starts out with something like looking for...sometimes it’s specific as somebody’s name. In my case what I found was a notice that said, ‘Looking for…’ something to the effect of, ‘anybody from Charlie Company 5th of the 46th 198th.’ I looked at that and I went holy shit I can’t believe somebody is out there actually looking for somebody who was in that unit. I think they even said 1970s. It actually took me a few days before I decided to go ahead and write back. I wrote back to, I’ve forgotten who it was, there were two guys’ names who were looking for. One of them was Dave Hammond and I was living in Beaverton, Oregon, which is just outside of Portland. It turns out that Dave lived like five miles from me. So I sent him a note and the next thing you know we’re meeting each other for the first time in I don’t know, 30 years or so at a little restaurant and having a beer and looking at each other’s pictures.
RV: What was that like?
SD: It was very strange. I don’t know that there’s any way to describe it. I think both Dave’s wife, Christine, and my wife, Sharon, we all met that evening.
RV: So you didn’t go by yourself, you took your wife.
SD: Yes, Sharon. You know because my wife is, she’s very curious as to how this is all going to go. We talked about this off and on for a lot of years. She’s a psychologist by the way. (Laughter)
RV: Perfect! I’m married to one also.
SD: Are you?
RV: Yes.
SD: She’s always encouraged me to talk about this but has known that I was kind of reluctant at the same time. So she was very curious as to see how this was all going to go. It’s funny how it all worked out because she and Christy ended up being best friends almost right away.
RV: Really?
SD: Yes. Because I think the wives share in a lot of this too. They just kind of, they understand probably better than anybody what you went through without having to actually go there.
RV: Right.
SD: At these reunions you see almost the bond grow between the wives as much as between the guys.

RV: I’ve noticed that at reunions. I’ve clearly seen that. What is that relationship like? That’s got to be very unique in and of itself. The spouses bonding over what?

SD: Well in many respects they are living with the same kind of, you know, person. All of their husbands have got a shared experience that’s kind of unique to their neighbor’s husband’s shared experiences. So when you get together at these reunions there’s as much of a brotherhood amongst the guys as almost the sisterhood amongst the women. You all kind of become brothers and sisters, if you will. It sounds kind of hokey but I think that best describes it.

RV: Well that makes sense. I’m not sure people who have never been or don’t know would understand that. That does make sense. Steve, are you okay on time today? Would you like to take a break?

SD: I’m okay. What time is it, 8:30. I’m okay for another ten minutes or so.

RV: Maybe we should leave other incidents in Dragon Valley for another conversation if things come to mind that you would like to talk about I would like you to discuss those. I wanted to ask you something you mentioned a few minutes ago and I know you probably saw this more than one time was napalming. You know, napalm being dropped. Can you describe what that’s like to see that? What does it sound like, feel like?

SD: Well first off, I just saw it a few times. Once, actually I was on stand down. Chu Lai got rocketed one morning. I forgotten how many rockets came in but it was quite a few. Whatever company is on stand down is kind of the reactionary company if something happens to Chu Lai. We were all pissed off because what’s a few God damned rockets, you know. They cut our stand down short. Within half an hour of that rocket attack we were on helicopters, on hueys heading out to what they thought was the location of where the rockets were launched. We got out there and sure enough there were a bunch of rockets there and I think we killed a couple Dinks and may have captured another one. We captured a whole load of rockets. The rest of the VC – and I think they were VC – had headed up into these hills. So we called in for an air strike.

That was the first time I had seen napalm. When you see it, it’s not like any other
ordnance. It’s coming to the ground. Napalm is, and I’ve only seen it coming down from
the air but it seems like it’s a canister that’s probably I don’t know four, five inches wide
and about two or three feet long. It kind of tumbles end over end as it is coming towards
the ground. Then when it hits the ground there’s a sheet of flame that’s this thing, I guess
it must slide across the ground, that goes up. My sense is probably hundred yards long,
maybe longer than that. I thought it was great at the time. (Laughter)
RV: (Laughter) Why? Why did you think that?
SD: Well, burn those son of a bitches out. It sure as hell took care of the jungle
cover of the woods that they were hiding in because there wasn’t much left of it after it
got on fire. I never saw anybody burnt by napalm or was up close any more than what I
just described. At that point, it was a distance. It was sheets of flame. We didn’t hear any
more from the enemy after that, at least that day.
RV: I can imagine it’s pretty intimidating.
SD: I’m glad we had it and they didn’t.
RV: The American firepower that was able to be brought to bear on the enemy,
what all did that do for you all psychologically?
SD: You know there just never was any doubt in my mind that if push came to
shove in a face-to-face competition, we were going to win because we had that firepower
but that’s why the other guys were smart not to take us on, head on. They knew that
would be a losing battle.
RV: Steve why don’t we go ahead and break for the day?
SD: Okay.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is May 11, 2005 and it’s about 8:29 Central Standard Time here in Lubbock, Texas. Steve, you are in Colorado Springs. Steve, tell me a little bit about when you became squad leader. This is right before you took a job in the rear.

SD: I had gone back to the field after I had been wounded and kind of found myself as a, since the squad was fairly new with the exception of I think one guy, kind of found myself as the de facto squad leader, if you will. Although while we were working with another squad. For the most part since they had more guys that had been in the field longer they were kind of taking the lead. In terms of the group of guys that I was with everybody was just looking at me because well I kind of had been there longer and had more experience. Then when we went back to…so we operated that way for I think a couple of weeks out in the field.

RV: What was that like for you, being squad leader? Was it a good position to be in as far as leadership?

SD: Well I felt like it was an awful lot of responsibility. You know I was kind of proud that somebody decided that I guess I had the makings of taking over a squad but it’s scary at the same time because…well again, it’s eight or nine guys that are kind of looking at you for, ‘Okay, what do we do next?’ Not so much when you’re with the platoon or with the company because that’s kind of decided by somebody with a higher grade than mine but if you’re out on some kind of ambush or whatever, you’re the guy that’s responsible for making sure things happen and people come back safe.
RV: Well, how did you find yourself kind of functioning? Were you good, do you think? Were you adequate?

SD: I wasn’t a squad leader long enough to know that really. When the word came down when I was in the rear that they wanted me over at brigade headquarters you know I had a lot of mixed emotions about getting out of the field. I didn’t for a moment hesitate to take the rear job after being out in the field; I don’t know whatever it was, seven months or whatever.

RV: It was a pretty easy decision?

SD: Oh yes. I did feel guilty about leaving all those guys behind. They would have thought I was crazy if I would have stayed because there wasn’t anybody who wouldn’t have traded me.

RV: Were they happy for you?

SD: Oh yes. Everybody was happy for me and I was happy for myself.

RV: Do you remember what they were saying to you?

SD: ‘You lucky son of a bitch. I hope you remember us when we come back to the rear.’ I mean everybody, it’s kind of a thing where everybody gives you a hard time but they’re laughing about it at the same time.

RV: How was it saying goodbye? What do you say to people like that who are going to be staying behind and fighting that kind of war?

SD: As I’m remembering you give everybody a hug and you tell them when they get back on stand down to come look you up so you can go have a beer with them at the EM club. I remember when I was at the rear when Charlie Company used to come back on stand down. Now when you’re in the rear, you got a hooch. You lived in a Quonset hut. It was divided in two by a wall in the middle and then there were four bunks on each side, so you were bunking with three other guys. It was a pretty nice arrangement after being in the field. I use to invite guys back to my hooch when Charlie Company was on stand down. I would go out and buy a couple of bottles of bourbon or scotch or whatever and some beer and we would sit around drinking and they would crash and burn at my place as opposed to down at the company stand down area.

RV: So you actually did see them again?
SD: Oh yeah. As time went on I knew less and less of the people who were in the company because a lot of guys were rotating out. I ended up extending my tour duty since I had a rear job because if you come back home, if you come back to the States with less than five months active duty left, they don’t assign you to a base you just sign out of the Army.

RV: Let’s talk about what happened in the rear. What was your job, your assignment exactly?

SD: I was a driver for brigade S3, which is Operations. So I was a driver for this major who was head of S3 and from time to time drove around some other officers from brigade headquarters.

RV: Where was this? Where was brigade headquarters?

SD: It was in Chu Lai. I was a gofer. You know, go for this, go for that. I ran a lot of errands. I pulled guard duty at night probably, and I don’t remember exactly but I probably had guard duty like three times a week out on the Chu Lai perimeter.

RV: You want to describe what guard duty was? What did you do?

SD: You went out to an area that was out on the perimeter. Most of the time we were out on an area that we’re kind of staring out a few hundred-yard expanse into the village of Chu Lai. We were in an elevated…there were bunkers underneath and then there was an elevated observation platform that was built that had a roof on it and a couple of radios in there. I think there were four guys that were assigned to a bunker every night. I can’t remember if that’s right, three or four guys. So you had a couple hours on and a couple of hours off, that kind of deal. You were looking for VC trying to get onto the base. I can only remember a couple of times when I was out there that something was going on and neither time was it in the area that I was assigned to. Chu Lai was a pretty large base. I’ve forgotten. It must have been miles long, probably a few miles wide as it extended along the coastline, so you could have dinks in a wire and be a couple miles away from where that was happening. One of the unique things was we had the village all out in front of us in our position. It was amazing, at dawn every morning like clockwork the entire village would come out into this field. It must have been a half a mile between our perimeter and the village. The people in the village, they would all go to the bathroom at the same place at the same time, every morning, it was like a
communal bathroom break that happened in front of the entire line. We always found that
amazing.

RV: They would come out in the same place, same time?
SD: Same time every morning. Hundreds of them, I mean it was amazing.
RV: You were out there on guard duty watching this.
SD: Watching all of this, right.
RV: Okay.
SD: Strange things happen in Vietnam.
RV: Yeah I can only imagine. Tell me what other incidents happened. You said
there were only a couple of times where you felt like there was something going on when
you were out there.
SD: Really it was kind of mundane duty. Compared to being in the field, anything
that you did in a rear was a cake job. I mean that’s why I extended to stay over there for a
couple of months. A, I could get out of active duty earlier and B, I found out where my
orders were for Ft. Hood, Texas which means I was going to be riding half track or tank
around in Texas some place playing war games. I just couldn’t see myself putting up with
that bull shit after going through what I went through in the field in Vietnam. Besides like
I said…I mean, the chances of you getting hurt in the rear like Chu Lai, having a rear job,
there’s more chance you’ll get killed in an automobile accident on the roads in the U.S.
Having a job in the rear and having a job and being out in the bush are just; I mean it’s
180 degrees in terms of the experience.
RV: What about getting rocketed and attacked at the base?
SD: We had a few rocket attacks. In the time that I was in the rear you know I
think you could have probably counted them on, I don’t know there couldn’t have been
more than five or six times where rockets were fired into the base. The VC who I assume
were firing the rockets, you know I never felt like they have a very good aim. They
would come into the perimeter. I don’t ever remember hearing that somebody got hurt
from a rocket attack that came into Chu Lai, at least when I was in the rear. They landed
someplace where they didn’t cause very much damage.
RV: So when that did happen, that was pretty relatively tame, they were just kind
of lobbing them in?
SD: People would head for their bunkers. I think that there was some type of
detail that was supposed to react to get out to further secure the perimeter. I don’t ever
remember doing that, but I could have. I just don’t remember.

RV: Steve why don’t you go ahead and describe your quarters and kind of your
basic living area, where you would eat, your basic amenities, things like that.

SD: Well as I said my quarters in the rear was a Quonset hut. It was made of
metal. It was a building that had two rooms, basically. There was a wall in the middle that
cut it in half and then there were four guys that lived in each room and we each had a
small bed, similar to the same kind of bed you had in basic. I think I had scrounged some
bookshelves some place and we all had our footlockers. We managed to buy a small
refrigerator where we kept mostly beer. I purchased through some catalog company that
was affiliated with the base or something a reel-to-reel, a Sony reel-to-reel music system
with speakers and microphones and the whole nine yards. Almost every Quonset hut, every hooch, I swear had some type of reel-to-reel music system.

RV: What kind of music did you all listen to? What did you hear?

SD: Well we listened to Armed Forces Radio during the day usually, but at night
we…you could order tapes and people would share tapes and you dubbed them. I mean
we listened to all the music of whatever was going on back home.

RV: What songs come to mind? What do you remember?

SD: *We Got to Get Out of This Place.* You know a lot of Eric Clapton, a lot of
Janice Joplin; a lot of you know, the Beatles, just all of the groups, the Rolling Stones,
just all of the groups that were very popular at the time.

RV: What else would you all do for entertainment?

SD: Well we spent a lot of time at the EM club just telling stories and bull shitting
with each other. Meals were mostly taken at the mess hall. There were issues…the
biggest problem in the rear I thought were the race problems.

RV: Really?

SD: Yes.

RV: What happened?

SD: There was a lot of tension between the black and I saw them as really kind of
militant and belligerent black guys who for whatever reason, you know I guess some of
them had some very good reasons, but had real chips on their shoulders and seemed like
were always looking for trouble. A lot of black power salutes. I know that there were
times they would refuse to salute officers. It just created a tension that just always seemed
to be there. It got to a point sometimes where you really, if you were going to walk back
to your hooch you better be with a couple other guys as opposed to walking alone.

RV: Really? It was that dangerous?
SD: Yes.

RV: Wow. When did you ever see any incidents, fights or people getting in each
other’s face and arguing about this stuff?
SD: I think I told you about the incident where we came back on when I was out
in the field and we came back on stand down and one of our guys got beat up by a few
black guys in the EM club; almost caused a riot. I never got in a fight in the rear. I used to
like to play, when you were talking about what did you used to do for entertainment, I
used to play a lot of basketball. I wasn’t a great player but I was a pretty good player. I
could hold my own. I was usually on one of the ‘A’ pick-up teams and there were quite a
few scuffles on the basketball court between sometimes the white guys and the black
guys. Push would come to shove and a lot of threats, ‘We’re coming to get you later,’ but
I never saw anything like that really come to pass.

RV: Okay. A lot of people say the culture, the attitude of the United States kind of
came to Vietnam with you all. Would you say that’s true or not?
SD: I guess if you look at race relations and the tensions that were going back in
the States at the time, yeah I guess you’d have to say some of that showed up in Chu Lai
for sure.

RV: Steve, tell me about, you mentioned going to the EM club. What was the deal
in the rear with drinking and drugs? What did you see?
SD: Well I saw a lot more…hang on one second. There were a lot more drugs in
the rear. When I was in the field we just, it was just a given that you weren’t going to be
smoking any dope or doing whatever drug that you were going to be doing if you were
out in the field. I just did not see any drugs, anybody smoking any pot or whatever when
we were out in the field. In the rear though there were a lot of drugs but I’m not sure it
was any more prevalent than what was going on back at the States at the time. You’re
talking about the culture of what was going on in America following us to Vietnam. I think that’s probably true with regard to drugs as well. There was a lot of pot that was being smoked in the rear. There was a lot of beer getting drunk in the EM club. But when I got back to the States we went out and hung out at bars too and drank beer so I’m not sure it was that much different than what was going on back here. The difference was the purity of the drugs that were available there. I knew of a guy who was hooked on heroine and his habit in Vietnam cost him probably a buck a day or something, but he went back to the States and that same habit was costing him instead of 50 bucks a month, maybe costing him 500 bucks a month so he couldn’t afford to live here. I never met one of these guys but the stories that were going around were guys would re-up or volunteer to come back to Vietnam and they would live in the rear if they could…but by coming back to Vietnam and again the jobs in the rear weren’t all that tough. You could afford a heroine habit more than you could afford it back in the States. I did know a couple of guys a couple hooches down from me that had a problem that they were gong to have to deal with when they got back. It was no question that these guys were doing some kind of heroine or sticking something in their arm.

RV: What was morale like? Did this effect morale?

SD: Well I don’t think morale was very high in 1970 and early 1971 in Chu Lai. I don’t think that the drug issues affected morale as much as how the war was being fought. I’ll tell you what affected morale more than the drugs were the racial issues. Again it just brought a…it wasn’t like being out in the field, don’t get me wrong, but there was a certain tension that was prevalent. That’s certainly had an impact on morale, I thought. It wasn’t all, and I don’t want to give anybody the wrong impression, it wasn’t all of the black guys that had chips on their shoulders, but there were more than a few that felt that…they were pissed off at the world for reasons that I can only surmise and I wouldn’t pretend to explain.

RV: Did you all have access to religious services in the rear?

SD: Yes.

RV: Did you partake?

SD: No. I’m not a...well I was brought up Catholic but I’ve become kind of an agnostic. Actually when I was in the field it always bothered me when somebody would
say, ‘Well, what’s going to happen is going to happen,’ or you know, ‘If there’s a bullet
with my name on it you know I guess it’s preordained.’ I always kind of felt like I wanted
somebody around me who felt like they had more control of their situation than leaving it
up to a deity someplace. I didn’t want to believe that if we didn’t work hard that we could
get done what needed to get done and get out of there. It was going to be up to us and not
somebody else.

RV: Well is the saying true that there are no atheists in foxholes?
SD: Yeah somewhat. Even though I consider myself as an agnostic I think I had
some kind of Buddha thing around my neck. I think I had a rosary. I was covering all the
bases (laughing).

RV: Just in case.
SD: Just in case.
RV: Well, did you talk to ministers or were they around, any of the chaplains?
SD: We had a chaplain come out in the field. If we were out in the field on
a…well, I won’t say every Sunday but you know we’d probably see a chaplain in the
field a couple times a month. I don’t remember what dominations that they were and
most of the guys who were out in the field if a service was held whatever it was it would
be attended. It would be pretty heavily attended wherever we were. Strange sometimes
they would be out in the middle of a field and sometimes they would be in the jungle.
I’ve forgotten how many helicopter flights I’ve taken.
RV: Yes. Well on another subject, what kind of contact did you all have in the
rear with women?
SD: Mostly with Vietnamese women; very rarely with American women. We
would see them every once in a while over at the USO. I always thought they were kind
of weird.
RV: The American women?
SD: Yes.
RV: Why?
SD: I don’t know. Just…some of them were goody two-shoes and that kind of
stuff. I didn’t hang around the USO a lot. I only went over there when I wanted a piece of
information or a newspaper from someplace or something like that. Occasionally you
would see Army nurses but not very often. Most of the women that we came in contact
with were Vietnamese women, particularly the women that worked on the base. Each of
us had a Vietnamese girl who would clean up our hooch. We called them hooch maids.
They would shine our shoes and make our beds and sweep out the hooch and I’ve
forgotten it cost us…nothing. Maybe a buck a week or something, I don’t remember.
Maybe it was more than that, but it was cheap.

RV: Did you trust them?
SD: Yes. Well, I trusted the girls that worked with us. They were very nice. I
sensed they had an education. For some reason this sticks in my mind, I think they were
Catholic. But I had heard some stories about some guys who had gotten ripped off by
their hooch maids, but I think that they knew if they did that they weren’t going to be on
the base. They would get fired, and it was a good job for them.

RV: What about the stories of the civilians being members of the Viet Cong, the
ones who could go on base?

SD: Well I didn’t see that. I didn’t run into very many…well, I did see some
civilians from time to time down at the PX, but most of the civilians that I knew on the
base were women. Could they have been Viet Cong or could they have Viet Cong
members in their family? I guess so. My sense is that they liked the fact that we were
there.

RV: The civilians did.
SD: The civilians did. I felt badly when the U.S. ultimately left there. Those
people, if they lost that war, they were going to get hurt.

RV: You definitely had that idea while you were there?
SD: Oh yeah. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were going to, there was
going to be a price to pay by the South Vietnamese if we left. There was no question in
my mind.

RV: How did you feel about that at the time?
SD: Well I don’t know. I guess you can tell. It’s a lot of mixed emotions about
that you know because you feel badly for them but again you know when I was in the
field and I was working with ARVN troops, I never felt like that they were truly gung ho
about defending their country. So on the one hand you feel sorry for the people that you
met in the rear who you felt like their hearts were in the right place yet you felt like this
was a group of people who, or a country that for whatever reason couldn’t take care of
itself.

RV: Why do you think that was the case?
SD: To this day I don’t understand that mind set. Again I don’t want to generalize
everything. Because there were the Kit Carson scouts that we worked with and those
guys were good at what they did and they were gung ho, but my sense was that the rank
and file soldier that was in the South Vietnamese Army was not very capable. I just don’t
get it. The Korean troops that I ran into there, I mean they were a gung ho bunch of
people. I ran into Australians just once or twice. I mean those guys were good soldiers.
The Americans I think were good soldiers. But the people that we were fighting for had
the worst army in the field. You know it’s just another example of how Vietnam was just
so screwed up. I’ve read other things since I’ve been there. We should have done a better
job I guess of helping those people help themselves than we did.

RV: How do you think we could have done it differently?
SD: I don’t know. Again that’s a higher pay grade than I was. I think maybe if we
had I don’t know, forced the issue more. It’s like raising a child: if you do everything for
them, the child never really takes responsibility for himself or herself. I think maybe we
took too much responsibility and should have forced the issue with the Vietnamese to
take on a bigger load. I don’t know if that would have worked or not. It’s one of those
seems to me issues.
RV: What was that like for morale? That must have not been very…
SD: Well that’s part of what affected morale and you wondered why you were
there if those people wouldn’t do a better job of fighting for themselves. It was a morale
issue in the field. You get depressed but it’s one of those things where you kind of shake
your head. What the hell are we doing here if these guys won’t stick up for themselves
better than what they’re doing?
RV: That’s got to be difficult.
SD: But at the same time you felt sorry for them because you knew what was
going to happen, you know.
RV: Did you all really know that they’re just going to get their butts kicked or did you think, ‘Okay we don’t really know exactly what the end game will be. They might do it,’?

SD: I knew if we left they were going to get their ass kicked.

RV: Really?

SD: Absolutely.

RV: Why so certain?

SD: I knew that in 1970 when I was in the field.

RV: Really?

SD: Yes.

RV: Tell me why so certain.

SD: Well just kind of what I was saying before. I mean, there was this one time we were out in the field with a, a few times we were operating but I do remember the one time we were operating with them and we got into a short firefight. The VC attempted or maybe it was ARVN attempted to ambush us. We returned fire and as I remember the firefight was kind of short lived as most of them were. And you turn around and those guys are gone. (Laughter) So it’s just, I mean it’s their country. They should know how to take on this enemy better than we do. And yet they never showed that.

RV: Were you guys like, ‘What the hell is this?’

SD: ‘What the hell is this,’ that’s exactly right. So that’s why I say if we’d left that those guys, you know they weren’t going to be able to stand up to the…the VC were, you know you had to give them some. They never gave up. I mean they persevered. They just kept coming at you in little bitty skirmishes. Like they say, there wasn’t a battle in Vietnam that was won by the VC or the North Vietnamese, the NVA. And it was the same thing with most skirmishes. Only one time that I know that the VC…well twice, in the time that I was there that you could say that they won that one. I mean the rest of the time, out of all the firefights and ambushes and everything, at best it was a draw and usually there was some kind of, you know, I won’t say usually but often times there was some kind of blood trail leading back from where they had attacked us.

RV: But did that matter?

SD: What do you mean?
RV: So you killed five of them or two of them, you wound two or three. Did you all think that mattered or that was significant? I’m kind of playing Devil’s Advocate here.

SD: No I understand what you’re saying. It did and it didn’t matter. I guess my point is that those guys never gave up in trying to win their cause. No matter how, what’s the word I’m searching for?

RV: No matter what they faced, the amount of the difficulties.

SD: Well that’s right. The fact that they just couldn’t beat the U.S. Army. I mean they just kept coming. They didn’t become demoralized by the fact that they would be doing all this hit and run stuff and not getting anywhere, at least militarily.

RV: Why do you think they did that?

SD: But my point is that they had a lot of perseverance but I don’t think the South Vietnamese had that same kind of characteristic. I think that the South Vietnamese [Viet Cong] and the NVA were just adamant that however long it took that they were going to win this thing. I never understood that if you really believed in your country and your people and what you were fighting for, why the South Vietnamese didn’t feel as fervently about this issue as the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.

RV: What was up with that? Why would they continue coming at you guys?

SD: You mean the VC?

RV: Yeah, the NVA and the VC. Why the persistence, in your mind?

SD: Well because they felt like, they believed in what they were doing. They just believed in their cause, at least in my mind, they believed in their cause more than the South Vietnamese believed in theirs. In having those strongly held beliefs, I mean that’s why they said, ‘Well however long it takes, we’re just going to keep after this.’ I suppose they could also read some of the handwriting on the wall of what was happening in the States at that time with the anti war movement and while they weren’t winning on the ground in Vietnam they were certainly, you could probably say they were winning the political battle in the United States.

RV: Do you think the United States military forces lacked that urgency? That might be a simple question there’s more to it. What was, in our minds, we obviously had the firepower, we obviously had the ability, but in the field was there a sense of urgency that you saw that we on our side did not have?
SD: Boy! (Laughter) I’ve never been asked that question before. I don’t think that, (speaks with someone else); my wife just came back in to grab something. Was there a sense of urgency for us to win this war as a grunt on the ground?

RV: Or was there a lack of the sense around that? I’ve heard many veterans, not necessarily the Vietnam War, just describe in wartime there is this underlying sense of urgency even if it’s a slow day and you’re just hanging out and nothing is happening. You still feel that and I’m wondering if that was the case on the ground there in Vietnam for you, for what you saw, your personal experience?

SD: Well I guess the best way that I can answer that is go back to something I said earlier in another one of the sessions. There was a frustration in the field oftentimes that the rules were such that it made it more difficult to win. And it goes back to, ‘How much political clearance do I have to have in order to call in artillery on a position that I’m receiving fire?’ At least when I was in the field you know there was a sense that we could have fought this a different way. And in a sense we were asked to fight this thing with one hand tied behind our back. So you know thinking about this now I guess my answer is I’m not sure there was an urgency by the leaders to win this thing. You know what I’m saying?

RV: Yes I do. Absolutely. It’s something that I have heard before.

SD: That this was more of a, ‘We’re going to put you guys in harm’s way and see how this comes out.’ (Laughter)

RV: (Laughter) That’s nice for you all.

SD: You know you fly out on all these missions and you get dropped into an LZ zone, or you know a landing zone, we called them LZs. You kind of wonder sometimes why you’re here. I suppose it’s because somebody spotted some enemy or whatever. It just seems like a lot of time chasing your tail.

RV: That’s an interesting way to put it. Let me ask you this, is this (laughter) it provides a great visual as well or a sad visual, this feeling you had, especially about the leadership, is this something that you developed in the field or in the rear when you were back there kind of watching and listening and observing?

SD: Well there wasn’t a lot of love for the leadership. I don’t know if I told you this story. We were out west of Chu Lai someplace and we had been humping around the
jungles and we heard that the colonel was, he had been flying around on his little LOH or whatever or his helicopter. We were going to be staying on this one spot for the day so we had to take down some trees. Clearing an LZ took a little while, especially if there were a lot of trees. Basically what you did was wrapped a little plastic explosion around the base of the tree, depending on how big the tree was, depending on how much plastic explosive went around it, then you put a charge into it and blew the trunk of the tree in half and hauled it off to the side so finally you had enough clearing where some helicopters could land. Well, that was the case this day. The colonel was going to come down and visit our company. Before the colonel would come down everybody had to empty their weapons and the word around was if you were found with a loaded chamber, you were going to be subject to court-martial.

RV: Wow. They were that worried.
SD: Yes.
RV: Now what kind of statement does that make to you all?
SD: I’ve forgotten about that until it just popped in my head a couple minutes ago. Yeah, what it said was he was afraid of getting shot by his own men.
RV: I mean there’s a total statement of a lack of trust here. I can only imagine how that made you all feel.
SD: Well sure. We’re out in the middle of nowhere. We have no idea, well I guess we did, kind of knew what enemy was around. Here’s a whole company of men that basically have been told to stand down with their weapons out in the middle of the bush.
RV: What did you see in the rear towards this? What kind of attitude was there amongst the leadership that you witnessed? I mean, you drove around these officers all day.
SD: Well right, and actually the relationship between the guys in the rear, the clerks and the gofers like me I mean was pretty good with the brass because we did work with them all day. I actually worked more with the sergeants, the top sergeants more than I worked with the majors and the colonels.
RV: Why? Just because they were more of your direct contact?
SD: They were my direct contact. There was a few times where the major wanted to go up to some village, I don’t know 20, 30 miles north of Chu Lai so you know loaded
up the jeep and I think I took one sergeant and a major, we all drew M-16s and I drew a
couple of grenades and that kind of thing and drove them up there and drove them back.
Most of the drivers, the guys that were gofers were guys that had been in grunt units. I
think the majors wanted, when we did take them off the base, wanted somebody at least
knew how to fire a weapon. I’m not saying anything negative about REMFs but a lot of
times guys come to Vietnam and get rear jobs from the very beginning to the end. I mean
never lock and load. So I think I’m off on a tangent here…
RV: That’s fine.
SD: …but the leadership in the rear had a pretty good relationship with its clerks
and drivers and what have you. Whereas in the field there was, by example I just said
with regard with the weapons stand down when the colonel shows up, yeah there wasn’t
trust. We never were sure what those guys were thinking or doing. I don’t know if that’s
much different than any other war. Maybe the grunts in World War II and Korea felt like
they always knew what was ahead of them where ours was more of a guerilla warfare all
the time, at least where I was at. I think that the guys up on the DMZ had it maybe a little
differently.
RV: Steve do you want to break for today?
SD: What time is it?
RV: It’s about 9, well your time, what is it? It’s 9:25, 8:25.
SD: I’m good for about another time minutes.
RV: Let me ask you then a couple other just I guess specific questions about the
rear in general. Tell me about contact with home. Did it improve in the rear and how did
that happen?
SD: Contact with who?
RV: With home, with the United States.
SD: Oh with home.
RV: With family and friends.
SD: I probably wrote more letters when I was in the rear. I sensed that, and made
it a point to let my parents know that I was out of the field and no longer in, I don’t think
I used these words but things were a lot easier, a lot less dangerous. When you go to
Vietnam, somewhere in the process you have to fill out this form that says that if you get
wounded, who do you want notified and do you want notification before, and I don’t remember exactly how this went, but did you want, if you were only injured slightly, did you still want a notification going back to the States. I had filled out the form that I said unless I was seriously injured I didn’t want that notification going back. I ended up writing a letter to my parents to tell them I had been wounded because I was afraid maybe they would get notified by it anyway and that I was fine, I was recuperating and so on and so forth. I knew that they were probably very worried at that point. So once I got to the rear I really made it a point that I was out of the field and out of a lot of danger. I think I wrote them back. I guess I had the opportunity to write them back more often. Did I answer your question?

RV: You did, I guess what you said was you wrote more. You didn’t really tell them everything.

SD: No. There were opportunities that you could do a, like a radio/telephone phone call home.

RV: The MARS calls.

SD: Yeah, right and I just never did that. I just felt like it would make me feel worse that you know especially if you still had a month to go and you heard from home. I didn’t take my R&R; everybody gets an R&R in Vietnam, a week off that they can go someplace. There are five or six places that you can go; Hawaii, Australia, Thailand, a few other places and I waited as long as I could to go to R&R because I felt like if I went then I had to come back to Vietnam and do another six months that would just seem interminable after having a week off at some place where you could wear your civvies all week.

RV: So you waited as long as possible?

SD: Yes. So I ended up going to Bangkok for a week after I had gotten a rear job. I would see guys who would go on R&R when I was in the field. Then they would come back from Hawaii or Bangkok and be back in the field again.

RV: You’re saying that’s just got be just unbelievably hard.

SD: Just unbelievably difficult.

RV: Yes. We can talk about Bangkok next time. I want to ask you about that, what you did.
SD: What I remember of it. (Laughter)
RV: Yeah what you remember. You were there a week but you remember about
20 hours maybe (laughing).
SD: Something like that.
RV: Well why don’t we go ahead and break for today, Steve? We’ll pick up
another time. Thanks a lot.