STEPHEN MAXNER: This is Steve Maxner, conducting oral history interview with Mr. David Shelly on the 18th of April, year 2000 at 10:15 a.m. in the Special Collections Library interview room. Alright Mr. Shelly, why don’t you go ahead and I guess begin the interview by reading the passage that you wanted to read?

DAVID SHELLY: Okay, thanks. I’ve got this little passage that I feel is related to my oral history. This is some oral history taken out of some books written on Vietnam. It says, "These people are not…” it’s talking about Vietnam veterans, "These people are not extraordinary except for the fact that they have survived Vietnam and continue to survive. I know that on more than one occasion I was specifically asked by the man I was interviewing to mention the fact that he hadn’t had a good job and was earning a decent living. At night he goes home to his wife and his children, sometimes stopping for a few beers at a local bar. In his spare time he’s watching baseball on television or polishing his car, not climbing a bell tower with an automatic weapon in his hand to take a pot shot at innocent citizens. However, I also talked to individuals who know where the impulse to climb that tower comes from. I met people who can’t seem to settle in one place, who have failed at leading others, who are choking on their own bitterness, who have attempted to commit suicide. Physically and mentally scared, their lives have been permanently damaged by their experience in Vietnam. That doesn’t’ make them abnormal, only as fragile as other human beings."

SM: How was that passage important to you?
DS: I think it pretty much hits home to even the veterans that came home and got on with their lives as I like to say because it was part of our lives and even though we were young, it made a huge impression on a young person’s life because it was the world turned upside down over there as far as we were concerned. I think that those that hear this in the future or whatever can maybe get a mind’s psyche of the individual sitting over there and how it did affect him.

SM: Okay. And this passage is from a book called ‘Nam by Mark Baker.

DS: Mark Baker.

SM: It’s non fiction. "Vietnam war in the words of soldiers who fought there."

Why don’t we begin by first you providing a short biographical sketch of yourself; where and when you were born, where you grew up, and I guess leading up to high school and your decision to join the military.

DS: Okay. I was born in February 19, 1949 in Freeport, Texas which is right outside of Galveston. My dad is William David Shelly and my mom is Lesta Mae Saunders Shelly. They met right after or right during World War II. My dad was stationed in Hobbs, New Mexico. He was a crew chief turned gunner on B17s during World War II over in Europe. He was shot down over there on his 9th mission and held a prisoner of war for 8 months. Family background, my great, great, great grand daddy who fought against Santa Anna so we’re pretty much native Texans. After I was born, shortly after I was born we moved to Hobbs, New Mexico where my brother was born a year later, a year and 4 months later and my dad got into the wholesale business and he stayed in that for about 16, 18 years I guess and we traveled all over the place in West Texas primarily and then settled in Lubbock in 1960. Then we went to school here in Lubbock, graduated from Lubbock High School in 1967. Went to business college after that, graduated from that in the later part of 1968 and knew the draft was going to get me eventually for Vietnam or draft for the military so me and a friend of mine volunteered for the draft in January of 1969. We were inducted into the Army. I went to Fort Bliss, Texas in El Paso and took my basic training; was selected out of our training battalion to go to the preparatory school at West Point. After basic, took AIT training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, called Tigerland Southport.
and because of racial tensions, and I may bring this up several times because it had a lot to do with the Vietnam war, each year of the Vietnam war from what I have read has been indifferent from the year previous because of the attitudes of soldiers and the attitudes at home. Our whole company had orders for Korea and because of the racial tensions and the things that were going on, the lackadaisical attitude in our particular training company. They resented all the orders and had them all ordered to go to Vietnam and whenever we stood in formation the day before we left the 1st sargent said, "I hope that all of you don’t come home."

SM: That was the message of the 1st sargent to you on your way to Vietnam, I hope you don’t come home?

DS: Because of the racial attitudes of the people that…

SM: What was his racial background?

DS: He was black. He was a black 1st sargent but we had a bunch of northern blacks that came down there for training that had the Muslim attitude that this was the white man’s war and they shouldn’t be fighting in it do they didn’t care whether they trained or not.

SM: Now what month and year was this? This was your AIT?

DS: This is AIT at Fort Polk and that’s the latter part of our…say mid April to first of June, somewhere in there.

SM: In 1960…

DS: In 1969.

SM: ’69, wow. A lot of the black members of your training unit were black Muslims?

DS: Right.

SM: A lot of black power signs and things like that?

DS: Correct.
SM: Any actual physical altercations?

DS: Let’s put it this way. We had two story barracks, old wooden barracks. They controlled the upper part of that barracks, the second story. They were all predominantly black up there and I of course being from West Texas, I hadn’t never seen that type of attitude. I guess I was naïve in a way but I was still young too. I remember one night I had one too many beers and decided I was going to go upstairs and find out what all this racial crap was about. I walked up there and asked them who the head of this cluster fuck was…

SM: That’s okay.

DS: …and it got real quiet. They was wondering why this tall, lanky white boy was invading their territory and finally one guy from the back stood up and said, "Well I guess I am," and I walked back there and I said, "You know, what’s all this crap going on," and everything," and he said, "If you got enough guts to come up here like this you got our respect." I got a lot of respect from them while I was in but still that didn’t change anything. Actual altercations? No. Not while we were there.

SM: What about physical altercations with the instructors, with the DI’s? How would they enforce discipline, for instance, if they had problems with a particular soldier? Would they just let it go? Would they…

DS: They just let it go. There was no discipline on their part at all which is rather shocking to me because all they may have, I don’t know, they may have sent them to the…you’ve got to look at it this way. If they sent one back they’d have to send them all back and then what would the training been with only one half of what we went out there to train with. That would have been half the platoon, so you’re losing a good majority of your training.

SM: What about other disciplinary measures? Article 15s?

DS: I’m sure they did, but it’s something that was not to my knowledge or what I can remember. I don’t remember seeing any discipline. There might have been, but I don’t remember.
SM: Take a step back for a second. You mentioned that your father was a prisoner of war in World War II for a little while, 8 months. Is that right?

DS: Right.

SM: Did he talk to you much about that experience?

DS: No, never. World War II veterans predominantly do not talk about their experiences. Last two weeks before he died I did sit down to the dinner table and visit with him about it. In fact, I’ve got it written down now; took a little oral history of my own. Found out a little bit about what happened while he was there. In fact, his death was caused by his being a prisoner because they saw that he had emphysema the last part of his life and finally they found somebody that had enough sense that took a biopsy of his lungs and found out that he had found… it sounds gross, but its called stronguloids which is a worm, and the gestation period of it is about 35-40 years and they say that he got that from sleeping in the sheep manure and stuff like that. [?] moving him up and down the rows. He never did stay in a specific cell any certain period of time. They moved him up and down the rows all the time. Why I don’t know, but anyhow.

SM: Wow, that’s amazing.

DS: So that’s what he died from kind of was worms got in and they say that they can attach to any organ in the body. Just so happened they attacked his lungs, disintegrated them.

SM: That’s horrible.

DS: Yeah.

SM: Okay. Your decision to go into the Army, what was that predicated upon? After you finished business school and you finally went ahead and volunteered to go?

DS: I didn’t have a lot of education and I figured with a little bit of education I wanted to make military a career. It was just something that me and a friend of mine decided that we wanted to do and that was it. We both wanted to become an officer and not necessarily be a
leader of men but help guide people through the military.

SM: Now how much about Vietnam were you aware of? Were you keeping up?

DS: Yeah, pretty much what was going on on TV but our parents went to war, our grandparents went to war, it was...this is something that we did what we were supposed to do for our country. If we were told that's what we were going to do, that's what we were going to do. Go ahead and do it.

SM: Was there any...in your decision to go into the Army, was there the notion that perhaps if you volunteered and went in before actually getting your number called in the draft, that by going in first you might be able to gear or steer yourself in a particular direction whether that be Westpoint or OCS? A lot of guys volunteered because they had more control over what would happen to them in their career. Was that part of your decision as well?

DS: No, because we knew whenever you go in whether you volunteer or you're drafted you still take a battery of tests that give them an idea of what your qualified in your MOS. Whenever you do get assigned an MOS and after I got in and took the series of tests so they could, I was qualified to sit behind a desk for 2 years and didn’t have me a job or anything like that and I said, "No, that’s not why I came into the military. The reason I came in was to get into the Army infantry. If I’m going to make this career, I’m going to do it where I can make a good career out of it." I knew you couldn’t do it sitting behind a desk.

SM: Right, okay. What did you think about the decision in 1968 when Johnson decided not to run for reelection, or were you paying attention to all that after the Tet offensive of ’68?

DS: I probably didn’t...I remember seeing it on TV but I don’t think it really made that much difference to me. I wasn’t...to me that was politics, and politics I didn’t care about. I knew that it shaped the way things were going to become, I was sure of that, but I also felt sure that probably the war would still go on whether he resigned or not, or decided not to run again, so I might as well just go on and do it.

SM: And do you recall what you’re parents thought about the war?
DS: Neither one of them thought...of course my mother was different from my dad about it. She knew that she had 2 sons that were available for the draft and I don’t think she wanted the 2 of her sons to go into the military because she saw how it affected her husband and his life after military service. She wanted things a little bit better for us which all parents want for their children. Not much was said by either one, though. They stood behind what we did regardless.

SM: Did your dad have a particular opinion.

DS: No. Not a bit. I don’t, I couldn’t recall when I went in whether he was proud that I went in or regretted that I went in. I think he just decided to let me make that decision and stand by whatever I decide to do.

SM: So you’re at Fort Polk, your unit is suffering from significant racial tensions and problems, initially going to Korea. Those orders are thrown, and you’re going to Vietnam.

DS: Right.

SM: Do you know what unit yet?

DS: No, back then whenever you went over there, after the first initial bunch of people that were in Vietnam they started then shifting everybody over in lots and groups on commercial airlines and stuff. You didn’t go over as a unit anymore. We went to 90th replacement battalion once we hit Bien Hoa Air Base there at [?] and you were assigned to whatever unit they decided to put you with at that time.

SM: What did you guys think about that?

DS: It was, that was different. Of course I didn’t know that much about the military still. I was still young, a novice as far as the military went. It didn’t...wherever they sent me is where I went. I knew it was going to be an infantry unit.

SM: The idea that you went through training with a particular unit and as a unit you were initially supposed to be sent to Korea?

DS: Right.
SM: And then you get to Vietnam and they’re just spreading you out to the four winds?
Did that bother you and your other soldiers that you weren’t going to be going into combat with
guys that you knew, that you had trained with?

DS: No, not really because I don’t think I would have wanted to go into combat with
those particular people.

SM: Okay. So you found out you were going…when did you find out you were going to
the 82\(^{\text{nd}}\)? That was your first unit of assignment, right?

DS: Right, that was my first unit of assignment was the 82\(^{\text{nd}}\) airborne division. I guess we
were there as the 9\(^{\text{th}}\) replacement battalion for 2 or 3 days before we got our assignments and
then after we got assigned to the 82\(^{\text{nd}}\). Some guys that I did go through the training with - of
course we all got orders at the same time - about 3 or 4 of these guys that I went over there with,
we all went to the 82\(^{\text{nd}}\). But we all went to a different company. None of us were in the same
company.

SM: And this was in June?

DS: Right, in ’69.

SM: ’69. Were you airborne qualified already?

DS: No.

SM: Did you go through airborne school eventually?

DS: No, of course I had my own opinion about airborne. I wasn’t necessarily scared of
heights but I couldn’t see jumping out of an airplane, that just seemed foolish to me because I
knew they were going to do it up there anyhow. I think they had one airborne jump the whole
time the Vietnam war was going on, and it was a disaster from my understanding. It didn’t
matter to me one way or the other. We did initially 2 weeks of training with the 82\(^{\text{nd}}\) before they
stuck us with the unit. We did repelling out of the helicopters and lots of night training and stuff
which they’ve taken some missions whenever I was with them, just primarily night ambushes is
what we primarily pulled was night ambushes.

SM: Now the training that you received in basic training and in AIT, did that, was that adequate to prepare you for Vietnam?

DS: Yeah, pretty much. You know, it’s just like a job. You get out of it what you put into it. If you want to train well and you want to learn because you know that you’re going to eventually get involved in combat, well you better try to learn the right way. I listen to the instructors and I think they gave pretty adequate training. I don’t think that they, I don’t think that regardless of where you took your training, whether it be Fort Polk or Fort Benning or wherever, I don’t think the training actually gives you the experience that you receive whenever you do get there. You just have to hope for the best.

SM: And what about the instructors themselves? Were there many Vietnam veterans teaching at basic and AIT?

DS: Most of them were. Yeah. I would be…all the DI’s were Vietnam veterans. In fact, they all seemed so young; most of them not over 22, 23.

SM: Did they invoke a lot of lessons from Vietnam? You know, "When I was in Vietnam, this is what we did, this is how we did it, and this could save your life," that kind of stuff?

DS: No, they didn’t actually put it that way. "Listen to what I have to say if you want to stay alive".

SM: Right.

DS: Yeah, they’d try not to…I don’t think they tried to dwell on lessons learned; keeps your mind intent. It’s, I don’t know, combat itself is an adrenaline rush in the first place, so you just have to be there.

SM: The training that you receive when you first arrived in the 82nd, how was that compared to the training you’d received in the United States?
DS: It was much more intense. At first it was really, really scary because, you know, they did set up night patrols, set up ambushes and stuff but after the 1st week we figured out that the training area that they had us in was about as safe as you could get in Vietnam and you really after a while you kind of got the feeling it was training and not really utilizing what they were trying to prepare you for.

SM: And in terms of live fire exercises, did you have many of those before your first contact, your first fire fight in Vietnam?

DS: First live fire exercises meaning target practices?

SM: No, for instance, those night ambushes that you went on. Any of them with live ammo?

DS: Oh yeah. They were all live ammo.

SM: They were?

DS: Oh yeah.

SM: Okay.

DS: All the training was done over there with live ammo.

SM: What about back in the United States? Any training done with live ammo as far as for patrolling and things?

DS: No.

SM: Okay. How long were you in the 82nd before you actually went on your first combat mission?

DS: Well, like I said, after the second waiting day they shipped us to our unit and our primary assignment. We were in the field the next week on an ambush.

SM: What was that specific unit that you were assigned to down through the platoon? Do
DS: I believe I was in A company. There was only one brigade of the 82nd over there [?]
if I remember right and I was in A company and past that I don’t remember.

SM: How about platoon?

DS: 1st platoon.

SM: 1st platoon? Okay. How were you welcomed in that platoon as a new guy in 1969?

DS: You know, in this, I know this may sound different from some of the other people
that were there, the 82nd, their morale seemed to be a whole lot higher than the other units and
the reason why I know this is because I ran into some other people from other units and other
outfits and in fact I was in a different outfit before I left there and the attitudes were totally
different. The people in the 82nd had more of a you might call gung-ho attitude and still a good
strike unit as far as I was concerned. They seemed to look after people and even though you were
new in country and stuff they wanted to help you out and learn how to live. I think they were a
unique company or unique outfit to be with. Their officers and senior NCOs actually seemed to
want to take care of the people and I thought that’s the way it was supposed to be until after they
took the colors home and stuck me in the 2nd of the 3rd Cavalry Division after that and that was
totally different. They didn’t care about the people.

SM: So the 82nd was a really good unit to be assigned to apparently?

DS: Yeah, they really were, yeah.

SM: One of the myths or one of the stereotypes of the Vietnam war, the FNG and how
that mentality…

DS: I think that was…the 82nd used that more of a kind of welcome in country a lot, you
know, FNG, you’re going to be that; cherry, whatever you’re going to call it. Until you get some
combat experience you’re going to be treated that way but it wasn’t a treatment as far as the rest
of the units, they stood away from me. They didn’t want to even be associated with you but these
guys they called you the cherry and FNG and stuff, but they still would hang out with you and be associated with you and help you out.

SM: Do you remember any of the NCOs or officers in particular from your unit?

DS: You know, I really don’t. I know that I carried a machine gun in our squad and I walked point a lot.

SM: This was the M-60 that you carried?

DS: Yeah. Whenever I wasn’t carrying it I was walking point. I probably walked point half the time I was there.

SM: Walking point, when did that start? Was that one of your initial duties or was that something you did later on after you got some experience?

DS: …you got into, yeah, with some experience. I was probably there 2 or 3 months before I started walking point.

SM: Okay, so why don’t you go ahead and describe your first experience in the field and on a patrol. What was that like?

DS: To my recollection, we did, like I said, lots of night ambushes. We’d go in, set up, whether it be set up on an old French fort or set up on a trail or a river crossing or whatever. It was pretty much the same. We had our standard operating procedures that we used as far as our night ambushes. We would go in and set up right at dark and then after it became dark we would move about a hundred meters down away from that just in case we were spotted moving into that. Then they couldn’t pin point us exactly, if they decided to put mortars in on us or whatever. We just predominantly set up an ambush like I said, whether it be on the river or on the trail or whatever, machine guns pointed that way. Probably in the 6 months I was with the 82nd, we had maybe, in my particular platoon, we probably had 4 maybe 5 firefights. We tripped that many, or initiated that many ambushes. They all went off well. The only casualty that I remember us having was a landmine, booby trap. Other than that and the firefights themselves, we didn’t lose anybody. We were…I don’t know, fortunate; whatever, had it together.
SM: Where in Vietnam was this?

DS: When I was with the 82\textsuperscript{nd} we were around The Iron Triangle, Saigon, and around the Hobo Woods, in that area in through there. Lots of roads and plantations, lots of rice paddies.

SM: When you talk about putting up these ambuses, is this what I guess today is called the L shaped ambush or would you use different types of configurations?

DS: …where the trail was, where it’s located and everything. Sometimes we’d just parallel with the trails and set off about 20,30 meters back, as long as we were back far enough when we set our clamors off we wouldn’t catch any back blast. It just depended on how the trail was set. If it was a river crossing…rivers in Vietnam are kind of like oceans, they have tides. At late night the rivers would go down real low. You can walk across them. In the daytime, they’re over your head, and so the best time to catch them on ambushes crossing the rivers was usually between 11, or say 23:00 hours to 01:00 because the rivers are slow. Just various ways of setting up.

SM: And what would your position usually be in those ambushes? Would you be the 60 gunner still?

DS: Yeah, I carried the M-60 during most of the ambushes. The only time I walked point during the daylight hours and at night I took over the 60 because I just liked it.

SM: So most of the patrolling that you did was during the day, or at night, or both?

DS: A little bit of both. We patrolled during the day and not every night, but we set up ambushes. They would alternated between the squads and things. Some nights we’d be in the company perimeter and then they’d just send one platoon out at night to do a night ambush so about every 3\textsuperscript{rd} or 4\textsuperscript{th} night we would go out on a night ambush and during the daytime we’d do patrol all day long.

SM: And where would you go out from as far as just your…what would be your base of operations? Where was that located?
DS: I was trying to think of earlier where our base of operations was and that’s with the
82nd. I really don’t remember. I don’t remember where the camp was or anything.

SM: But you would walk out?

DS: Yeah, oh yeah.

SM: How far usually would you go in terms of your patrolling and in terms of your
ambushes?

DS: Oh probably within a thousand, two thousand meters at most. We wouldn’t get that
far out because we had to know where our artillery or support loads in case we get any caught on
our ambush and we would need support with artillery, mortars, or whatever.

SM: So not too far?

DS: No, not really.

SM: And your first encounter with the enemy, you mentioned in the questionnaires that
you filled out, that it was primarily, I guess this was a courier unit carrying food or something?
The first encounter that you actually had with the enemy?

DS: Oh, yeah, we…well in fact there’s certain trails on that, that when the enemy been
moving arms and food up and down for them and so we set up the ambush one night and I set up
a trip fire on one end and on both ends of the trail itself and that way we could catch him going
either way and set up clamors shooting in towards the center of us and first night the trip fire
went off and I happened to be up that night and I threw claymores and it was real quiet
afterwards, and I threw a (?) afterwards and I called in artillery and flare because you can get a
whole lot more light out of artillery than you can out of mortars and I checked the sight and I
guessed we killed a family of pigs that night. It was kind of funny, but anyhow. The next night
we went out and set up ambushes about probably a hundred meters down in the same location
and about the same time that night it went off and I blew claymores and well…let’s put it this
way; I reached to blow the claymores and all of a sudden I heard rustling coming through the
bushes towards us. We figured out it was 3 or 4 VC that were carrying rice down the trail that
night. They did not have any weapons. The clamors, regardless, didn’t get thrown and we
didn’t…there was one kill out of the deal and I just happened to be the one that killed him with
one round because he came running towards me and he didn’t see me and I didn’t see him until
he got right at me and all I can remember is both of our eyes getting as big around as saucers and
me pulling the trigger and he fell over. He wasn’t…didn’t have any weapons or anything and we
didn’t have any evidence of weapons on the others. Of course they got away. All we found was
their rice sacks they were carrying.

SM: And these were bags? They weren’t even carrying them on bicycles or anything?

DS: No, they were by foot; probably seemed like they weighed 40 or 50 pounds a piece.

SM: What was your first experience with an armed enemy?

DS: During daylight patrol, we were walking around a cemetery somewhere, I don’t
know where, but anyway we got fired upon at that time and it was different. You really don’t
know what it sounds like whenever a weapon has been fired at you until you’re there because
you can hear the bullets whizzing by and everything. It’s different. It’s really hard to describe.
It’s one of those ‘got to be there’ deals. But I was scared, but I think after it’s initiated and
everything you’re too busy trying to stay alive. It’s an adrenaline rush, and now you hear it. Talk
about adrenaline rush all the time and it is! I think it’s something that keeps you alive during
times that you’re fighting, but after it’s over with it’s just like taking any drug. After it’s over
with it’s a really, really big let down. I mean, it just drains you. You just sit back and relax for a
while because you have to; because you are totally drained.

SM: What size unit was it that engaged?

DS: Squad sized, it wasn’t that big. All we could see…and they were probably 200
meters away from us when we released. I don’t know. The Vietnamese - or at least then or later
on North Vietnamese - that I ran into, they weren’t very good as far as I could tell at initiating
contact because they always…they didn’t wait until you get upon them. I don’t know if it scared
them enough or they figured that they just wanted to make contact and get out as quick as
possible so we could get our helicopters and our artillery on top because they can’t have
resources that we did and they always initiated contact too far away to really damage any GI’s or units I was with anyhow. I’m sure there were different operations in different places. In my situation, they always initiated contact when we were so far away that they didn’t do much damage to us.

SM: And you said earlier VC, was this something that was understood? That most of the units that you came up against with the 82\textsuperscript{nd} that they were the Viet Cong?

DS: Primarily in the part that I was in, yes. They were primarily VC, Viet Cong. NVA were, during that part of the war, were mostly in the northern parts of Vietnam. Northern parts of south Vietnam, and of course later on we found out they had major refuges across the border in Cambodia which wasn’t that far from us and they were in charge of a lot of the VC units. The Viet Cong was predominantly in the southern part of south Vietnam, the ones I saw.

SM: What was the largest unit that you came up against?

DS: When I was with the 82\textsuperscript{nd} that was probably the largest, maybe a platoon. Well, maybe 10 or 15 was the major that I saw. The thing about it, you know, if you think about it, I never do remember seeing that many at all anyhow. Even during major fire fights you just didn’t see them because they were so camouflaged by their bunkers and stuff. You did never really know the size of the element that you were in contact with because they always hit and run. They would retreat by within at least the first 15-20 minutes of fire fight they would be out of there because of the artillery that we’d bring in on us. They just didn’t have the resources.

SM: So they’d hit, engage you for 15 minutes, and then leave?

DS: Yep. In that particular area around there, there was lot’s of tunnels, major tunnels in that part of the country. Of course the famous tunnels of Cu Chi weren’t too far from where we were performing all of our operations.

SM: Did you stumble upon many tunnels?

DS: Yes, quite a few whenever I was walking point. Of course, we had the rules of engagement whether we were in a friendly area or not. Some places where we’d fire upon
immediately and some we’d have to call back to the CO and find out if it was possible to fire
upon them, even if we had found the tunnel. So sometimes we would initiate our own
engagement and call it back that we were fired upon. After a while you get the attitude that, "I’m
getting tired of getting fired upon first before I start shooting on them and take the initiative
myself." We weren’t near any villages or anything like that, but we figured we could hurt any
civilians, but still we were restricted; bunch of bull – that’s the way it was.

SM: Was that attitude shared by most of your other soldiers, your fellow soldiers, about
the rules of engagement?

DS: Yeah, yeah, that it was a bunch of bull! If there’s civilians in there we used our
heads. We weren’t intentionally trying to hurt civilians even though we knew that some of those
civilians were probably VC but we respected that part of the deal. We were in situations where
we actually saw the enemy and to heck with the rules of engagement. We’d take them and take
the consequences later.

SM: And who would lead your patrols? Would this be your platoon leader?

DS: Yes, platoon. Well, I don’t remember the platoon leader as much as I remember the
platoon sergeants. The platoon leaders, they backed with his radial most of the time you really
don’t see a lot of it. They’d send us out in the open in squad type situations.

SM: Did your platoon leader ever go out on patrols?

DS: Yeah, I’m sure he did sometimes, I just don’t remember. He would come running
whenever we found large caches or anything. He would be there generally on the spot, but other
than that I don’t remember seeing a lot of him because most of the ambushes were pulled, even if
we had platoon sized ambushes, they’d split us up squad sized about 100-200 meters apart.

SM: What did you and the other soldiers in your unit think about that, the fact that the
platoon leader usually stayed back in the area of operations, the base of operations, safe?

DS: Sometimes that was good, just not a good platoon leader or whatever. Sometimes if
he stayed out of your way you were better off anyhow. There was, out of all the infantry officers
I knew in Vietnam, I had respect for maybe one and that was it and he was a CO that I had when
I was with the 1st cav but they just didn’t have it together. I can see that for one reason, is that
you would really have to be a good officer to…the officers spent 6 months in the field, even if
you were infantry officers. The other 6 months they would spend in the battalion or staff level,
whatever, so you really didn’t get, to me, you really didn’t get a good feel for what was going on
out there unless you really wanted to, and I think the infantry officers over there – this is from
personal experience - I’m not saying a lot of them, but the ones I knew just wanted to do their
time to go get a CIB and get to the rear area. That was it. He’d depend a lot on the platoon
sargent, to handle the men. In fact, I always thought the sargent ran the military unit.

SM: That didn’t have a negative or adverse impact on the morale of the soldiers knowing
that the officers were there just to get their tickets punched, get their CIBs and then they weren’t
willing to put themselves in harm’s way with the consistency that you guys were?

DS: Well like I said, I didn’t…I think my main mission while I was there was to come
home and to accomplish that mission, I figured that if they stayed out of my way, if that was the
best thing for me for them to stay out of my way, well that’s the way I wanted it. It’s an attitude I
guess.

SM: How many platoon leaders did your unit have? How many were cycled through your
platoon while you were in the 82nd? Do you recall?

DS: Well like I said, after the first 6 months I was gone out of the 82nd, too, so I only got
to see one.

SM: Oh, you did only see one? Okay. Any other memorable events or activities in the
82nd while you were assigned with them in Vietnam?

DS: Not really. Ambushes that we pulled on the river one night, thought we heard some
sloshing in the mud coming across the river and we fired a couple of hand flares and opened up a
machine gun on it when we heard a sound; found out we probably killed 20 or 30 frogs; it wasn’t
that big a deal. Now we didn’t…we had limited contacts really whenever I was with the 82nd. I
think we were in pretty much a secure area where we were at during that time. Different story
SM: Okay, before we go to the 1st cav, one last question about the 82nd. You mentioned that when you stumbled across caches of weapons and stuff the lieutenant would come running. How often would that happen? Did you find a lot of weapons cached?

DS: My squad personally found the largest cache that the 82nd had been credited in finding. In fact it’s in the papers back here in a second. My mother’s still got…I’ve got a copy of it now. It was a large weapons and food cache. That was, we probably, we found probably 3 while I was with them; not my particular squad did, that was the only one that was found that I was part of.

SM: And this was an assortment of weapons, from small arms to heavy?

DS: Well yeah, small arms to AK-47s to SKS’s to ammo, a lot of rice.

SM: Any .50 cals, or anything like that?

DS: No, handmade hand grenades. They made a lot of their stuff, booby traps and stuff was all pretty much handmade so stuff that they stole off of us or stupid GI’s would leave behind as far as ammo or shell casings and stuff like that, they found a way to make booby traps out of them. And whenever we’d stop to eat we knew that we were being followed during our daytime shows we’d stop to eat lunch and we’d booby trap our own C-rations cans because we knew they’d try to dig them out and see if we were leaving food and sure enough we’d move on down the trail about 100 meters or so and we’d hear an explosion so we knew that we had people following us the whole time.

SM: When you hear an explosion like that after leaving the area, would you go back to find out what happened?

DS: Most of the time we’d just keep going because we had a mission to go to a certain location and set up so we really didn’t…and a lot of times it was when we were in a so called friendly area and we wouldn’t want the CO to know that we set a booby trap because that was kind of a no-no to do that.
SM: Was there any concern that maybe the people following you might have been kids or civilians and they were the ones picking up these cans?

DS: True, but of course we didn’t think about that. We had just had intelligence that we were being followed and stuff. We were just acting on that. When you were being followed, to us, the enemy was following you.

SM: Okay, and I guess when the 82nd left, this was in 1970?

DS: It was in December.

SM: So late 1969?

DS: Yeah, December 1969 they took the colors home. Unless you had at least 8 months in country you couldn’t go back to the colors. You had to stay in country and they would reassign you to another unit. Most of my buddies, they got very, very good jobs but they sent me to the 1st cav, in fact the same unit that Custer took in Little Bighorn; I was with B Company, another story. I need to take a break.

SM: Oh yeah, absolutely. Let’s go ahead and pause for a moment. While you were assigned to the 82nd airborne, what was the heaviest weapon you encountered in a combat situation?

DS: Mortars are probably the heaviest. As far as small arms, AK-47, SKS. Maybe a light machine gun, but that was all.

SM: Okay, so no .50 cals or anything like that while you were assigned to that?

DS: No.

SM: Okay. So why don’t you go ahead and describe the transition from the 82nd airborne to the 1st cav.

DS: Right before they took the colors home they sent us all back to the 82nd and told us that after if you only had less than 8 months in country you couldn’t go home, they’d reassign
you, so they threw a big steak and beer party that lasted about a week and then after that we all
got our orders to different units, the ones that stayed there. They sent me to the 1st cavalry
division, B company, 2nd of the 7th and their home base was at Tay Ninh right below the Black
Virgin Mountain and we operated pretty much out of there, mostly company sized operations
and most of it in Cambodia at that time. Because I had in country experience, whenever I got to
that particular unit, most of that unit was depleted and people going home and from fire fights.
We only had about half strength in our platoon at the time, so we…I was there with 1st cav for
about a week before we even went on an operation because we were trying to get new people in.
First operation we went on was a company sized operation in Cambodia and half of our platoon
were FNGs, even our platoon leader was. Our platoon, whenever we hit an LZ, our platoon was
lead platoon or point platoon, whatever you want to call it. We put one of the new guys on point,
walking point and I brought up the rear platoon with M-60 machine gun and we walked maybe a
click, 1000 meters, and they brought us to a halt because the new guy couldn’t keep us on the
right course that was our objective so they called back to the rear for me to come up and finish
walking point until we got there because of the fact that he kept getting us lost and couldn’t read
the map or whatever the deal was, I don’t know, but anyhow our squad went up on point. We
had the most experienced squad as far as people go. So I took over walking point. What I
remember, and this was the 1st day, we were in real thick bamboo. In fact, in parts of it, we were
having to low crawl and this is carrying 90 pounds worth of pack on our backs. I remember
halting everybody because I came to an open area that was probably 50 meters in diameter. It’s
like walking in real thick bamboo to a wide open field and after a while you get a sense that
something’s wrong and I halted everybody, pulled off my pack, and I low crawled around about
half way around that perimeter and about that time I heard Vietnamese language and I knew we
were in Cambodia and I knew we weren’t near a village so it wasn’t friendly because we were in
cowboy-Indian country this time. So, I was trying to keep everybody quiet because I could hear
the rest of the company trudging through the bush getting there and I couldn’t get them quiet
because I heard the Vietnamese. They were just talking like they were having a good ol’ time
and all of a sudden it got quiet and I’m going, "Uh-oh," and then I heard the bolt slam back on a
crew served weapon and I said, "Uh-oh," again and I pulled the pin on 2 grenades and threw
them over my head and all hell broke loose. Our new platoon leader hid, positioned the men
around that perimeter then, inexperienced as he was, he didn’t know any better, we lost
everybody in my platoon except me and 2 other guys; wiped out our whole platoon. After it was
over with, seemed like I guess it lasted about 45 minutes, we were separated from the rest of our
company. They were still 100-200 meters behind us and I had to call in the air strike units on top
of us to get out of it. I figured if I was going to die I was going to take a few of them with me.
After it was said and done, after it’s all over with, we had found out that we had walked into an
NVA base brigade sized - or they called it regimen sized base – Russian made machine gun. I
figured that out, but a buddy of mine from Oklahoma, they chopped his legs off from the knees
down. Like I said, we lost everything except 3 of us came out of it.

SM: How many killed and wounded?

DS: Like I said, we were understrengthened in our platoon, so I - its only a guesstimate -
around 20 killed and 3 wounded. I think we only Medevaced like 3 or 4 people out as far as
wounded. We got the rest of them out, too. That was my first major battle that I was in. It was
different. In fact, had we, after it settled down and we started bumping out of there, then he kept
following us and giving us harassment fire on the way out. We set up probably a couple of clicks
away in an old perimeter that we had found there and we got harassment from them all night
long and finally the next morning they got us out. We brought the helicopters in and pulled us
out of there. That was the first major, major firefight I’d been in. After that, they decided not to
put our unit in Cambodia like that anymore because they had made a mistake apparently so we
just pretty much the rest of the time pulled patrols out of Tay Ninh and just local type stuff. I
never did go back into Cambodia again; thank goodness that was it. We still had a few fire fights
but nothing like that. Like I said, most of that area the NVA was predominant.

SM: Now how far into Cambodia was this?

DS: That, to my knowledge, over about 5 miles inside.

SM: Okay, this was chopper insertion?

DS: Yeah, probably they inserted us about 2 miles down over the border. That’s to my
memory.
SM: You mentioned having to Medevac about 3 guys out. How quick was that response?

DS: After we brought in air support on top of us and they’d flown and all that still stuff, I could feel the heat from napalm and all that stuff, and it takes your breath away because it sucks oxygen out of the air. In fact, during the period of time that we were getting our KIAs and the wounded out of the battlefield area because we had finally pulled out of there and we pulled back about 500 meters, we sent some up to pull our dead out and they were still catching fire as they were pulling our people out there; still getting harassment fire then. We got them all out and got them Medevaced out. It was a pretty quick reaction, within 15 to 20 minutes. Choppers came in there and got them out.

SM: Do you know if those guys survived?

DS: The buddy of mine from Oklahoma, yeah. We got a letter from him. He was in rehab in Denver, Colorado. He’d gotten prosthetic legs and stuff. He was doing alright. I haven’t talked to him or heard from him since.

SM: What kind of…you said air support; napalm, bombs? What kind of aircraft were bringing these in? Do you know?

DS: They were I think Navy jets.

SM: Okay, so Navy support.

DS: To the best of my knowledge.

SM: Anything else memorable from your time with the 1st cav as far as other patrols?

DS: You know, a lot of people talk about the drugs that were going on over there and things? There was in the line units and infantry units, we didn’t have that problem, the unit I was with anyhow. The problems that I saw with that were just in rarity. It’s where the clerks and stuff like that, the XO [?] goings on back there. You’ve got to remember that out of all units when I was there, only 10% of say I think the build up at the time, maximum buildup, was below 500,000 troops and only 10% of them were combat troops. You’re talking 50,000 vs. 450,000,
yeah. I could see a major drug problem with 450,000 men but as far as I know the line units…I promise you nobody went to the field with me on drugs. That didn’t happen.

SM: You mentioned earlier during our break that there were some racial problems?

DS: Yeah. A lot of the blacks that were over there, the ones that didn’t go through the infantry unit, they did everything they could to get out. There’s this one major deal going on at that time, if they shave, blah, blah, blah, because of the humidity their skin would break out real bad, so there was a lot of blacks out there growing beards. They were getting away with murder while the rest of us couldn’t do that kind of thing. They were getting medical discernments from the field just because of that.

SM: Breakout?

DS: The skin would break out, like their neck and stuff so I don’t know. They would get big pimples. I think what they did is they took the mosquito repellent and did it themselves. It didn’t matter. I had kids, black kids that were under me, worked for me, were good kids and had one of them die in my arms so some of them were good, it’s just the majority of them weren’t. They would [?]. They were still fighting the white man’s war.

SM: Was there segregation, felt segregation, in your unit?

DS: [?]. But we go out [?] they stayed in the ringer. We didn’t have that much problem with them whenever we’d go to the field.

SM: And how about enforcing discipline in your unit?

DS: That was another situation like I told you a while ago. I felt kind of like I was back at Fort Polk in certain ways. I don’t think they were disciplined the way they should have been. That’s my opinion.

SM: Were there times when guys were given Article 15s or court marshals or anything?

DS: I don’t know. I really don’t remember.
SM: What was the leadership like in the 1st cav as far as the NCOs and the officers?

DS: Pretty good. I think they...like I said, the only officer that I remember as far as a
damn good officer was the CO that we had because he fought with us. He was respected. I only
knew, well I knew 2 platoon leaders that were in 1st cav, the first one got killed the first day. I
didn’t’ know him that well, and the 2nd one that took his place, he...we didn’t have to go into
such a hot combat area that he didn’t come be a leader and everything. He turned out to be pretty
good. Captain was real good.

SM: Do you remember his name?

DS: No, I wish I could. Seems like I remembered it the other day, but I can’t remember
what it is. In fact, seems like I read a book and it had his name in it. Somebody else mentioned
his name and I just can’t remember now.

SM: Do you keep in touch with any of the guys that you served with in Vietnam?

DS: No. The only one was with the 82nd which I now do because they were from
Lubbock. A couple of them were. They still live here. I don’t see them that often but every once
in a while I’ll give them a call.

SM: Is there anything else you want to add about your service with either the 82nd or with
the 1st cav in Vietnam? Anything specific to your in country experience?

DS: No, I guess not.

SM: You felt like you were adequately supported as a combat unit in both units?

DS: Yes, I think we had good support in either one. Immediate support, no problem with
that.

SM: And when you were in those units, did you ever have a sense that, or did you ever
wonder why the United States was doing what it was doing in Vietnam?

DS: Well, like I said, every year the war went on the attitudes, political and what have
you, to Vietnam and from soldiers they always have different attitudes as the years went on. Yeah, towards the end of my tour over there I completely changed in attitude. A lot of kids didn’t want to be over there in the first place. One squad that I’m familiar with were…liked to been over there because of the fact that they were given the option of getting in the military and going to Vietnam or going to prison because they were bad boys, but they were bad boys. They liked everything, they enjoyed fighting, and I get along real well with them because I can sure depend on them if something came down. I guess the only thing that you really worry about when you first get there is can you really shoot that weapon at somebody? I think everybody wonders that. Once you get started, there’s no doubt and no question that it’s either your life or theirs, and you wanted to go home, so you fought back.

SM: What did you think, in going back to it, when your contacts there…yeah, I guess your first contact would be the second where you killed the rice carrier.

DS: Yeah.

SM: How did that affect you? What did you thing about that when that happened?

DS: I really didn’t think a lot about it. We had a deal going on in the 82\textsuperscript{nd} that if you got 3 confirmed kills, you got to go on R&R in country for 3 days so it was kind of a promotion where you [?] get to go have fun. As a kid, you like to party. That’s what we were after.

SM: Speaking of that, that body count mentality, was that heavily emphasized in your units, the 82\textsuperscript{nd} and the 1\textsuperscript{st} cavalry?

DS: The 82\textsuperscript{nd} was. It wasn’t as much in the 1\textsuperscript{st} cav. We had different missions.

SM: What was the difference between the missions? What was your mission in 82\textsuperscript{nd} and what your mission in 1\textsuperscript{st} cav.

DS: Our mission was different tactics and different areas because the…you didn’t have the hard core NVA down with the 82\textsuperscript{nd} primarily VCS [?] squads, you didn’t see the enemy that much. You were lucky to get 3 kills anyhow. The heavier buildup of NVA up north where the 1\textsuperscript{st} cav was. The mission there was pretty much just hope you got out of each fire fight alive, so
really didn’t care about how many you killed just as long as you came home.

SM: And you wouldn’t, with the 1st cav, there wouldn’t be any kind of a confirmation about how many guys you might have killed?

DS: No, not really. You go in there and try to get a body count after each fire fight, but they were good about taking…dragging their bodies out. I mean, you guessed a lot of times. Sometimes it was kind of like Macnamara’s war. If you found one arm and one leg, well that’s 3 people, you know? So it’s kind of an exaggeration of numbers.

SM: The guys in your unit, you and the other men that you served with, must have known it was going on. What made you think about that kind of garbage, the numbers game?

DS: I thought it was a stupid way to run the war, you know, because I had respect for the enemy. They were doing the same thing we were, just on the opposite side. I try not to think of the politics. I just wanted to get out alive.

SM: Most of the other men in your unit felt the same way?

DS: Yeah, we just wanted to go home in one piece.

SM: Okay, I’m going to change out this tape before it stops. I’ve got some more questions I do want to ask so this ends the tape 1. This is tape 2 of the interview with David Shelly. Mr. Shelly, why don’t we go ahead and begin now with a quick discussion of your post war experiences and I guess focusing on things like how the war affected you. In what ways did your experiences in Vietnam affect you?

DS: That and the military itself I think helped me become more of an organized person, daily life especially, work ethics and stuff like that. Just like in the military I made rank real fast because I wanted to become something and make something out of my career and I did so when I decided upon the electrical field. I started out working in the warehouse for a wholesaler, worked my way up to salesman and then I worked for a wholesale outfit for about 10 years and then I worked for an electrical contractor as an estimator and then I went to work as another guy as a manufacturer’s representative. So, I pretty much worked my way up from the bottom up to the
best that I can be in that field. The years that I was out on the road as a salesman, I really didn’t
realize what my actions were until probably within the last few years. I was probably a hard a
person to be around at times. During the daytime I was calling people, I got along with
customers real well. In fact, I always had the saying that I never had any customers that had a lot
of friends and that’s how I made most of my sales was doing things for them and helping them
out in situations where they needed help. But at nighttime whenever I got to the hotel room there
was 4 walls around me and it got to be to the point where the only way I could handle that
sometimes was to drink myself to sleep. And for about 10 years that’s pretty much how I
handled that situation. Daytime everything’s fine, nighttime it got to the point where unless I
drank myself to sleep, I wouldn’t sleep. It started showing, I’m sure it did, and so I did decide to
go to the vet’s center here in Lubbock and seek help. This was a new deal for them. The Vet
Centers popped up in the late ‘80’s around the country, specifically for the Vietnam era veterans
and to give them help and I went in one day and started visiting with them and went to a couple
of their rep groups and stuff like that and got to visiting with other veterans; found out that I said
I wasn’t the only one out there that had some of the same feelings that they did. We talked about
getting on with our lives after the military and getting out of the war situation and everything and
you do get on with it and it seems that as long as you’re busy and working, if you work 24 hours
a day everything’s fine but once you sit down and rest and get to thinking about things, well it’s
a different story. Sometimes I wonder…I have the psyche, "Why did I live through a certain
situation I got into and the rest of them didn’t?" They call it survivor’s guilt and I don’t’ know,
but I’m just glad I did, don’t get me wrong. I don’t’ know, I have different feelings from a lot of
those guys that go there all the time, the veterans and stuff and I don’t go there anymore because
I found out that I can cope with it. I’ve just learned how to do it, how to handle different
situations when they arise. Even when Admiral Tidd was in town we were visiting the other
night before they left to go back down the road. He still has problems with it, too. I mean, that
works all the way to the top. When you lose a lot of friends in certain situations, it’s got to work
on you. [It’ll be crazy if you do, it’s not crazy if you do, it’s crazy if you didn’t.] But you just
learn to cope with it. Some people need help learning how to cope, and some don’t. But, I think
all in all, I wouldn't change a thing as far as my life goes, the way I’ve raised my kids. Like I’ve
told you, I’ve got 4 boys. 2 of them are step-kids and 2 of them are mine. They’re all working,
productive kids. As far as I could tell they’re good kids. I know they’re good kids. We still all
talk and get along. I didn’t have a whole lot of help, I mean, I wasn’t giving a whole lot of help
the first 10 years raising them because I was gone so much. After they became grown and out on
their own, instead of kids they’ve become more friends.

SM: Just out of curiosity, how were you treated when you came back from Vietnam?
What was the reception like as far as people that you talked to?

DS: They just didn’t talk about it down there in the first place. You didn’t talk about
being in the military. I didn’t run into the situation a lot of guys tell me about, getting spit on,
stuff like that. But of course, I guess, whenever I got back in country into Oakland after I
processed out and was fixing to head back to Lubbock, I had a whole night layover before my
plane left the next day and so I was going to the motel to spend the night and I called a cab. The
cab got there to pick me up, he said, "I’m not trying to be rude or nothin’," he said, "I appreciate
what you’ve done," but he said, "You’d be better off if you weren’t wearing that uniform." And I
said, "Well I appreciate that," and I went and put on some civilian clothes and he said, "It’s not
good," and I said, "Well, I appreciate you telling me." So I went and changed and then the next
morning before I took my flight of course you have to wear them if you’re going…flying in the
military you had to wear your uniform, so I put my uniform back on. After I got in Lubbock it
didn’t make any difference anyhow. Nobody here in Lubbock had that mentality that [?] against
the military and things. West Texas is [?] whether it sits that way from everybody else that has a
political outlook on life, I don’t’ know. It’s a pretty conservative part of the country. I think
that’s one of the major reasons why we’ve got the Vietnam Center here in Lubbock. But no, I
didn’t have that experience that other people talk about as far as people hating your guts and
stuff. I was fortunate. You still didn’t’ talk about it around because nobody wanted to hear about
it so it didn’t’ matter. If it ever came out in conversation at a party or anything…it never came up
in conversation. That’s all there was to it. Even though it is a conservative part of the country,
they still didn’t want to talk about it and I think partly because they were ashamed that they
didn’t’ get to go. After a while, after about 10 or 15 years after we got back, well a lot of people
tried to get on the band wagon saying that they went to Vietnam and come to find out they didn’t
because we were starting to get acclamation, whatever you call it, just rewards for the war itself
and finally getting out recognition if there was such thing as reward. World War II vets never acknowledged that to this day.

SM: Did you ever try to go to any of the various vet organizations before the Vet Center opened up like the VFW?

DS: Yeah, I went. As soon as I came back in ’72, got back in Lubbock, I was going to the VFW here and got run off because they said that Vietnam was not a war and never would be and we didn’t know what it was like to be in a war, and I said, "Well, you don’t need me then," and so I left. That’s the last time I was in a veteran’s service organization until 1990 and I joined American Legion out here because I was told that it was that was probably different and most ways it was. In fact, within 3 years I was the command of the American Legion post here in Lubbock. Up until my divorce from my first wife, I was actively involved.

SM: And did you have any other interaction with Vietnam veterans here in Lubbock?

DS: You know, some yes. The majority of them was through the Vet Center and Vietnam Center and that was it.

SM: How much do you think the silence, the inability to talk about your experiences and things like that prior to the opening of the Vet Center and your inclusion in that and the American Legion, but that period between 1972 and I guess the early ‘80s or the ‘80s when those places opened up, how much did that contribute to the difficulties you faced trying to cope with your experiences in the war?

DS: Well, I think silence is not always golden. I think you should have somebody to talk to sometimes about anything, about any problem that you have. If you have a problem I think you ought to be able to talk to someone whether it be your spouse or whoever. But then again, you’re not going to sit around talking to just anybody about how you had to kill somebody or something like that. That’s something you keep within yourself because sometimes it’s hard to believe yourself that things like that happened. Like I said before, it’s kind of the world turned upside down. It seems like a dream in the first place, a lot of occasions, but you know it’s not. Like I said, as long as I keep active, mentally active in other things, it doesn’t affect me a bit. At
night when I can’t sleep and I’m up at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning drinking coffee or reading
or something I may get to thinking about it again but it’s not…and as time goes on, like they say
‘time heals all wounds’ and it does. I don’t know if you just seem to forget a lot of the stuff or
whatever, but that’s good, too.

SM: Well when did you become active with the Vietnam Center?

DS: Hell, the first day that Jim Reckner got a bunch of us together, and as a matter of fact
a lot of us came from the Vet Center because that was one of the connections here in town, the
veterans of the Vietnam war and we sat down and started a meeting and started visiting about
what we need to do and he got to telling a story about asking some of his students if they knew
who one of the major generals was in the Vietnam war and he said only one of them knew the
name of Westmoreland and he got to thinking that he’d hate to see America lose such history as
the Vietnam…well, ‘60s and ‘70s as it was a very tragic era of the 20th century. It shaped and
formed the United States in many ways and he’d hate to lose that kind of history. That’s when
we decided we needed to hold an archive to document all this stuff up.

SM: What year was that?

DS: 1989 and every since then it’s…in fact, it’s been a good healing factor for me
because I’ve learned you know, whenever you’re a, I call it a warrior, a PFC or one of the guys
out there actually doing the fighting, you know you get orders to do something but you don’t
know where they’re generated from. You don’t’ know why this particular order was given or
anything else. Well, since I’ve become involved with the Vietnam Center I’ve done major
reading about the Vietnam war. Anywhere from General Giap to Westmoreland, Abrams,
Johnson, and a little bit on Nixon, but I wanted to find out where these orders came from and
why they were given and the political aspects and just try to figure out the war itself, the
mindsets of the general public other than the Vietnam soldiers, too. It’s been a real learning
experience. I could probably give my own class in Vietnam and this is just from looking at notes.
I can see all sides of the war from the war itself to the internal shifts of the United States. Like I
said, I think it changed the whole outcome of where we’re at right now as far as military
concern, that’s for sure. We tend to do things a little differently whenever we go to war because
SM: What are the major lessons that you think that we should take away from the war?

DS: Well that we ought to have definite goals and everybody, the general population on up to the military should have a common goal and if we’re going to go in there and do what we’ve got to do with that military strategy and less people and as less KIAs as possible and do it right. Get in there and, as they say, kick ass and get out. Do what…we go in there and if we’re going to war, let’s go to war and get it over with; get accomplished what we go after in the first place and let the politics rule the war which [?] we pretty much did. My only regret there is that we didn’t do the final objective.

SM: Do you think that the Vietnam Center helps in facilitating learning those lessons?

DS: Oh yeah, definitely. If you archive everything, all sides of the war including the protesting and everything else, I think that type of documentation and if you go back and research all aspects, even military minds would get a better mind set on how they do battle. I think the Vietnam Center and archive, it’s going to be one of the best things that I’ve seen happen. I just wished that more Vietnam veterans would get involved locally and whenever I spoke at the American Legion I tried everything I could think of to get them to bring their papers and stuff in and let us archive them. I don’t know what it’s going to take to really get [?]. in fact, I told General Robinson about 4 years ago whenever he was here, I said, "We’ve got the archive," I said, "We’ve got the scholar’s involved," I said, "The only way I can see to get the veterans involved is to build a museum here." And I’m not saying that’s [?] museum along with an archive in our building coming up, but I think it’s going to drive the rest of the veterans in. I think we’ll get the general veteran population out of that because they’ll want to come in and see the museum, not an academic situation.

SM: What other major obstacles have there been to the creation and development of the Vietnam Center and Archive from your perspective?

DS: Just like any project you’re trying to come up with, the money is a major obstacle unless you’ve got the money to do the project you want to do with it, it’s really hard to do. Jim
Reckner will tell you more than I can because he’s been doing 99% of the money raising I’m sure over the years. It’s hard to do, very hard to do. Even with the PAC committee we’ve got working for in Washington D.C., I haven’t seen anything out of them but we’ve been fortunate enough to have people like the chancellor come on board and President Haragan to be able to help us, if anything, make the right connection with the right people. Of course I think the major, major thing we did in the very beginning was to recruit Admiral Zumwalt to be the chairman of the board because he had major connections everywhere and it’s been snowballing since in the good direction.

SM: Any other interesting developments in the way you’ve been involved now with this project for 11 years? What are the more memorable aspects of that involvement?

DS: I’ve got to meet a lot of different people. It really amazes me. Sometimes I sit back and think I’m a little out of my league sitting down and eating with heads of state and ambassadors and former generals and even generals of the enemy. That’s something that I never thought I’d get to do in my life. This is, I guess on a personal note, it’s still more part of the Vietnam experience and I’ve enjoyed it. I’ve immensely enjoyed it. I’ve met lots of people that I never thought I’d get to meet worldwide. I guess they say everybody has their 15 minutes of glory, and in the last 10 years or so it seems like it’s been about 10 years worth of it to me to be able to meet the people that I’ve met and visited with them and sit down and talk to them about their own experiences and stuff. It’s really, really been a moving experience to get to meet people like William Colby and people like that, it’s outstanding.

SM: What did you first think when you sat down with one of the former PAVN generals?

DS: Well, in fact I had supper with him, General [?] one night, and of course we couldn’t understand each other. He had a translator with him, but I don’t know. It’s just like sitting down and eating with anybody. You didn’t feel that you were in harm’s way or anything. It was nice to sit down and just visit, find out about their culture and compare cultures and everything else. Even though they’re still communist country, they’re still human. Their politics just different from mine obviously.
SM: Did you ever give much thought or concern to the fact that this might have been one of the guys that commanded, say, that NVA regimen that your cav unit ran up against and lost 20 guys?

DS: Nah. I’ve just [?] and I respected that. He was doing the same thing I was doing, staying alive, and that’s all there was to that. No big deal. I’m just glad that I’m sitting here talking to him.

SM: Do you think the Vietnam war was worth the sacrifices made?

DS: Good question. I don’t think any war is worth the sacrifices that are made because…and I realize that anytime you go to war you’re going to lose human lives. That’s just part of the war. But to go there for the wrong reasons is a different thing. Like I said, lessons learned from that is that we’re not ready to go to war and win the war I just don’t see going. I don’t think it’s right for anybody. I hate to see 58,000 GI’s, United States Americans lose their lives over there, but I forgot how many millions they said of Vietnamese lost their lives. Sacrifices are made during war and that’s that. I guess I don’t know how else to answer that.

SM: What about current deployments of American forces and when you look back at how we were in Vietnam and then look forward to how we’ve become involved in places like Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Serbia, places like that. Does your Vietnam experience effect the way you look at these modern deployments?

DS: I don’t know if…and I look at that as a fight between democracy and communism, is [?] and I see that the United States is trying to push our democratic views on other nations and that’s fine but I don’t think we ought to be sitting over there being a police force for previous communist nations that don’t want you in there in the first place and that’s all there is to it. Some of those countries, middle European countries, have been ethically and racially fighting each other since year 1 AD and you’re not going to change that and I don’t think that we ought to be in the middle of it. That’s my personal opinion. I think we’re wrong in being there and I’m talking about a lot of things. Somalia, I don’t remember a whole lot about Somalia. I remember seeing on TV where some of the GI’s were being dragged through the streets dead bodies and
stuff like that but that right there was kind of upsetting but at that particular point in my life whenever we started over there I don’t’ remember reading that much about Somalia. I remember going in there and everything but I don’t’ remember why. I don’t know the reason. I had my mind somewhere else during that period of my life. Maybe I was trying to blot it out, I don’t know.

SM: Anything you want to add about your post war experiences, how the war effected you?

DS: No, I think I sad it’s over I guess, but it’s better if you ask the healthier I guess as far as mental attitude about the war. The more I read about it, the more I get a lot of the answers that I had questions for that helped me get rid of all the bad stuff that I had, why and why we were there and I just think that as time goes on I think all those feelings eventually, they won’t go away. Some of the things that happened will never go away, that’s just the way it is. I wont’ be able to ever forget them. But I learned how to cope with them. That’s 99% of the battle.

SM: Alright, that’s it. We can go ahead and end the interview now. This is the end of tape 2 interview with David Shelly.