Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today’s date is the twenty-third of June 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and I’m speaking with the colonel by telephone from Virginia.

Good afternoon, sir.

William LeGro: Good afternoon.

LC: I want to thank you very much for agreeing to spend some time with us to record some of your insights, recollections, observations over a most interesting career of service to the United States. First of all, Colonel, can I ask you where you were born and when?

WL: Yes. I was born in Reedley, California—that’s in Fresno County—on the tenth of July 1922.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What did your father do?

WL: Well, my father at that time I believe was working in the shoe store in Reedley. He later became an insurance salesman for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. He probably started that about 1925 or ’26 and he did that for the rest of his life until he retired.

LC: Had he had any military service?
WL: Yes. He served in World War I. He attained the rank of band corporal in the US Infantry. I believe at that time he was assigned to the Division. He was a sousaphone player and then transferred to baritone horn. He was at Norfolk I believe in 1917, or no 1918. When he joined the Army—he was in the regular Army—he joined the Infantry at the Presidio, San Francisco. Then the regiment moved to Virginia and was about ready to embark for France when the armistice was signed. So, he never saw service in France.

LC: But he was on active duty during that period?

WL: Yeah. He was on active duty. I guess he served two or three years in the Infantry until he was discharged at the end of the war. Yeah.

LC: Did he ever express any feelings about having, as it were, missed out on the conflicts in Europe?

WL: Yeah. He said all of the soldiers in the regiment were sorry they didn’t get there earlier. I don’t think they would have said, “We’re sorry the war is over.” But yeah, they looked forward to going overseas.

LC: Now, was he married?

WL: No. Not at this time. No.

LC: So they were married right after the war?

WL: My mother served in France however.

LC: Please tell me about that. What was her name, her maiden name?

WL: Her name was Philippa Nelson, and she was born in Wyoming; in Evanston, Wyoming right there close to the Utah border. Her father was a locomotive engineer with the Union Pacific. She went into nurses training upon graduation from high school at the Dee Memorial Hospital in Ogden, Utah. After graduation she became a nurse. She was a nurse. She worked as a visiting nurse up in the high country of Wyoming there.

LC: That must have been quite a set of experiences.

WL: Quite interesting, yeah. She taped some of her experiences for us and—she’s a very interesting lady. During World War I, the Red Cross put out a call for nurses to serve with the Army. They were given the equivalent rank of lieutenant, I believe. She and some of her father’s, my father’s sisters, signed up and went over to France and they served in a field hospital somewhere in France.
LC: Do you know what year she went over?

WL: Over—

LC: Was it 1917?

WL: Seventeen. Yeah. Her most memorable experiences in the ship going over was that it was hit by the flu epidemic and a lot of soldiers on that ship died of flu before they ever reached France.

LC: Did she become ill? Do you know?

WL: Sick, but she stayed on duty. But she didn’t—she recovered obviously.

LC: Now, did she already know some of your—did she already know your father then?

WL: I don’t believe she did. I believe that they met—when she returned from the war my father’s family had moved to [Reedley]. My father’s sisters were working at the Fresno County Hospital and they got my mother a job there. I believe that’s how they met, how she met my father.

LC: Did she ever tell you anymore about her work in France, in France itself?

WL: She would speak of it now and then, how it was pretty miserable. The accommodations—the hospital was in a, as I recall, kind of a sea of mud with tents and the casualties were flowing in at a pretty good rate. She had a lot of work to do, hard work.

LC: I’m sure she did. Do you know how far back she was from the lines or what area in France she was assigned to?

WL: She said she was in Southern France. So they were not really—they weren’t a very close in evacuation hospital. They were a field hospital, which was probably behind the corps boundaries.

LC: Did her parents put up any kind of fight about her going overseas?

WL: No, not at all. Her mother died before she was even finished high school and her father was killed on the railroad shortly after that so she didn’t have any.

LC: She was on her own in a way.

WL: Yeah. She was pretty much on her own.

LC: She sounds like quite a lady.
WL: She was. During the Depression she had to go back to work as a nurse and
she had to get her accreditations all over again. She was a registered nurse in Utah and
Wyoming. But after the war she didn’t do nursing for a while and had to study again to
pass the boards in the State of California, and that was pretty tough.
LC: I’ll bet it was.
WL: Because at that time nursing had become a little bit more complicated than it
was when she was—you know new drugs and new procedures and so on.
LC: She had a family as well.
WL: Yeah. By that time, why yes. She had three kids.
LC: Now, tell me about your siblings, older, younger?
WL: My sister is a year older than I and she’s still living in Monterey, California.
She married a doctor, for that matter. That was her plan when we were in—we were in
University of California together and she said, “I’m going to marry a doctor.” She found
one and—
LC: She carried through.
WL: Yeah, yeah.
LC: Good for her. And younger than you?
WL: My younger brother, Tom, he was about two and a half years younger than I.
He was in the University of California after I had graduated and gone off to war. He got
a little bit antsy about that. He didn’t think he could be at the university when the
country was at war so he quit and he joined the Army. Volunteered for the draft, I guess
is really more accurate. He went overseas with the Division into France. That division
was put into action just following the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of ’44. He was
killed in action. He was killed—well, his regiment was the lead regiment in crossing the
Sauer River from Luxembourg into Germany. He was a mortar gunner by that time and
his boat was hit, a direct hit, and he was killed along with everybody in the boat for that
matter. He’s buried in the military cemetery in Luxembourg, at Hamm, Luxembourg.
LC: I would imagine that you, Colonel, have been over there to visit the cemetery.
WL: I’ve seen the grave. Yeah. He was only nineteen when he was killed.
LC: Let me just fast forward and ask where you were when you found out about
this.
WL: To the best of my recollections we had just finished the battle in Zamboanga in Mindanao, or it might have been in Palawan. I can’t recall now, one or the other.

LC: Okay. Okay. That must have been just a terrible blow.

WL: It was pretty tough. Tom and I were very close when we were kids.

LC: How much younger was he than you?

WL: About two and a half years, two and a half to three years.

LC: So you two probably palled around—

WL: We were together constantly until I graduated from high school and then off to the university. Then I didn’t see a lot of him. But he was still in high school.

LC: Now, let me ask you about yourself as a young man just growing up and going to school. Where did you go to your grade school?

WL: I went to school in Oakland, California.

LC: Now, your parents had moved up there, is that right?

WL: Yeah. They moved—what happened. My dad was having a hard time making a living and they moved briefly to Los Angeles. But my sister was just a baby and they brought me to live with my grandmother and my aunt in Watsonville, California. That’s close to Monterey. I lived with them, and I don’t remember how long, perhaps a year until my father got his act together and was able to get enough money together to pick me up. We all moved—and by that time my mother was, let’s see. She was pregnant with Tom, and we all moved to Oakland. Rented a house there for a while, and my sister began school. I was little bit too young to begin school. But she started her kindergarten in Oakland. Maxwell Park I think the name of the place was. Then they found a place to live in East Oakland. We moved there and that’s where I began school at Daniel Webster Elementary School in East Oakland. That whole area is completely black right now. In fact, it’s a rather bad neighborhood with drugs and lots of problems.

LC: Sure. Was it diverse at all when you were there?

WL: When I was there it wasn’t diverse. No, unless you call a lot of Portuguese—a lot of the folks were Portuguese. But we didn’t think that that was anything wrong with that. Quite a few, a few Mexicans but very, very few. Most of it was white, Anglo-Saxon.

LC: Middle class or lower middle class?
WL: Middle class. Working class. That was the elementary school. Then junior high school. The system in California there was six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. My sister and I were a year [a part]. By this time we were only a half year. I had skipped a couple of grades and I almost caught up with her. I was only a half year behind her.

LC: Now, is that because you were a hard working student or did it come easily for you?

WL: It came pretty easily for me, that is reading and writing and that sort of stuff. That was easy for me. She was smart too. She skipped one grade or half a grade. Then we went to Castlemont High School together.

LC: Can you spell that?

WL: Castle-mont.

LC: Oh, Castlemont. I’m sorry. Yeah, sure.

WL: Castlemont High School in East Oakland. Let’s see. That was three years and we—they had graduations twice a year in those days in California. I don’t know if they still do. But she graduated in January and I graduated in June of ’39, both of us. Then she stayed out for half a year and we entered the University of California together.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit about those high school years. Were you much for sports?

WL: No. I was pretty small for my age. I didn’t begin growing until I left high school. I turned out to be six feet tall. But at that time I was kind of a runt.

LC: What about jobs? Did you find your way to make some money?

WL: Yeah. I delivered papers for about two years on my bicycle.

LC: How much did you make? Do you know?

WL: Yeah. I made about twelve dollars a month.

LC: That’s not too bad. Those were real dollars. I mean I know you had to earn them, but that’s not too bad. How did, if you can remember, how did the Depression affect the family if at all?

WL: It affected us in that my mother had to go back to work. That was the only thing. My dad worked awfully hard and my mother did too. For a while my aunt, my
father’s oldest sister, came to live with us for awhile to take care of the house while my
mother was working because she had to work about twelve hours a day.

LC: Is that right? Now, was she at a hospital or where was she?

WL: Until she got her accreditation back she had to work in a nursing home as a
practical nurse. But then while she was doing that she was studying and she took the
boards again and she became a supervisor of nurses at the county hospital. So she got
right back into it again. She was still working in geriatrics and she also had the TB
(tuberculosis) wards.

LC: Goodness, which in the ’30s would have been quite substantially populated
I’m sure. A lot of people went to California because of that, California, Arizona, New
Mexico.

WL: And it was in the years just before they had discovered some really good
drugs for TB. At that time it was largely a nursing problem.

LC: Right, just the palliative care, comfort care. Yeah. Not to dismiss that, I
mean that’s hard work for anybody who’s ever done it.

WL: I had a rather—come to think of the medical part of it. I had a rather
difficult time when I was about, trying to think now, I must have been eight or nine years
old when I had my first bout with pneumonia. What they call double lobar pneumonia,
and I had it twice. I came pretty close to dying and that again was before there had been
any specific antibiotics for pneumonia. Then it was, we had a homeopathic physician and
it was my mother’s nursing that really saved my life a couple of times.

LC: Were you outside a lot or do you have any idea how that came to you or were
you just kind of—?

WL: I don’t know how I got that disease.

LC: Geez. That’s pretty hard for a youngster to have that.

WL: It kept me behind in growth actually, I believe.

LC: Um-hm. I wouldn’t be surprised.

WL: Physical development and that’s why I was kind of small. I had to stay in
bed for two or three months. I missed a lot of school and had to make up quite a bit but I
was still able to make it back up again.
LC: Did that have any, you know, that period of illness which is longer than a lot of kids ever experience now anyway, did that have any kind of impact on you? Did it make you kind of a hard charger in terms of school, you wanted to get back to it and get on with it?

WL: I don’t remember ever feeling that way. Just had to work harder to catch up. I remember having more problems with math than anything else because they were already into long division and I couldn’t figure out what they were doing.

LC: Well, graduating in 1939, and I know that you later studied political science, were you reading the newspaper and paying attention?

WL: Oh yeah. Yeah. In ’39 there was a lot of—in those days they did have a good program in the schools with newspapers. They had a newspaper called the Weekly Reader. I remember that. You ever hear of that?

LC: Yes.

WL: Well, that was a good thing. I don’t think they do that anymore in school.

LC: I think they just rely on the Internet now.

WL: Yeah. Anyway—

LC: Maybe a shame there.

WL: So we learned about Hitler and we learned about Mussolini and what was going on in Europe, although it was still pretty far away. Then I guess in, was it 1940 they started the draft. The Army started calling some National Guard units up for federal service and so on. We were aware of that. In 1939 when I entered the University of California, ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) was mandatory.

LC: Oh is that right?

WL: Every land grant college or university, every able-bodied male had to take two years of ROTC. Two years was mandatory. The last two years were optional and that’s where you worked for the commission.

LC: Let me ask about both you and your sister going to university that fall. First of all, who within the family was the lead supporter of both of you going to school and both going to California?

WL: Both my parents were. It was easy then because it cost, the cost to us for to go to Cal was $27.50 per semester. That’s what we had to pay the university. Twenty-
five dollars of that was for medical insurance and $2.50 was euphemistically called the incidental fee. I don’t know what they did with that.

LC: That’s just extraordinary.

WL: Yeah. So, essentially it was a free education. We had to buy our books, which were in those days by today’s standards that was practically nothing. I mean you’d buy a textbook for—the most expensive one might be five dollars. Not like the fifty dollars and eighty dollars that they have to pay these days.

LC: Right. For a single book, or more.

WL: Yeah. Right. My daughter goes to a private school and we have to buy her books just for high school. But anyway, so it was pretty cheap. Both my mother and father wanted us to go to college and it was expected that we would go. You didn’t have SATs. I don’t know if I could get into college these days.

LC: I think you probably could.

WL: It’d be a struggle though. There then if you had a “B” average you could get into the University of California.

LC: Were there ever any issues that made any distinction between your sister going and you going or was it always thought she would go as well?

WL: Oh sure. She was smarter than I was anyway. They wouldn’t have held her back. She had a good deal more energy, I think.

LC: What was she interested in? What was she studying?

WL: She studied political science and history also. But then she became—her major was in social work, as I remember. In fact, as soon as she graduated I was going off to war and she went down to Monterey. I guess that’s about the time she got married. She worked as a social worker in Monterey County, I think, while her husband was going to medical school. The Army sent him to medical school at the University of Southern California. He graduated [from Cal] the same time we did too. He went down to medical school and got his medical degree. The Army made him serve in the Army too. He served in the occupation of Japan as a military surgeon.

LC: No kidding. Is he still with us too?

WL: Yeah. He’s still alive, although he’s not in good shape. He had a stroke but he was a very fine doctor. He didn’t have a great affection for the Army. He told me
some awfully funny stories about his service in Japan with General Eichelberger and General MacArthur and so on.

LC: He didn’t have a great deal of love for those guys?

WL: Oh yeah. Well, he liked them. Yeah, he thought they were great but he thought the Army was pretty stupid all the time, but he’s a typical doctor.

LC: Right. I guess that’s a doctor’s thing is what I was going to say. But he certainly sounds as if he served the country in those post-war, those dangerous post-war, years.

WL: Yeah. He paid his dues. That’s for sure.

LC: Did he then go into private practice or—?

WL: Yes. He went into his private practice in Monterey and he never moved out of there.

LC: Yeah. They still live there. Well, it’s Monterey. That would work for me.

WL: That’s right.

LC: It would certainly trump Lubbock. I would give you that. Let me ask about your own early experiences going up to Cal. What was it like to go to a university? I mean was it all that you were, you know, looking forward to? Was it exciting?

WL: I really liked it. Because we didn’t have much money we had to live at home for a couple years and commute. Commuting from East Oakland to Berkeley, these days people wouldn’t even probably put up with it. The way we had to do, we had to get on the bus. That was about an hour’s ride into Oakland and get on a streetcar, transfer to the streetcar and go out to Berkeley. The whole thing, I think, cost us fourteen cents a fare, which was ridiculously low by today’s standards. We did it and we—of course that was expected. Then after my—let’s see, in my junior year I moved out there and waited tables in a women’s boarding house and worked for the lady that gave me a room within a couple of blocks from the campus. So it was a lot easier.

LC: Did your sister continue to go back and forth from home?

WL: I’m trying to think what she did now. I think she found a job and worked out there too. I don’t know what she was doing. I can’t remember now how she managed it.

LC: What was the atmosphere like there?
WL: The atmosphere at Berkeley?

LC: Yeah. Politically or socially.

WL: Well, it was interesting in those days because there was a lot of agitation for one cause and another on the campus. You couldn’t hardly go across the campus without seeing somebody up on a box making a speech about something. Like independence for India or support the Longshoremen in their strike in San Francisco. See, independence for India, those were the big things. Then of course against the draft. The Communists were—there was a Young Communist League that was pretty strong. Of course, Hitler and Stalin had made their treaty and everything was looking pretty rosy for the Communists. The Communists had to be against the draft because Hitler was an ally of the Communists in Russia. So they were kind of caught between ideologies. They didn’t know quite where to go. Then, when Hitler invaded Russia why they had to drop off that.

LC: Yeah. There were a few contortions they had to go through.

WL: Yeah. It was kind of hard for them. It was kind of funny. There was a lot of protest against the draft though to start with. In fact, there was a professor, one of the very good history professors, Professor May, his son was a Communist. He was preaching there against his own father on the campus. There was some pretty strange things going on.

LC: Did any of that anti-war stuff get aimed at ROTC people or probably involve some of the ROTC people?

WL: Not so much then. There wasn’t—later on, of course as you know, in the Vietnam War, a great deal of trouble for ROTC. But in those days no. I don’t remember that much. We had to wear our uniform once a week I guess it was. It had this funny little OD, olive drab, uniform with blue epaulettes on it. I got to be a corporal by the time, my second year. I was pretty proud of that. I got to wear corporal stripes.

LC: They recognized your potential I guess.

WL: Oh yeah. Sure. We had to go to classes. We had a very good instructor.

LC: Military science?

WL: A lieutenant colonel, Army, regular Army, on weapons.

LC: Do you remember his name?

WL: I didn’t think I’d ever forget it but I can’t remember now.
LC: That’s okay. I mean some of those career officers that were doing that kind of work during World War II don’t sometimes get the recognition that they probably should have for keeping those young men involved and getting them prepared for what they were likely to encounter at least at some stage.

WL: We did get some very elementary training with the Browning Automatic Rifle and the Springfield ‘03 rifle that the Army had in those days before the M1 came out. We did go on the range. I believe it was sub-caliber range. I think we fired only the .22s on the indoor ranges. But at least it gave me a little bit of a leg up so when I got into the Army I knew a little bit. I wasn’t behind the curve.

LC: Were there any instructors or classes, you know, even anything you can tell us generally, not necessarily their names but the subjects or the areas, that really kind of caught your imagination or—?

WL: Well, map reading was the most interesting one that I remember. That’s vital course for infantrymen. I learned how to read a map, a military map, long before I was in the active Army. That was very important. We did a lot of close order drill, what they called then, dismounted drill, drill of the soldier. That helped me a lot too when I got in. I knew how to do right face and left face and about face, and I knew how to keep in step. I didn’t have any trouble. That sort of thing.

LC: Were those drills held right on the main campus area?

WL: Yes. They were on the, on one of the athletic fields.

LC: We talked a little bit about anti-draft agitation and speech making. Was there anything that was anti-war? Were there any pacifists who said, you know, that we should stay out of the war entirely, isolationists, any of those folks?

WL: Not after the Germans invaded Russia. No, after that—

LC: So not after ’42?

WL: Yeah. Not after ’42. There wasn’t anything like that I remember. People pretty much shut up because I guess even the Communists realized that this war was going to go on and why argue about it now.

LC: Do you remember where you were at the time of Pearl Harbor and the attack out there?
WL: Yeah. My sister and I were at home studying for our finals. We had the radio on on the Sunday morning and there it was. Yeah. That was pretty remarkable. You see another thing about my background that I haven’t mentioned yet, I was engaged to be married already and I was only nineteen. We were going to be married on the tenth of January ’42, and here on the seventh of December of ’41 we’re at war.

LC: Yeah. The whole world changed.

WL: Yeah. At that time during that period of that December I was working part-time for the post office delivering the Christmas mail. Also, I remember that part of it. But we did get married on the tenth of January anyway. My wife at that time had gotten a job. She was working for Standard Oil Company in San Francisco. Had to go across on the ferry, work over there. But then she got a job with the draft board in Berkeley. I decided that—I knew that I would be twenty years old in July and I’d have to go into the Army. I determined that I should complete my university if I could before I was drafted. So I managed to get a six months extension on the draft if I would go to school all summer. So I took what they called intersession and summer session, two periods of instruction all summer. I managed to graduate then in February of ’43. Yeah. February ’43. I would have graduated in the summer of ’43. I started in ’39, so.

LC: Right. So you accelerated it by several months—six it sounds like.

WL: Yeah. I cut it by about six months, five months. They agreed to let me graduate. As soon as I graduated I got on the ferry and went over to San Francisco and volunteered for induction, that’s what they called it.

LC: Right away you did this.

WL: Right away. Yeah.

LC: All of this you had obviously planned out with your wife and so on. So she knew that you were going to be disappearing essentially into the Army system.

WL: Yeah. I mean everybody was going to go. Now, I could have volunteered immediately right after Pearl Harbor. But since I had almost finished my college I figured well that would be better to graduate first, not leave that behind. I don’t know whether that was a good idea or not but—

LC: Well, did it give you the leg up in terms of rank when you entered?
WL: Not much. No. When I entered I was asked by this Army clerk, he said, “What branch do you want?” I told him. “I want the field artillery.” I had already studied trigonometry and I figured that would be important as a field artilleryman, so I went to field artillery. He said, “We don’t have any vacancies right now in that. What’s your second choice?” I said, “Infantry.” He said, “Well, we have some vacancies there.” So that’s how I got into the infantry.

LC: Okay. Why did you say infantry as a second choice?

WL: Well, I wanted to be a real soldier. I didn’t want to—I always had the idea that if you’re going to do something, why do it upfront somewhere. I didn’t want to be in the rear anywhere.

LC: Is that right? When you say real soldier, what did that mean to you at that time? Can you say a little more about that?

WL: Oh. Real soldier meant somebody that did fighting, that’s all. I didn’t want to be a clerk or an orderly or anything like that.

LC: I’m sure all of that would have been possible especially since you had a degree.

WL: Well, maybe. I don’t know. They knew I had a degree. They didn’t say, “Hey, you’re so smart we’re going to let you do this or that.” They asked me which branch and so that’s how I got there.

LC: Did you have as many people, but not all people did at that time, a kind of upwelling of patriotic feeling? I mean how much did that play a role in what you were about to embark on?

WL: Well, of course I was, I guess, as upset as anybody about the attack by the Japanese. I guess by this time I was smart enough to put the whole thing into context of a general worldwide war. We knew that the British had been defeated in Southeast Asia. We knew that the US Army had gone through some very, very tough times in North Africa by this time. I mean it was time to get into it. That’s about all I can think of.

LC: Colonel, once you went into the induction can you tell me what happened?

WL: Well, as soon as I took the oath there in the courthouse in San Francisco they put me on a train. At that time they had a train that went from San Francisco down to Monterey. They took me down to the Presidio of Monterey where I went through, I
guess what they call processing. You know, get the shots, get first issue of uniforms, and whatever else paperwork you went through. I was there only for about three or four days I believe. Then on a train again to the Oakland, they called it the mole. That was the Oakland rail yards, the railroad yards, at the port of Oakland. We went there and we transferred onto a troop train to go for my first assignment. That’s what happened there and I know my wife came down. She knew I was coming in there. They came down and gave each other a hug, and I got on the troop train and off I went for my first assignment.

LC: You clearly then already had your orders for where you were to report?
WL: Yeah. But I got those orders in Monterey. For about, I think there were about thirty of us that were assigned to the same place.

LC: Where was that?
WL: Well, I was assigned to the Infantry. The Infantry was a Chicago National Guard regiment. Most of the soldiers were from the south side of Chicago. It had been the Illinois [Regiment]. Didn’t have an illustrious history by any means.

LC: Why do you say that?
WL: Well, it was mustered into federal service during the war with Spain. It was at Santiago, I believe, in Cuba. Then after that it was mustered out again. It was brought in for World War I, fought in about three or four campaigns in Europe in France. Out again. I just say, it doesn’t have a history like the Infantry Division. In fact, it wasn’t even in the Army during the Civil War. Most of the other regiments I’ve been in, I’ve been in five different regiments in five different divisions, and they all had a pretty good history. But this one was kind of an ordinary National Guard unit.

LC: Where were they based just then? In Chicago?
WL: They were based in Chicago, yeah, before they were mustered in.

LC: So you and these—?
WL: Of thirty guys from California we joined the at a place called Camp Strongs, and this was in February. The snow was about shoulder high. We took this train, went up through Chicago and Minneapolis. We transferred to a railroad called the Soo Line, which is [named] after Sault Ste. Marie on the upper peninsular of Michigan. We landed at a little place called, let’s see, at Newberry. Newberry, Michigan.

LC: It’s very small. Yes.
WL: Very small town. Are you familiar with that?
LC: I am. I’m from Michigan. I know exactly where it is.
WL: You know what I’m talking about then. Yeah. We got onto some trucks but
the temperature was around thirty below. It was one of the coldest winters that they’d
had for years in Michigan and it’s always pretty cold up there.
LC: Bitter cold.
WL: Upper Peninsula there anyway. Got on trucks. They took us to Camp
Strongs. Camp Strongs had been a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp. Some
Indians, this is a story they told us. Some Indians had been employed to keep the snow
shoveled off of the roofs of these barracks and apparently the job got ahead of them
because a couple barracks had already collapsed. So we were jammed into what was
remaining. Our bunks were four bunks high in tarpaper covered shacks. That’s what we
called them. The heating was from coal stoves dispersed down the center aisle of the
barracks. If you were within four feet of the stove, why, you were reasonably warm. In
fact, you could’ve get cooked because it would keep the stoves almost red hot. But if you
were more than that away from the stove it wasn’t too much effect. Anyway, that was
where I took basic training. There was a cadre from the , which was headquartered at
Sault Ste. Marie in a place called Fort Brady. Doesn’t exist any longer, but Fort Brady
was the headquarters of the . They had already sent one battalion to North Africa as
replacements from the fighting in North Africa. So we had only two battalions left. The
mission of the was to protect the Soo Locks, which was important. It was important to
protect them. Whether these two [battalions] of infantry could have done much about it
is a question.
LC: Did they explain to you the strategic significance of the locks?
WL: Oh yeah they did. Yeah. All of the ore for United States mills out of the
Mesabi Range came down through Lake Superior into Lake Michigan through the Soo
Locks. So, if they had been damaged or destroyed, why, we would have been in tough
shape for iron ore, that’s for sure.
LC: Yeah. Yeah. So there were these two battalions?
WL: Two battalions. Yeah.
LC: Were they full strength or getting there?
WL: We were pretty much full strength, [training replacements] to bring it up to
full strength. Put it that way. After what, about three months of basic training there,
which was almost all classroom work because the weather was so miserable you couldn’t
do much outside. You try to do bayonet drill in two feet of snow. It’s not very effective.

LC: No. I wouldn’t think so.

WL: We did get to go to the range and get qualified. I was the best shot in the
company for that matter. The company commander gave me a five dollar prize.

LC: Is that right?

WL: Yeah. Yeah. I had to kind of fight for it because he promised it. Then two
or three weeks after we came back from the range, I asked my platoon sergeant. I said,
“I’d like to ask the sergeant about that five dollars I was promised.” He said, “Okay,
you can go see the sergeant.” So, with the sergeant I spoke with him. I said, “You
know, the company commander promised me five dollars. Promised five dollars to the
highest score on the range.” He said, “Okay.” He went in and got the five dollars. The
company commander was kind of a martinet. I never did like him. But anyway he’d
come through with the five bucks after being pressured.

LC: Yeah. He had to get some public leverage there on him.

WL: Anyway, I was assigned to an anti-tank—I was assigned to headquarters and
Headquarters Company of the [ ] Battalion of the after training, and assigned to the anti-
tank platoon. We had three 37 mm towed anti-tank guns. They [were] towed behind
Dodge trucks. When we’d have an alert we’d hook up the gun and drive out into the
countryside there. They had a very important crossroads, which all seems kind of silly.
But the threat that they perceived was that the Germans would have, did have the
capability of sending an airborne assault across the Atlantic. To land somewhere close to
the Locks and come in and seize them and destroy them. Farfetched I think but—

LC: Well, it’s interesting because during the early Cold War years the Soo Locks
was also thought of as extremely important because of all the traffic through there, the
natural resources traffic. Was, you know, again one of the sights that was very heavily
defended this time with air defenses.

WL: Well, they did bring in—they had a couple of anti-aircraft batteries there and
there was a female unit with barrage balloons. You know, the barrage balloons?
LC: Yes I do but go ahead and explain it for someone who might not get that reference.

WL: Well, there was a company at least of WACs, Women’s Army Corps, W-A-C. Who had these balloons that were helium inflated and they would loose them over the city and over the Locks. They had cables dangling down from them that were designed to intercept any aircraft that would be coming in low to dive bomb the locks.

LC: No kidding!

WL: That was the point of the whole exercise. I don’t know. They were only, oh, seven or eight hundred feet, I’m guessing now, above the terrain. That was the point, to keep low flying aircraft from coming in to bomb the Locks.

LC: So these cables would interfere with propellers or whatever.

WL: Well, an airplane flying into a cable that’s—

LC: That’s a bad, bad thing. How heavy would those cables be? How big around? Any idea?

WL: About an inch.

LC: No kidding. Even that would probably do it. Yeah. So this company, do you know where they were based?

WL: They were based there at Fort Brady too. Never got into Fort Brady. Our battalion was stationed outside of the city at the county fairgrounds. So the only time I got into the city was when I went into the hospital.

LC: For what purpose?

WL: I got pneumonia there too.

LC: Oh, well, that’s a lot more understandable really in some ways than getting it in the West Coast but—

WL: But I recovered from that pretty quickly.

LC: Okay. How long were you actually down with that?

WL: Oh, probably about two weeks at the most.

LC: How long did you stay up in the Sault Ste. Marie area then?

WL: Let’s see, we got there in February and we left there, I believe, in June. The entire regiment left. Apparently they decided that the threat had diminished or changed to the point where they didn’t really need infantry there. But the anti-aircraft capability,
that would be it. So, they put us on a train and went down to Chicago, through Chicago
to a place called Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi, which is pretty close to Meridian.
Meridian’s been in the news for the last couple of days. You know, the trial down there
at Philadelphia?

LC: Sure. This is the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) fellow.

WL: Yeah. Anyway, Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi was outside of Meridian,
Mississippi and we stayed there in training. We went to the range. We did a lot of
marching, a lot of long distance marching. I mean road marching for probably maybe six
weeks or so.

LC: This would be endurance building.

WL: Yeah. Right. Just physical training. A lot of physical training, calisthenics,
and marching. Then we motor marched to Fort Benning, right across Alabama. I
remember we bivouacked at Tuskegee out on an airfield. Tuskegee is famous for the
Negro airmen of World War II.

LC: So were you actually like on the campus area?

WL: No, we were on the airfield. There was an airfield out there and that’s where
we pitched our tents. Then continued on to march to Fort Benning where we became,
what they called, school troops. School troops for the infantry school. Our mission was
to put on demonstrations of weapons and tactics for officer candidate schools, for courses
that were going through the infantry school. By that time I was still in the anti-tank
platoon. We traded in our 37 mm guns for the British five-pounder, which was a 57 mm
gun. Still not big enough to do significant damage to a German tank but the biggest thing
we had at the time. We trained on the 57 gun. Then about, oh when was it? While I was
there I got appendicitis. I was kind of on the sick book a lot. My wife joined me down
there and she got a job taking care of a colonel’s kids on the post, after awhile. Real nice
guy and they gave her a room on the post. But the time I had appendicitis she was living
off post in a little room with a hot plate and I got to go see her, if I was lucky, once a
week. They’d let me have a pass and get on a bus. They call it the shack bus.

LC: The shack bus?
WL: On a Saturday after inspection, if you passed inspection you’d get a pass and you’d go off and you had to be back by Sunday night. Drive in to take this bus, actually it was a truck but they called it a bus.

LC: You’d just kind of pile in and out of this?

WL: Pile into and go into Columbus and see your wife. Anyway, while I was in there one night I had these terrible cramps and I had a very tough ride getting back into the base. We were in a part of Fort Benning called Harmony Church. I’ll never forget it. Harmony Church area of Fort Benning is where our regiment was. I reported in the next morning to the sergeant. I said, “I’m in bad shape.” I guess he could tell by the way I looked. He agreed. I didn’t have to prove anything to him. They got an ambulance and I went into the hospital and I had very severe acute appendicitis. They operated on me there. These days you’re out of the hospital in two or three days for something like that.

LC: Yeah. If that even. Yeah. So you were in for—?

WL: I was in there for about I think at least three weeks before I was back to duty.

LC: Wow. Well, the drugs were very different. I mean there were a lot more risks.

WL: Yeah. There were more risks of infection and the techniques also. I think they hadn’t discovered that “get him back on his feet as soon as you can” idea that they do now.

LC: That must have been a little bit frightening for your wife to be there and you be sick.

WL: Yeah. It was. It was tough on her.

LC: Not sure what was happening. I’m sure that it was tough. Yeah.

WL: But I remember there was a very good chaplain there. I’ll never forget him. His name was Gebauer. He was a German. In fact he spoke with a German accent. He’d come from South Africa, he’d been a minister down there. He said when he had appendicitis in South Africa the surgeon was drunk and he showed me the scar. He had this great gash across his abdomen. Looked like he’d been hit with machine guns or something and he said, “This is what he did to me. I was lucky I survived.” So he said, “You’re in relatively good hands here.” But he was a nice guy and he was very nice to my wife.
LC: Very good. Now let me ask about observations that you made in Mississippi then you’re going across Alabama and Georgia—

WL: I can tell you one observation from Fort Benning that I’ll never forget. I was on a pass on the main post and I went to the cafeteria on the main post of Fort Benning. I got in line and in front of me was a—we called them Negroes there and I still think it’s appropriate—anyway, was a Negro lieutenant, lieutenant, good looking fellow, in front of me in the line. He put his tray out for service and the lady behind the counter said, “You can’t eat here. This is whites only.” It was so embarrassing to me because here I was a private from California. I hadn’t seen this sort of treatment before. I knew it existed but this is first time I’d seen it in action. I thought, “Here’s a guy who is commissioned in the United States Army to lead troops in battle and they’re not going to serve him along with me.” I can eat, I’m a private, but he couldn’t. That was my first really solid impression of what racism was like in those days. Of course I saw it in Columbus all the time. If you went to the Woolworth store for a soda fountain counter there, there were no blacks there. You couldn’t see them there. Then they had these segregated restrooms, segregated drinking fountains. The bus terminals they were all segregated and so on. It was pretty stupid. But when you saw it in the military I thought, “Why this is absolutely is wrong.”

LC: Right. Do you remember how that young man reacted, if at all?

WL: Well, no I don’t. I think he probably realized that he’d made a mistake and there was no point in making an argument out of it.

LC: Wasn’t going to get anywhere. Um-hm. Well, I’m sure this must have been shocking because when you know about something on an intellectual level, that’s kind of one thing, but actually going there, living, and breathing the experiences is a totally different order of experience.

WL: Exactly. Of course, I couldn’t understand what most of the blacks said anyway. If you talked to them their language and their syntax, the pronunciation, was so difficult that I couldn’t understand hardly anything anybody was saying coming from California.

LC: Well, for sure. Now, at Fort Benning how long were you there in total?
WL: Well, I guess from June until, it must have been—I think we had Christmas there. But shortly after Christmas the regiment—the War Department decided, I always used to think that they just kind of gave up on us, they gave up on the. But that’s probably not fair. I think they just didn’t need an infantry regiment with only two battalions, a separate regiment not belonging to a division. They didn’t need that structure in the Army at that time. There were a few other independent regiments in the Army, as you probably know.

LC: Yeah. Just a very few.

WL: Yeah. The in the Pacific. I know a couple of others but they were rare. The happened to be an independent regiment. Because before World War II began the Army, all of the Army divisions had four regiments. Then the Army, their doctrine changed and they decided everything had to be in threes. So each division had to lose a regiment and that regiment either was used to form another division or it was independent. So that’s how come the was an independent regiment. It was part of the Division until the was triangularized.

LC: Is that the term they used?

WL: Yeah. They used that word. It was a very awkward word.

LC: Yes it is, but the Army seems to come up with those on a regular basis.

WL: So they deactivated the, folded the colors there at Fort Benning. Then, all of the officers and non commissioned officers above the rank of corporal, I guess, were sent to the European theater as replacements. All of them probably went to England, that’s where the base was. The rest of us, all the privates, we were shipped off to California and then on to Australia. That’s where we went. That’s how I got to Australia. We went from Fort Benning by troop train to San Francisco, of course, Oakland. Then ferry over to San Francisco, and then from San Francisco on a ferry to Angel Island, which is an island in San Francisco Bay. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of it but—

LC: Yes, I have.

WL: Angel Island. It’s not too far from Alcatraz.

LC: Was it a processing center or what was it then?
WL: Well, it was a, yeah. I guess they called it an embarkation port. The ships
didn’t really come in there. But we were there for processing for overseas shipment.
Interestingly enough there was a very small Japanese prisoner of war camp in there.

LC: Well, I was going to ask you whether you came across any POW (prisoner of
war) camps in all this traveling.

WL: Yeah. Well that was the only one. That was on Angel Island. It was a very
small stockade enclosure.

LC: Now, just to make the distinction that this is not a civilian detention center for
those of Japanese ancestry this is a POW camp. POWs.

WL: Oh no, no, no. All of the Japanese that were shipped out from California, I
believe none of them stayed in California. They were out in the Middle West, most of
them.

LC: Did you ever have any friends or know of anyone who was moved out?

WL: Oh yeah. In my high school there were only two Japanese families that I can
recall. I was good friends with one of them, Kenichi Korematsu. He was in my grade.
In fact we went to the senior ball together, I think, with his date and mine. He’s a nice
fellow. Then there was a girl, I can’t remember her name. Very pretty little Japanese girl
that was in that school too. I know that their families were moved out. Yeah. It was a
terrible thing.

LC: Did you think it was terrible at the time? I mean did it—?

WL: Well, I wasn’t completely aware of it right away, you know. I don’t know
when they started that. Must have been early ’42 when they started it. In any case we all
thought that was a horrible thing to do and there was no good reason to do that. I used to
think, “Well, if you’re going to do that round up all the Italians and Germans.” In fact,
the Germans were, I think, all in all, in hindsight anyway, a much more serious threat.
But that’s beside the point. Yeah. I knew them.

LC: On Angel Island you were there for, what a couple of days?

WL: We were there probably a little longer than that. Maybe ten days.

LC: Now, was the POW camp sort of on a certain end of the island?

WL: It was down on the end of the island somewhere. We did a lot of running
and marching around that. There was only one road around the perimeter of the island
and we ran around that and we’d run past this Japanese camp every time we went by there.

LC: Did you see them?
WL: Oh yeah. You could see them out there.
LC: Any exchanges back and forth?
WL: No. No. We were soldiers.
LC: Yeah. You were moving and—right? Interesting. I mean did it get you kind of hacked off to see those guys there or—?
WL: No. I was glad that they were there.
LC: As opposed to—
WL: Well, they won’t have to shoot again.
LC: Right. Well, they were already taken care of though. That was a good thing I’m sure. About how many guys were being held there? Any idea?
WL: I don’t have—I wouldn’t think of it as more than a couple hundred at the most. You know, we didn’t take an awful lot of prisoners, as you probably know, in the Pacific War. The Japanese did not surrender easily and the few that we captured, in my own experience, were pretty badly wounded before. They wouldn’t let themselves be captured. They’d commit suicide or be shot before they’d surrender. So you didn’t see very many.
LC: Did you have our orders at this point, that you were bound for Australia?
WL: No. We didn’t know for sure. They kept things pretty quiet. I did get one pass. I was able to leave the island, going to see my wife. By that time she’s back and staying with my family, with my mother and father, in Oakland. I got a pass to go home to see her and I think I overstayed it by about twelve hours.
LC: Get in trouble?
WL: Got in a little bit of trouble. Not so serious, I mean what are you going to do to me? Send me to Australia?
LC: Well, there’s that. Right. I think a lot of guys probably thought that too.
WL: I was still a private anyway. I couldn’t have been busted much for it. Didn’t matter.
LC: Can you describe your sort of emotional state at this time? I mean were you excited about getting off to the conflict?

WL: I was excited about going off to war. I was very unhappy about leaving my bride, put it that way. So, you can’t say I was torn between two emotions but those are the two emotions I had. One, I hated to leave her but I was anxious to get into action. I wasn’t anxious to go get shot at but I was anxious to see what the war was like and experience it.

LC: When did you actually then leave the US?

WL: I guess we left there in January of ’44. I’m guessing now but that’s about when we left, and we got to Australia. We went on a ship named Sea Corporal. It was what they called a victory ship. There were two main types of cargo and troop ships in those days. You’re very familiar, I’m sure, with a liberty ship, which was that mass-produced cargo carrier. Very slow ship. Victory ships were a much better ship. They were fast, they do seventeen or eighteen knots. They were a fast transport, relatively fast transport. It took us, I think, seventeen days to get from San Francisco to, we came into Brisbane, Australia. There were I think about, I’m guessing now, maybe two thousand soldiers on the ship.

LC: Okay. I was going to ask you. Did they work you hard during the passage?

WL: No. There was no work to be, well—

LC: In terms of physical—

WL: Got to clean sweep down for and aft. Man your sweepers, man your brooms, that sort of stuff. But otherwise there wasn’t much to do. I remember my bunk was in the bow of the ship, way down deep in the hold. There were fifty [gallon] garbage cans that were quite often filled with vomit. The smell down there was pretty bad. It wasn’t pleasant. Anytime you can get on deck, why, you’d make for it. I was never seasick. A lot of soldiers were. But the sea was relatively calm. Large swells going out of the port. But it was all in all a very pleasant trip. The food was terrible. Hard-boiled eggs, boiled potatoes, that’s about it. Boiled sausage. I remember there was a—the officers, they had pretty good accommodations. They were all up on deck and they actually had real, you know, they had roast beef and that sort of stuff. There was a cook, merchant marine cook that would sell a soldier a roast beef sandwich for a dollar. Well, I didn’t have a dollar.
We were being paid about—my take home, take home pay—my net pay after allotments was about twenty dollars a month. The rest of it went home to my wife. So I didn’t have any money to spend on things like that. The luxury life of roast beef sandwiches.

LC: Goodness. What was the morale like? What were guys talking about? Can you recall any of that?

WL: Morale was good. The guys mostly talked about home, talked about their old jobs. They talked about women a lot! Girls. What they were going to do when they got to Melbourne and all this other stuff. They were a pretty rough group. I was the only guy ever in my company—no, there were two people who had been to college besides the officers in my company in the Pacific. I was one of them.

LC: I can’t imagine you doing this, but did you let people know that you had a university degree in political science and so on?

WL: I didn’t talk about it.

LC: I’m sure. I’m sure.

WL: They knew that I could read and write. All they cared was that—I never—there wasn’t any point in talking about stuff like that.

LC: Did they know you were married? Did you have a wedding band or—?

WL: You mean the officers or the other men? The other men knew it too. I wasn’t about to go out and carouse around. The very few opportunities we had to do anything like that I never did anything like that.

LC: Now, when you came into Brisbane can you tell me what the town was like? What it was like when you arrived?

WL: Very interesting. Brisbane had covered sidewalks. It reminded me of the old west with wooden sidewalks, planks, and a roof. Apparently during the rainy season that was pretty useful to have that sort of thing. I don’t remember the weather. We were probably there in the dry season. That would have been January. It’s probably dry, usually dry there during that season. The chaplain on the ship going over on *Sea Corporal* had collected a dollar from everybody and when we got to Brisbane he gave us a certificate, what they call a shell back certificate. You get that because you had the honor and privilege of crossing the equator. So you got a certificate that attested to that fact that at certain latitude—well, at certain longitude you’d cross the equator. He sold
those for a dollar to everybody. Then we saw him drunk on the streets of Brisbane. That was one of the most interesting things to see, this Army chaplain staggering around Brisbane. We were there, I can’t even remember now, probably no more than a day. They put us on a train going up the coast to a place called Rockhampton, which is right on the coast by the Great Barrier Reef. Up in what Australians call Bloody Queensland, Queensland Province, Australia. I don’t know what Australian railroads are like now but that was a narrow gauge railroad, steam powered. I remember the locomotive didn’t quite have enough power to get us over one of the hills so everybody had to get off the train and walk beside it for a half a mile or so until it crested the hill. Then we could get back on again and go and continue on. Stopped at a couple little places and bought for my first experience with fresh pineapple.

LC: Tell me about that. How did you get—was someone selling it along the way?

WL: Yeah. Vendors selling fresh pineapple. I remember what really messed up the uniform was pineapple juice. Hard to eat with your fingers.

LC: Sticky mess. Did you and the other guys have an idea of where you were actually heading?

WL: I don’t remember them telling us where we were going or why. They didn’t communicate very well with privates in those days.

LC: Um-hm. They were just marching you on, “Do this, do that.”

WL: Yeah. “Well, get on this train.” “Where’s this train going?” “Oh, we’ll find out when we get there.” So, we got up to Rockhampton and that happened to be the base camp of two American divisions who had fought in New Guinea. The Infantry Division out of Wisconsin, Michigan, or Wisconsin—most of them I think were Wisconsin and Minnesota. I don’t know. Maybe some from Michigan out of the Red Arrow Division. The other division was the Infantry Division, which happened to be the first National Guard division mobilized for World War II. It was the first one sent overseas. Not the first one in combat but the first one sent overseas, the Division was there. They had just returned from their first tour into New Guinea. One of the regiments, had fought at a place called Sanananda, another one at Salamaua, and they had come back. I was assigned to the Infantry Regiment to Company M. In those days an infantry regiment had twenty companies in it. They had three battalions and each battalion had three rifle
companies, a headquarters company, and a heavy weapons company. The Battalion D Company was heavy weapons, Battalion H Company was heavy weapons. In my battalion, I was assigned to Battalion, M Company was heavy weapons. Heavy weapons company had a platoon of six 81 mm mortars and two platoons of heavy machine guns. Each of those platoons had four guns in two sections of two guns each. I was assigned, I guess, to the first platoon of machine guns in Company M. The heavy machine gun was a Browning .30 caliber water-cooled machine gun. That’s why they called it the heavy machine gun because it was water-cooled.

LC: Let me ask you how those functioned down in—

WL: The gun?

LC: Yeah. The gun.

WL: The gun was a very fine gun. It was very stable, accurate. But it was the same cyclic rate as the light machine gun, which was a Browning also. This gun was model 1917 so it had seen service in World War I, that particular model. The tripod and cradle, the cradle was the part of the tripod that held the gun, that weighed fifty-one pounds. The gun weighed, with water, weighed about forty-two pounds. That’s how you broke down the load for the gun. Then the ammunition handlers, and I was one of those, we each carried two cans of thirty caliber ammunition. Each can weighed twenty-five pounds. The number three man carried the tool kit in addition to a can of ammo and that weighed about the same. Anyway, that and a spare bolt, a spare barrel extension, a spare barrel, and some other stuff brought its weight up. No, that was number four man. Number three man carried what they called a water chest. You had to put this chest; it was about the size of a breadbox I guess. He carried that and a can of ammunition. You needed that because when the gun was fired and got hot you would get steam. So you put a tube from the water jacket of the gun into the water chest so that the steam went down into the water and you wouldn’t get this cloud of steam in front of the gun.

LC: So the location couldn’t be as easily identified?

WL: Yeah. That’s right. They were going to find you if you fired very long anyway but at least you wouldn’t that steam in front of you.

LC: How reliable was it?
WL: It was a very reliable gun. Yeah. It was a good gun. You could fire many, many rounds before you would have any problems with it.

LC: How long would it take to go through, say under pressure, how long would it take to go through a can of ammunition?

WL: Well, its cyclic rate was about five hundred rounds per minute but you fired about two hundred and fifty rounds a minute. Each can carried two hundred and fifty rounds. You could probably use up your entire load in about ten minutes if it were steady firing. So somebody had to be going back to get more ammo to load up.

LC: Okay. Would that have been you as the ammo carrier?

WL: One of them. Yes.

LC: Okay. Let me ask a little bit about Rockhampton itself when you arrived up there. It’s got division bases located there?

WL: Well, yeah. Both divisions were based there. They had some tents. They had pyramidal tents. The company command post, the CP, was in a tent. Everything was in tents. We didn’t have any buildings. I was issued a hammock to sleep in and strung it between two trees. These were a new development. They were what they called a jungle hammock. It had a roof and mosquito netting around it. It was a rather intricate affair with a zipper on the side. You were supposed to climb in and zip it up so the mosquitoes wouldn’t get you. I had a little problem the first night I got into that thing because I put it too high and I strung it really tight and they issued us some beer that day, really green beer. Actually it looked green. I drank too much of that and I got into that hammock and promptly flipped over and came out through the mosquito net, tore it all to shreds, hit the ground really hard. My first night at Rockhampton wasn’t very good. After that I think I can’t recall now, but then I think they issued us some cots too and we could put them on the ground. You didn’t have to go in your hammock if you didn’t want to. But mosquitoes were a problem there at Rockhampton and you had to have a mosquito net over your cot.

LC: Was there a concern about malaria then?

WL: There was a very great concern about malaria from Rockhampton on north and all through New Guinea and the Philippines. Yeah. We took a drug that was supposed to be a protection against it called Atabrine.
LC: Yes. Did that make you sick?
WL: No. Not really. Little slight upset but nothing serious. It tended to turn your
eyeballs yellow. Everybody that had been on it for a while looked like they had jaundice.
That was a problem because jaundice became a problem. Hepatitis became a problem,
particularly in New Guinea. In fact, I had it later. So, it was hard to detect except that
you felt bad. But by looking at you, you said, “Well, that’s the Atabrine that made your
eyeballs yellow.” But actually it was hepatitis or it could have been. So anyway we took
Atabrine and I never got any malaria. There was also Dengue fever. That was rather
serious in New Guinea. In Rockhampton though it wasn’t such a—

LC: Were some of those men that were coming back from those early battles,
were they ill rather than injured? Did you see any of that? Was there a hospital facility
there?

WL: Well, there must have been a hospital there but I didn’t get into it. I’m sure
there was.

LC: Now, altogether how long were you staying?

WL: In Rocky? We were only there I would say no more than two or three
weeks. I don’t remember hardly. I remember getting into Rockhampton town once, I
believe, but nothing memorable about it. Then we shipped out for New Guinea again.
We went on an Australian ship, Canimbla, was its name. It had been an ocean liner. It
was a pretty nice ship, rather large. We went up to Finschhafen, New Guinea. That’s
where we landed.

LC: Just for someone who doesn’t have a map right in front of them, is this on the
western end of the island or—?

WL: It’s on the northeastern coast of New Guinea. There’s a peninsula that
comes out right above Finschhafen called Huon Peninsula, H-u-o-n. It’s on the north
shore of New Guinea. The most important city in New Guinea is still Port Moresby, I
believe. It’s probably the only major port in the whole, in the Papua part of New Guinea.
Port Moresby is on the southern coast of New Guinea in the south.

LC: So you guys were up on the northern coast?

WL: The north coast. The main battle that had taken place in New Guinea before
we got there was at Buna. From Buna on to the west at Salamaua where one of our
regiments had fought, where the Division had fought. Then on up to a place called—well, I mentioned Finschhafen. The Australians I believe had taken Finschhafen and in land from Finschhafen a place called Nadzab had been seized. Nadzab New Guinea. In an airborne assault by the U.S. Parachute Regiment. I believe they had taken the, could be wrong there but I believe that’s right. Anyway, we went into Finschhafen. That was already under our control.

LC: It was already a secure area?

WL: Yeah. We set up camp in—put up our eight man tents in an area there above the ocean. Did some training up in the ridges above Finschhafen. I remember that’s the first time I got out to fire the machine gun. I hadn’t been in machine gunning before. See, I’d been in anti-tank guns. So first experience with the thirty caliber machine gun and got some good training and field firing from one ridge over to the other ridge with the machine gun.

LC: What did you know about your likely work over the upcoming period? Did you have any information?

WL: Very little. We didn’t know. We knew that we were preparing for a landing. But we didn’t know where and we didn’t really know when, how much longer we’d be in Finschhafen. I don’t even know how long we were there. I wouldn’t say it was more than a month outside before we were back down on the beach loading the ships for the landing that we were going to make up at Hollandia. That’s our first action; first action I was in. [We made a practice landing on the coast before loading up for the Hollandia landing.]

LC: Can you tell me about that crossing? How did you go?

WL: Well, let’s see. I’m trying to think now. I think I was in a LST, a landing ship tank. I think my company was in a LST and we were in what they called—we made the landing in what we called AMTRACs. (amphibious tractor) That was a tracked amphibious vehicle about the size of a small tank and it would hold a squad or so. That’s what we landed in. They put down the ramp in front of the LST and we just drove it out into the water and up on the shore.

LC: Now, was it a secured area that you were landing on?
WL: It wasn’t secured but we weren’t opposed either. Somebody make a mistake somewhere along the line and I don’t know who it was. Whether it was the captain of our ship or maybe he got the wrong instructions, but whatever happened they put us ashore in a mangrove swamp and you can’t walk through a mangrove swamp.

LC: Goodness no.

WL: There’s only water.

LC: Yeah. There’s no land.

WL: The beach was only a few yards wide until you’re right into the swamp so they came back with these tracks. We got on them again and went out into the bay. This was Humboldt Bay, I think it was the name of the place. They took us around on this track. We took a little bit of fire from a couple of islands out in the bay but nothing serious. Nobody got hurt. We landed on the shore by Hollandia town. Again we were not opposed, there was nobody shooting at us. See, in Battalion it was I, K, and L Company were the rifle companies. My machine gun squad was attached to K Company. We were all the, in fact the whole section was always attached to K Company. I didn’t go ashore with M Company. I went ashore with the rifle company, K Company. I Company, they put them ashore on a little island out in the bay and they had a real problem because they got strafed by the Navy. They lost about thirty guys, thirty soldiers killed. They got ahead of themselves and the Navy didn’t know who they were and they really decimated I Company. The company commander was badly wounded in just getting off the landing craft. He stumbled and fell on a bayonet of one of the soldiers and took a very serious bayonet wound in his armpit. So he had a rather rough landing. But we were pretty lucky. We got ashore without any casualties and began moving inland.

LC: You’re moving then forward with other companies essentially?

WL: Yeah. Always attached to K Company. We marched. We carried our gun. I was carrying ammunition. We marched to, let’s see, where were we headed? The name of the lake—Lake Sentani is where we were headed. It was about seventeen or eighteen miles as I remember from the shore and we started marching inland, and I don’t know which company was leading. K Company might have been leading. I was probably back behind the Platoon because we kept machine guns back. So I saw a couple of dead Japs along the way, on the road.
LC: Now, just for tactical reasons why would you keep the machine gun further back?

WL: Well, you want your rifles up forward and then the machine gun so if you need them you want to bring them up forward. We’re not in the situation we could use them while we’re marching. You have to put them down and—

LC: They’re not as mobile, I mean in terms of—

WL: No. You can’t run with them very easily very far. The tripod is carried by the gunner himself, number one, and he’s got it with the legs spread, if you can visualize that. He’s got two forward legs, one over each shoulder. It’s a triangle we’re talking about. The trail leg of the gun is down his back resting on his pack. He’s got both hands occupied holding the [tripod]. The gunner, the number two man, is carrying the gun and he’s got a pretty heavy load. He’s not going to run very far with that either. You just keep your rifles up forward. Make a maneuver. Then if they need you they’ll call you up.

LC: What was communication like? Was the gunner or someone in the platoon radio enabled?

WL: No, we didn’t have any radios. No.

LC: Okay. So what? Hand signals or just running back and forth talking with each other?

WL: Yeah. Talking, hand and arm signals, yelling, signals with hand and arm. The platoons, even the rifle platoons, as I recall, they didn’t have any radios. When we set up on a defensive position, why, they’d string wire and you’d have a telephone in the platoon area that would go back to the company command post. So the rifle platoon leaders could talk to the company commander by wire. But the machine gunners, we just stayed with the platoon. We were following the directions of the orders of the platoon leader in whose area we were assigned.

LC: Now, did you finally make it to the lake area?

WL: Oh yeah. A couple of days we took some fire as we moved. I remember we dug in on—most of this terrain in that part of New Guinea was what they called kunai grass. It was high savanna grass. The grass was, well, six feet tall. If you got into it, why, you were pretty well concealed. Because you might see the tops of people’s heads
moving through it but otherwise it was pretty high grass. We moved up on top of a brow of the hill, set up the gun, dug in, and Japanese fired at us with anti-aircraft guns. These were about 40 mm I believe, and a lot of shrapnel falling down. But we didn’t take hardly any casualties anyway. I lost my helmet on that one and I was kind of upset about that. I’d given my helmet to another soldier to take it down to the lake to bring some water back. Nobody was bringing us any water and the temperature was well over a hundred degrees. One man died of the heat.

LC: Did he really?
WL: Yeah, a guy in K Company. He was too heavy. He was a big, heavy fellow and he died. This fellow that I gave my helmet to dropped it in the lake so I didn’t have a helmet for a couple of days.

LC: How did you come up with another one?
WL: I don’t remember.

LC: But I’m sure that was a high priority. Get something on your head.
WL: Yeah, it was. Probably got one from a casualty later on.

LC: So, Japanese were using anti-aircraft—?
WL: Well, they used it that time. The interesting thing about Hollandia was really a, might call it turning movement. MacArthur had designed—we got in behind the main Japanese fighting divisions and the only thing left there at Hollandia—they had pulled back out of Hollandia and left service troops there and some Air Force. There was a lot of airplanes. But mostly airplanes, Japanese fighters and bombers, were destroyed on the ground by the Army Air Corps before we even landed. There were a lot of destroyed airplanes on the airfield. There were two or three airfields back there by Lake Sentani. That was our objective, to seize those airfields. We did that in I would say probably a week. It didn’t take us very long to get back there and rout out the few Japs that were still there. Chase them off into the hills most of them. Didn’t see very many dead Japanese.

LC: Were you kind of learning what their defenses were as you went along and perhaps with scuttlebutt and so on?
WL: Well, they didn’t have any hardly any good designed defenses. There was another aspect to this whole campaign. I should have mentioned the Infantry Division
landed at a different location. I think it was called Tanahmerah Bay. They were coming in from the North and we were moving up from the South, and it was a pincher movement, and we met. Our forward elements met the forward elements of the Division. We kind of enveloped what was left of the Japanese force there. But they were, it wasn’t really a very—we didn’t take very many casualties right there. There were some casualties down by the beach when the Japs brought a bomber in and hit our ammunition dump. That was a great explosion there and quite a few soldiers were killed down there on the beach because of that. But you might call it kind of an accident of war that they just happened to get real lucky and hit that ammo dump.

LC: Yeah. I was going to ask about air cover and if there were any Japanese aircraft?

WL: We didn’t see any; I didn’t see any Japanese aircraft in that whole Hollandia operation. Now, I know there was one because they hit that ammo dump but I didn’t see any. I saw some later but not in this operation. So it was a pretty easy run for us. There was a good training experience. We had a lot of hard marching but not much action.

LC: Well, as you note, a very physically demanding environment to try to get anything done really. You mentioned water supplies. I just want to ask about that. How, when it worked, did the supply system function?

WL: Well, in our experience, the terrain we were in, virtually everything had to be handled by hand. I know that on that march towards Sentani they brought up a couple of vehicles and they said, “Here, you can put your guns in these trucks.” In fact, they might have belonged to us, I don’t know. “You don’t have to carry them any further.” So we just walked along with the trucks. Then we got to a point where the Japs had blown the road up. It was on a side of a hill. It was a cut on the side of a hill and they had cratered it and the road was down in the draw. There wasn’t any road left. So we went back and picked up our guns off the truck and carried them the rest of the way. Went around this roadblock. So everything was by hand and it was pretty tough. We had to carry our—we carry about three days rations in our packs, that was K-rations.

LC: For someone who doesn’t really know what those were can you just describe them?
WL: They were in a little box. One meal was in a small box, let’s say, about the size of a cigarette carton only not shaped that way. It would have a can of—the breakfast meal was a small can of, like a tuna fish can, about that size, of maybe chopped eggs, a fruit bar about the size of a Milky Way bar, small one. A pack of I think four cigarettes, a little pack of toilet paper. What else was in there? Matches, and that’s it. That’s breakfast. Oh, and some crackers, and that was breakfast. The lunch meal would use the other piece of can of cheese, some more crackers, maybe a piece of hard what they called tropical chocolate. That was chocolate that would not melt in the heat. Might have been some more cigarettes in that. The Army didn’t think there was anything wrong with smoking, obviously.

LC: Were you a smoker?
WL: Oh I was. I smoked a pipe then.
LC: Oh really?
WL: Yeah. Not very many soldiers did so when they issued pipe tobacco I usually had all the pipe tobacco I needed.
LC: I’ll bet.
WL: Yeah. There was chewing tobacco issued too for that matter for the guys that chewed. There were quite a few of those.
LC: So there’s a lot of bartering going on with that stuff I’ll bet.
WL: Some of them dipped snuff. They had little boxes of snuff that would come up. Dinner meal was, from the K-rations, was another can of usually maybe corned beef or some other, ham loaf. I don’t know what else. Oh, sometimes there was a little can of fruit like fruit cocktail sort of stuff. Those were K-rations. Oh, and a little packet of soluble what they called, now they call it instant coffee, called it soluble coffee. You’d heat up some water in your canteen cup and put it in there, taste like coffee. Or if you wanted it cold well there was a little packet of lemon powder. You could make ersatz lemonade.

LC: Were there any modifications to the kits because of the tropical heat?
WL: The only one I know about is the tropical chocolate.
LC: Okay. Salt tablets or anything like that?
WL: Salt tablets or anything? No, but they did issue us those. Yeah. They issued us salt tablets, and of course the Atabrine.

LC: Right. Did you have to take that, what, every week or—?

WL: I think that was a weekly thing and you had to line up and, of course if you’re in combat you couldn’t do this, but if you were in garrison, in the camp, why you’d line up in front of the first sergeant and he’d make sure that you swallowed it.

LC: Oh, I was going to ask you if anybody said, “You know what, I’m not taking that stuff?”

WL: Well, yeah.

LC: Probably.

WL: Soldiers will do that sort of stuff.

LC: Yeah, that’s right. Well, Colonel, thank you. Let’s take a break there.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today’s the twenty-fourth of August 2005. I am in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas and Bill is speaking to me by telephone from Virginia. Bill, we have been talking about your unit’s operations during World War II in the Hollandia area in New Guinea. Can you take the story on from the point at which we last discussed your unit’s actions?

WL: Yes. I try to recall now where we were. We moved—we being the Infantry, Infantry Division, and I was in Battalion. I was in Company M, which was the heavy weapons company. I was in the heavy machine gun platoon as an ammunition bearer for a 30 caliber water-cooled heavy machine gun and we were advancing. We advanced inland from our landing at Humboldt Bay. Humboldt Bay being the bay in which the town of Hollandia was situated. We moved, marched inland, and our advance took us about, as I recall now, about fifteen or sixteen miles on a rather good dirt road, laterite probably, road along a hill line over some hills, grassy hills. The jungle wasn’t very thick there. Most of it was grass. I think they call it a savanna type terrain. We got to a lake called Sentani, S-e-n-t-a-n-i. Lake Sentani was a rather large lake. I’m guessing it was about four or five miles long, maybe a mile wide, but that’s just a guess. I never saw a map of it. Japanese had two or three airfields there around Sentani. It was kind of a plain, and there were quite a few fighter aircraft and a few bombers still on the runways that had been destroyed by our pre-landing attacks by Air Force and Army Air Corps, I guess you called it. Perhaps some of the Navy aircraft had destroyed a lot of aircraft on the ground. The Japanese force that was located at Hollandia was largely a logistical element and they had escaped from Hollandia. They were going, let’s see, I try to get my orientation there. They must have been going generally south and east out of Hollandia to escape our attack. There were very few fighting forces, if any, there, that is infantry. Because MacArthur had bypassed some of the major Japanese forces in the attack on
Hollandia. Another division, the Infantry Division, had landed at Tanahmerah Bay. Tanahmerah, I think.

LC: I think you’re right.

WL: Tanahmerah Bay, and they had advanced inland from there. So we were actually doing an envelopment of the airfields at Sentani. Sometime within, I’d say, two or three days of our advance in there we joined with the lead elements of the Division. I think it was the Infantry Regiment, and joined up with them. I didn’t see them. Our battalion didn’t get into that area. I don’t know who did. We dug defensive positions around Tanahmerah Bay—or rather, excuse me, around Lake Sentani. There was one incident that I recall now. We had a soldier in our battalion in one of the machine gun squads, not in my squad, who when he had a chance he liked to hunt for souvenirs. He went into a small hut where there were some Japanese stores of some kind, I don’t know what, and he was searching around in there. He saw some movement at the back of the hut and without checking to see what it was he fired his carbine and killed an American soldier right there. That was a rather disturbing event.

LC: You had mentioned earlier that there was a friendly fire incident with the Navy offshore guys.

WL: Oh yeah. That was against our I Company. Our I Company had landed on a small island in Humboldt Bay that apparently had a Japanese machine gun or maybe an anti-aircraft position on it. They landed there to reduce that threat to our landing and during that advance across that very small island the Navy air support came in and strafed on the island and killed I think it was upwards of twenty, twenty-five soldiers from I Company. I Company apparently had not put out any identification symbols. We carried usually some panels of very bright colored panels that we were supposed to put on the terrain to show where our forward elements were. Whether or not they did that I don’t know. The story we got is that they didn’t do that and the Navy couldn’t see them.

LC: Were they reflective or—?

WL: Well, bright colored. They were kind of a plastic material. They were very bright. Yeah.

LC: Wow. Bill, just stopping right there for a moment, how did you and the other men that you were serving with process or react to news like the hitting of I Company
and the obviously accidental, shooting of one soldier, American soldier, by another? Did
you just kind of take it in stride or—?

WL: Oh yeah, especially the air attack and so on. That’s just one of those things.

It happens quite frequently, well, frequently.

LC: But when it does happen—

WL: I mean it’s just part of the drill. That’s what happens. There was another
incident, skipping ahead to Biak, where a Navy destroyer offshore giving support to one
of the units from a different, I think in the Regiment. They fired into a cave, there were
a lot of caves on the seashore, and they hit, there was an element, a platoon, of 162 going
into that cave and they fired into the cave. I mean that’s just—we expected that. We
didn’t like it but there was—when you’re using high explosives somebody’s going to get
hurt. But the shooting of the other soldier, we were pretty well upset with this guy that
did it. He was kind of a jerk anyway.

LC: Was he? How did you know he was a jerk?

WL: Because he acted like one. He was just a—

LC: Was he sort of a hothead or—?

WL: Yeah, and not very bright. Well, when we got to Zamboanga—this is
skipping ahead, you know, way ahead of it into now—there was a Moro prostitute who
set up her business in a grass hut on stilts. A lot of the Moro buildings, houses, around
Zamboanga were on stilts and she had her business up there. There was quite a long line
of soldiers waiting to see her and Luna was one of them. He got up there with her and he
decided that he’d fallen in love and she belonged to him and wasn’t going to let anybody
else in. Well, there were some soldiers that took exception to that. One of them climbed
up there and threw Luna out through the wall of the place. The walls are just made of
grass or probably palm leaves. He went out and he landed I guess it was about ten feet
above the terrain and he landed pretty hard and broke his arm. We figured he kind of
deserved that.

LC: No one felt too bad for him, huh?

WL: Anyway.

LC: Well, you were saying that you had, your platoon had dug in there around the
lake and how long did you actually remain in that position?
WL: I would say we were not there for more than ten days at the most, and then we made a night march back from Sentani to the beach. One good thing about that march as I remember it is that they let us put our guns and our ammunition on trucks so we didn’t have to carry them all the way back. That gun and the ammo is pretty heavy so it was a good deal that we did. We marched all night. We made that night march. We made it all the way back to the beach in one night. That doesn’t measure up to the way the Union Army and the Confederates marched during the Civil War but—

LC: You were still going pretty good clip though. That was fifteen miles.

WL: Yeah. It was a pretty good march. We got down to the beach and bivouacked right there on the beach at Humboldt Bay. The only thing I remember that was significant about that is that we just, I don’t remember. I don’t believe we dug holes. It was pretty hard to dig a hole on a sandy beach, tend to collapse on you. But we stayed there on the beach, pitched ponchos for the weather, the heat of the day and the rain. It wasn’t bad. I recall that we wore leggings. I don’t know if—

LC: Go ahead and explain what those are.

WL: Well, leggings were a canvas, were out of canvas, and they had a strap that went under the boot and you laced them on the outside. They went up over your calf, not quite to the knee, and then you bloused your trousers into those leggings.

LC: Can you explain what the purpose of them was?

WL: Well, it was to keep your trousers from catching on thorns and getting torn and wet and to keep insects off your ankles and from climbing up your pants legs, things like that. I recall sleeping one night there and of course take my leggings off at night and a crab called up my leg and got clear up into my thigh before I woke. That was a startling event. Shaking that crab out of my pants leg. Of course I didn’t know what it was.

LC: But that was one of the hazards of being in this tropical environment.

WL: Yeah. It was interesting. But we were there only two or three days as I recall, and then we loaded up on a, let’s see. What kind of a ship I was on? I think M Company—K Company. I was attached to K Company. My machine gun squad was attached to, in fact the machine gun section of two guns, was attached to K Company.

LC: Now, when you say attached you mean you traveled with them?
WL: Yeah. We were with them all the while. We moved with them, we dug in with them. In other words, we took our orders from this rifle company commander, from K Company. That was the standard procedure for heavy machine guns sections. In a heavy weapons company there were four sections. Each platoon had two sections and the standard employment of heavy machine guns was to attach one section to each of the three rifle companies of the battalion and the other section remained with battalion Headquarters Company. My platoon was attached to—we were in the platoon. One section was attached to I Company and my section was always attached to K Company.

LC: And K Company was a rifle company?

WL: Rifle company. Right. We moved with and dug in with the rifle company at all times. So when we went on landing ship infantry, why, we went in with K Company. One LSI I remembered would carry about two hundred troops. It was about what a rifle company at normal strength would be with an attached platoon of, with an attached section of heavy machine guns, was about two hundred men and that’s what was on a landing ship infantry. So we got on the LSI and then we went to, we sailed overnight up the coast of New Guinea to Biak, and that’s where we went in. Our next landing was at Biak.

LC: Now, I’m sorry. I don’t know. Is Biak a bay? Is it an island?

WL: Biak is one of the Schouten Islands. A lot of the names up there, as you probably know, are Dutch because this was—we’re talking about the Dutch East Indies now. That’s why Hollandia had that name.

LC: Yeah. That’s right. Can you give a point of reference, for example, from—?

WL: It’s in what they call Geelvink Bay. I can’t—Geelvink. We’ll spell it phonetically. I don’t know. G-e-l—

LC: We’ll have someone look it up. How’s that?

WL: Geelvink Bay. A lot of names there are German too. I think Germans had some of the territory because they called that end of New Guinea, what did they call it?

LC: West Irian?

WL: [Irian Barat], Vogelkop, Bird’s Head, Vogelkop Peninsula. Geelvink Bay is formed by that peninsula. It goes out northwest into the rest of Indonesia, and Biak
Island is one of the Islands of the Schouten Islands in Geelvink Bay. The other island is Japen, J-a-p-e-n, I believe. (Editor’s note: Yapen) Biak was spelled B-i-a-k.

LC: I’m just actually looking at a map now and Biak lies just almost right on the equator.

WL: Yes.

LC: So that gives a sense of what kind of—was it a mountainous island? Did it rise up quickly?

WL: No. There were no mountains on it. It is largely made of coral and limestone. That’s what it is. It’s coral and limestone. It had a very dense and tall rainforest on the ridges. It’s just kind of one ridge after another with a rather high plateau in the center. The beach on the side that we went in—I’m trying to think of which side, that would have been the north side—there was a very small island that was called Owi, O-w-i, which was just off the shore of Biak. It probably doesn’t appear on the map. The beach was very, very narrow. There was hardly any beach at all. A cliff rises within about fifty yards of the shore. That cliff had some trails on it you could climb and get up to the top, but that’s where we landed on that. That cliff was pocked with caves. The Japanese had withdrawn from the beach. The Navy put in a very, very heavy bombardment of the island before we landed. The Japs took refuge in their caves, which gave them very good protection, and there were some other caves just back behind the beach which were very, very deep and had been developed by the Japanese as storage areas and defensive positions. They put artillery pieces [inside] of some of these caves and they could pull the guns out and fire it then pull them back in where they were protected from anything but a direct hit. They were protected against bombing too.

Bombs didn’t bother them a bit. Any case, we went in, in the first wave. There was no opposition on the beach. There was no enemy fire against us as we landed. We actually landed on a jetty, a stone jetty that came out into this bay. The ship went right in and dropped its—kind of a ladder that you’d get off the ship on and right onto the jetty. Didn’t get our feet wet. The only problem we faced on the landing and that wasn’t my problem because I was still a private and it wasn’t my problem to sort this one out. But we were supposed to land on the right of the Regiment. The Infantry Division had three regiments. The Regiment, the , and the . I was in 186. We were at this time—the 163
was on a separate operation as a regimental combat team. I can’t remember the name right now of the island they landed on but they were on a separate operation. So we had only two regiments of the division on the Biak landing. The was to land on our left and we were on the right but somehow they got that mixed up and the 162 landed on our right. So rather than change the plans of who was going to do what the division commander elected to have the 162 move from the right to the left on the beach. They marched right through us. If this had been an opposed landing we would have been in pretty deep trouble because you don’t countermarch troops up and down a beach.

LC: No. Anyone visualizing, for example, Normandy beach would instantly get your point.

WL: Yeah. But in any case it worked out all right in the event because there was no opposition on the beach. I mean no immediate opposition. We moved up a trail onto the top of this ridge overlooking the bay and we began to dig in as quickly as we could. It was very difficult digging there because you’re on, there’s very little soil. It’s rock that is limestone and coral. L-o-e-s-s. You know, that earth is moved around the South Pacific by the winds. It’s picked up and carried by the monsoons and dropped on these islands. That’s about all the earth they have. Of course, it happens over centuries so there’s a little bit of dirt there.

LC: Right. But it didn’t yield very easily under a shovel, I’m sure.

WL: Very difficult to dig in, but we dug as well as we could. I would say within about an hour or two after we got up onto that ridge to dig the Japanese launched an air attack and there were something like, we counted about twenty-one Japanese aircraft. They were light bombers, medium bombers, I would say. They called them Betties, twin engine airplane, about quite a bit similar to our B-25 and a lot of fighters. They came and strafed and bombed on our ridge. One of our gunners, our gunner, tried to fire back with the machine gun but that was more just for dramatic effect if anything else. He couldn’t possibly hit anybody; hit an airplane, with that gun. Anyway, they came in low and they did drop a bomb on where our kitchen was setting up and they killed, I don’t know, three of our cooks and the mess sergeant. Later on I was part of the detail to bury those guys right there virtually where they were killed. Of course those graves were later picked up by our graves registration and they were moved somewhere else. But that those were our
first casualties there. Those airplanes, nearly all of them were shot down by anti-aircraft
in the bay, our anti-aircraft. By this time of course there were quite a few Navy ships
with their anti-aircraft guns and we had quite a few on the beach by this time, Army twin
40 mm guns and quad 50s and other guns. We saw quite a few Japanese airplanes get
shot down there.

LC: What was it like to actually see them coming at you knowing, I mean—?
WL: Well, it was our first experience in getting an air attack and it was pretty
exciting. Weren’t too afraid because I mean as an individual you know that he’s not
really shooting at you. He’s shooting at a whole bunch of people and your chances of
getting hit are rather small as an individual. But of course they did hit our kitchen and
from then on we had trouble with—of course, being attached to the K Company didn’t
have to worry about getting fed because K Company had to feed us anyway. Most of the
time we were on combat rations anyway. There were very few times that we ever used
our kitchen and got hot meals. I remember about the time the aircraft came in, this attack
came in, I had gone to a, there was a well on that ridge with a pool of water in it. I went
down there with a helmet to get some water for the rest of the guys. About that time the
aircraft came in so I took refuge in a hole and there was a black soldier there. You know,
we didn’t have black soldiers in the infantry, not in the Division. It was a segregated
Army and there were no black soldiers in the whole division but there quite a few black
soldiers in Stevedore units. They were unloading ships and this soldier, he had come up
for the same purpose, to get some water from the beach and he said, “I’d done seen it in
the movies but this is the first time I’d done seen it personal.” He was talking about the
air attack. I thought that was pretty funny. It was the first time I had seen it personally
too. It was funny. Let’s see, what else happened on that ridge? Not much else happened
on the ridge. About the same time that we were there though the was running into some
very serious problems. They had moved east on the beach and there was a defile. That
is, the beach almost disappeared. You were walking and if you wanted to keep on
moving you were almost in the bay. I believe they call it the Pirai Defile, P-i-r-a-i. The
Japanese moved a force in behind the lead battalion, cut them off, and they had a very
serious fight there for several hours. In fact all night I think; took some heavy casualties.
We were lucky. We were up there on the ridge and we didn’t get attacked immediately.
The next day we moved out towards the next ridge over. The idea, the strategy there was like I say, the tactic was to move the up the beach towards what they called Mokmer, M-o-k-m-e-r, Aerodrome. That was the main airfield the Japanese, this was a large airfield. The runways in that area were made of crushed coral, which is a very solid surface once it’s put down. The 162, the , was to move up that way up the beach and we were to envelope this by moving inland, moving around the Japanese caves, and coming down on the beach from above, down on the airfield. That was the strategy.

LC: Okay. Mokmer’s on the far eastern end of the island.

WL: Well, east-west was just about in the center. It wasn’t all the way to the end but it was very close to the beach. It was on the beach actually.

LC: Did the have the job of trying to get into those caves and get—?

WL: Later on we did. Yeah. But at this point we were just moving inland.

LC: Right. With the objective of—?

WL: The objective was to envelope, to go around those caves and come down on the beach from the ridge above. It’s hard to—

LC: To control the airfield?

WL: Yeah.

LC: To get control of the airfield?

WL: The objective of the entire operation was to seize that airfield. In fact that was really, in my view, the objective of almost every landing that we made in the Pacific theater. This includes the Marines in the center going up the central Pacific, was to seize airfields. Once you got the airfield then you could give protection to additional landings as you kept on going. Of course our ultimate objective was the Philippines. That’s what MacArthur’s strategy was. That was the strategy of the entire war there in the Pacific was to—one arm was to go up into the Philippines and the other arm would go up the center of the Pacific and towards Japan itself. I don’t know. They had to have contingencies for, and take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. Such as there was a discussion much later on whether we would go into what they called then Formosa, Formosa was Taiwan, or go into China or go into Japan directly. There was quite a discussion on which one of those objectives would be feasible.
LC: I hope that after we deal more with your own experience that you’ll give us your insights on how you think the strategy worked. So, I’d very much like to talk to you about the issues at that level as well.

WL: Well, understand that what I know about the strategies of the war is what I read about later. Again I was a private. It took me almost two years to make PFC so I wasn’t in on the—

LC: Right now you’re stranded up on a ridge somewhere trying to—and I think everyone will appreciate that, on the other hand.

WL: Right. I had to survive and get something to eat now and then and enough water to keep from perishing. That was my purpose.

LC: Your central motivation.

WL: Anyway, we moved off the ridge and we moved inland, perhaps not very far. I’m trying to think about, maybe a mile or two we moved and we bivouacked, well we set in a defensive position on another very broad ridge and tried to dig in. It was impossible to dig. Actually it was impossible. Could not dig the gun in, could not dig in anywhere. Managed to dislodge some chunks of coral and tried to build a little parapet around myself and around the gun and so on. But we had no protection at all from anything that night and we were attacked by apparently about a company of Japanese, what we called Japanese Imperial Marines. The thing I remember mostly about that is that it was almost impossible to defend against them because they got inside our perimeter. If you started throwing grenades the chances were great that you’d kill some of your own folks because these guys were inside and you could barely see them. It was a black dark night. You could see these people running around and a few of them, I didn’t get a shot at any of them. They were moving too fast. There was a lot of yelling, “Banzai,” yelling. It was very, very scary because it was, again, we didn’t have foxholes. Everybody was on top of the ground. These guys running around in the middle of the perimeter shooting was kind of scary.

LC: Could you tell what direction the attack was coming from or did it seem to multi-directional?

WL: In the midst of us.

LC: They just appeared?
WL: Yeah. But quite a few of them were killed and we had almost no casualties. K Company might have lost two or three. We didn’t lose anybody in our machine gun squad. Most of the attacks seemed to be on the other side of the perimeter, not on the side I was on. I was very lucky.

LC: How did it come about that they suffered so much more heavily in terms of casualties?

WL: Oh because they were running around and our folks, our infantry soldiers, were on the ground and looking at them and not moving. You know, they were moving around. You could see them in the shadows. A little bit of, perhaps a little bit of moonlight. You could see enough so that you could hit them.

LC: You’d get a shot off or—? Was there hand-to-hand combat? Do you know?

WL: There might have been but I don’t think so though.

LC: Okay. Yeah. It sounds pretty frightening.

WL: Yeah. It was my first experience with that close in combat anyway. It was really scary, but by dawn that was all gone. In getting up and starting to move around saw quite a few bodies, and these were big Japs. The Japanese we’d seen at Hollandia, we captured a few, were little scrawny little fellows. But these were some pretty big guys and the word got was that they were Marines. What had happened, and I don’t know whether these were part of the forces the Japanese landed but the Japanese did reinforce at Biak. They moved a destroyer, at least one destroyer, in on the north side of the island, on the opposite side that we were on, and reinforced with one hundred or two hundred—I’ve read the account of it and I can’t recall now, but they did reinforce in Biak. They got through our Navy screen and landed some folks and these Marines might have been part of that force.

LC: When you say they were that these guys were larger, physically larger—?

WL: Five ten, six foot.

LC: Really?

WL: Big guys.

LC: Do you remember anything about their equipment? I mean did you see many of them in the morning?

WL: Oh yeah. Yeah.
LC: What were they carrying? Do you remember?

WL: Well, they were carrying their cartridge belts and their rifles, bayonets—I don’t recall if they had any, were carrying any packs. They were probably dropped their packs before they made the attack, and their canteens. Officers had swords and pistols. Soldiers had their rifles and bayonets. Just ordinary. They had their helmets. They had a round kind of a helmet shaped like a pot like we did only they were smaller.

LC: Do you have any sense of why they wouldn’t have used, for example, explosives? I mean the fact that they could get in that close to the Americans; maybe they didn’t know how close they were. I’m not sure.

WL: They knew where we were. Why they didn’t use grenades you mean? Well, they did use grenades. They were throwing grenades around.

LC: They were. Okay.

WL: I don’t recall that they used any mortars. They may have. There was an awful lot of noise and it’s hard to tell what’s going on but—

LC: Yeah. The confusion and—

WL: They didn’t use any artillery possibly because they didn’t have any in range because they could have hit us in that spot. We didn’t have any artillery support either at that time because again we were up on a ridge and I don’t know where our direct support battery was but it wasn’t employed there. Possibly couldn’t get the range.

LC: Well, as you say, it does sound like you were pretty fortunate in just the distribution of where the firing and exchanges took place.

WL: So the next day we started marching for this envelopment and the temperature probably was around 120, something like that. I think about these poor guys in the Iraq now where the temperature is in the 120s. The fact that they have to carry all their gear and they have to wear their protective vests and all that stuff and I just wonder how they make it because we didn’t have any protective vest to wear. At least we didn’t have that to carry. We had a heavy load but we didn’t have to carry blankets or anything like that. Our packs, we carried a poncho, we carried extra ammunition for our—as an ammunition handler my basic [load] was the carbine, a 30 caliber carbine. The gunners, the first and second gunners, carried pistols, 45 caliber pistols, because their hands were—they couldn’t carry a rifle. We carried extra ammunition for that. Everybody
carried at least two hand grenades. Carried your shaving kit. What else? Usually a days
rations. That would’ve been in our operation there in Biak we carried K-rations. Are you
familiar with that?

LC: Go ahead and tell us. I think you might have mentioned some of the details.
WL: Three meals. There’s a breakfast, a lunch, and a dinner meal in a K-ration,
and the K ration came in a small box kind of like a child’s pencil box. It’s about that
size. The breakfast meal you had a small can, about like the size of a tuna fish can, small
can of tuna fish, and that was called scrambled eggs was in that. Had a can of biscuits
about the same size as the can. There was something like a fruit bar I believe. There was
a little pack of toilet paper, a pack of matches; I think there was a pack of cigarettes, four
or five cigarettes in a pack, and what else? That was about it, as I remember, in the
breakfast meal, and that was in a cardboard, like I said little cardboard box. Inside the
cardboard there was—oh, there was also a packet of soluble coffee. Called it soluble,
now they call it instant, but they called it soluble coffee. Anyway, a little packet of that.

LC: You were going to say inside the cardboard—?
WL: Inside the cardboard there was a wax paper box. The wax paper was useful
because you could tear that into little strips and it would burn for a long time and you
would heat your coffee, your water, in your mess cup, which was made of aluminum.
After the war started they made it out of some cheap kind of pot metal and it wasn’t as
nice as aluminum, but anyway that doesn’t matter. You’d heat your water over this little
cardboard fire that you had, the wax cardboard fire, and get it hot enough to at least get it
warm. Then you could dissolve your soluble coffee in that and you’d have a cup of
coffee for the morning. That was your morning meal. Then you had the lunch meal.
Let’s see, what’d they put in that? Usually some kind of a meat of some kind. It might
have been kind of like a Spam or a meatloaf, something like that, and another can of
 crackers of some sort. Again the usual, the cigarettes and the—you know, they didn’t
worry about giving everybody cancer.

LC: Right. That wasn’t the concern.
WL: Was no concern.
LC: About how—I mean just if you have to guess, Bill, I’m sure you’re up on these things now. Can you guess how many calories they were giving you in the course of a day?

WL: Gee, I don’t know. I don’t keep track of calories.

LC: You don’t have to bother with that?

WL: No.

LC: You’re very lucky.

WL: Well, I probably should but I’m not much overweight. That was the lunch meal. Oh, then the lunch meal you got what they called tropical chocolate. This was a chocolate bar that would not melt. In fact I’m not sure it digested once you ate it. I don’t know what happened to it. But you could put it out in the sun, it wouldn’t melt. Tropical chocolate.

LC: That’s a little frightening really.

WL: Yeah. What else was in that? Let’s see—yeah. That was the lunch meal. Oh, they also had a pack of lemon powder. You would dissolve in your water if you wanted to and it would make you lemonade. It was kind of an acidic tasting stuff but—and I don’t know what the purpose was but I’m just assuming you drink the water. Then the evening meal was about the same. Another can of some kind of meat. Oh no, let’s see. Maybe it was the lunch meal was this can of cheese. That’s what it was. The dinner meal was a can of meat of some sort. That was it. So, that was the K-ration. You would get that and most of us would take this thing all apart as soon as they issue it to us and get rid of any extra weight. Anything you didn’t want to eat or use you could give it to somebody or throw it away. Wouldn’t carry anything extra because you want to be as light as you could.

LC: Just to review for a second, you might have mentioned this last time, but you were actually carrying cans of ammunition for the rifle?

WL: For the machine gun.

LC: Sorry, I’m sorry, the machine gun. How much did those weigh?

WL: Each can weighed twenty-five pounds. Each can of 30 caliber machine gun ammunition had 250 rounds in it. Each ammunition handler carried two cans or he’d carry one can and something else. Now, this time, let’s see, I was number four in the
squad so I carried the tool kit and one can of ammunition. The tool kit weighs about
twenty-five pounds too and it had an extra bolt, an extra bolt extension, I think I had an
extra barrel strapped onto it. There was a hammer and then there was some other stuff in
that box that the machine gunner or the squad leader insisted that I would carry in that. It
was a rather large tin or metal box with a handle on it. Unfortunately the handle broke
and I had to use a—I borrowed some bandage from the medic and had to make my own
handle. That was very hard to carry that thing with that cloth handle. It made huge
blisters on my hand. I got blisters on my other hand too and a lot of—another thing we
ran into there on Biak and trying to dig in that coral. The coral would fly up and chip, in
chips, and almost everybody had bloody knuckles from that stuff coming up and chipping
you. The problem there is a lot of sores like that did not heal quickly. They developed
ulcers. I didn’t have any trouble with ulcers but a lot of soldiers did. They called them
tropical ulcers. Just sores usually from some cut or a bruise or something would fester
into a huge boil. It was quite serious.

LC: Getting infected and so on?

WL: Getting infected.

LC: What about illnesses just while we’re talking about this kind of stuff. I
mean—

WL: On Biak?

LC: Yeah. I mean were guys, you know—this is just, you know, the reality of it
I’m sure.

WL: There were many more casualties from illnesses than there were from
gunfire shots there. In Biak there was a serious typhus infestation. They called it scrub
typhus. They set up a hospital, the Army set up a hospital on this island offshore called
Owi. They discovered after they put it up that Owi was particularly badly infested with
these ticks, mites, that spread the typhus. So a poor soldier would get wounded on Biak,
get shipped over to the evacuation hospital on Biak and then contract typhus while he
was there waiting for transport out. It was really pretty sad. Typhus was a big problem
there. Malaria was pretty, by this time in the Pacific, in our theater, was pretty well under
control. Some guys got it. We took a prophylactic for that, Atabrine.

LC: Did that make you sick or did it make anyone sick? Do you remember?
WL: Yeah. It was a little bit. Some people reacted more to it than others, and I never had great problem. A little bit of stomach upset but it would be rather temporary. The main effect that it had was visual. I mean you turned yellow. Your skin turned yellow and your eyeballs turned yellow, and that was a problem mainly because you couldn’t tell whether you had jaundice or not. I mean jaundice was, again, almost of epidemic proportions in this part of the Pacific. Hepatitis—I’ll tell you about that later. I got hepatitis there but it was a serious problem. The other disease that was quite prevalent was Dengue fever, which is very similar to malaria. It’s spread by mosquitoes also. But by this time in the war we had pretty well controlled Dengue in at least where I was.

LC: By doing what?

WL: Well, by spraying DDT around.

LC: Did they give you any kind of, sort of personal bug repellent that you carried with you?

WL: Oh yeah! Yeah. We had mosquito repellent; kind of an oily—same that’s used now I suppose. You’d put that on all the time, keep that on you, and that would protect you pretty well against mosquitoes.

LC: Okay. Bill, go ahead and tell me what happened next as the was moving across the island towards the aerodrome.

WL: Okay. As we started moving that next morning after that first attack by the Japanese Marines we only went about maybe a mile and we came under attack on the right flank. We put our gun in action, that is we put it down because we were being attacked from that side. But the K Company was on that side so we couldn’t fire. It was just probably a couple of Japanese scouts that were keeping track of us that caused the firing on that flank. It was no serious attack so we kept moving. There was just a very narrow trail and we moved through some very heavy brush and overgrown forest. It was very difficult to move because of the vines, very dense forest. We got some rain. That was good because the water—we didn’t have enough water. Everybody was carrying two canteens. But by mid-morning your canteens were virtually dry. Temperature was very hot. I remember filling one canteen from a puddle in the road on the trail, muddy water. But we had tablets to drop into the water. It was supposed to kill all—
LC: Was there a plan for supplying water to the units in the field?

WL: Yeah there was a plan but it didn’t work very well. One battalion was apparently detailed to follow us and carry water behind us because they couldn’t get any vehicles. We didn’t have any vehicles at all to follow us up that trail. So one battalion or a company at least was supposed to be carrying five gallon cans of water behind us, but they didn’t reach us. So we got to a very steep ridge we had to climb, and this was later in the—it must have been around four or five o’clock we got to this ridge. Everybody was very tired. In fact I could recall that I never felt so tired in my life and was probably because of dehydration along with the heat. It just took everything out of you. I had to climb hand over hand up this cliff to the top of the ridge. Now to climb hand over hand when you’ve got both hands full—a machine gun box of ammunition box in one hand and another box of tools in the other. The poor guy carrying the tripod. He had both hands on the tripod and that weighed fifty-four pounds and he was trying to get up the hill. That’s the number one man. The number two guy trying to carry that gun up, it’s very difficult. I remember that our platoon leader, Lieutenant Fisher, was a very good guy and he was up there at the top giving everybody a hand. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up that last step up because I just practically couldn’t hardly move. My legs were so aching, but he helped me up and I got up to the top along with everybody else.

LC: What kind of a guy was he?

WL: He was very well educated fellow. Very quiet and in thinking about it later I figured he was kind of wasted in that job. There wasn’t much for him to do. Our machine gun section as I say was attached to K Company. We got our orders from the K Company commander. There wasn’t much for Lieutenant Fisher to do. I used to have some pretty good talks with him at night when everything had quieted down.

LC: Where was he from Bill?

WL: He’s from the East somewhere. Can’t recall.

LC: But you, thinking back on it, felt he—?

WL: Well, I felt that he was smart enough and was a good enough officer that he should have been leading the rifle platoon or commanding a company rather than just watching us dig the holes for the machine gun.
LC: Well, that climb up sounds pretty miserable. Were there guys who, I don’t
know, didn’t want to do it?
WL: None as far as I know.
LC: Everybody made it?
WL: Yeah. We got up to the top and dug the gun in as best we could. There were
a lot of holes up there, just natural cavities in the ridge; a lot of it very big trees. The
Squad they had actually drank the water out of their water jacket of their gun. We didn’t
do that. We were a little bit better disciplined.
LC: Just to clarify the water jacket was—?
WL: Well, the heavy machine gun was water-cooled. The barrel was surrounded
by water and you had to keep that—they called it the water jacket. It was a big tube, it
was on both ends, through which the barrel went and there was a gland in the front that
would keep the water from leaking out. There was a hose that you attached to the bottom
that would condense the water because you didn’t want a lot of steam coming out of this
thing when you were firing it. So you had a tube that went back into the water can. The
number three man carried the water can for it was supposed to be to condense the steam
as it came out of this tube. You’d drop it into the water can into a—and you also used
that water to replenish the supply of the water in the water jacket of the gun.
LC: Which was critical to its functioning.
WL: Yeah. Right. If you didn’t have water in it you couldn’t fire very many
rounds because it was a light barrel and it would get red hot.
LC: That’d be the end of that.
WL: That’d be the end of the barrel. So you had to keep that water jacket full.
First Squad decided that they wanted to drink that water, which was not smart, but that’s
what they did. Then in order to keep the gun cooled they used urine to put into the water
jacket. Now, that messed it up for all time.
LC: Why was that?
WL: Well, when urine boils it makes a terrible smell. Not only that but they
could never put—if they ever wanted to drink water out of that again why you’d probably
wouldn’t want to do that. But anyway that was a dumb thing for them to do. We didn’t
do that.
LC: But you mentioned that it had rained so you guys were in luck in a way.

WL: Yeah because the big trees, you could catch water coming off these huge leaves and spread a poncho out and catch water and refill your canteens with that because we still didn’t get any water. That was an entire day. In the tropics they say, I think, that a man has to drink about five gallons a day. So, we didn’t have any. The next morning we got the orders to march down to the airfield. You could see the airfield from where we were. I guess it was about maybe a mile away, maybe longer. So, that next morning we packed up and started down. We got down to the airfield—it was a flat, naturally a flat plain—marching through great tall grass and shrub. Got down to the airfield and started to dig. Again, it was very difficult but there was some soil there. We got down; we got the gun down maybe two feet down and kept digging. You never quit digging until you get as far down deep as you possibly can, and then the Japanese started shelling us. You know, they had quite a few cannons up on the ridge. They pulled them out of their caves and gave us a pretty good concentration of medium and heavy artillery. Jensen in the Squad was hit first in the face with a big shard. Stuff was flying all over the place and of course we were still digging like mad, trying to get down below the surface. My platoon sergeant, Abe Hathaway, he got hit in the butt, a pretty good lick. A couple of other guys got hit, but nobody in my squad got hit. Let’s see, the instrument corporal of M Company, a guy named Schroeder; he was the only other fellow in the company, enlisted man in the company that had any education. I think Schroeder had a degree in math or something. He was a corporal. He set up all six of the 81 mm mortars virtually by himself. While everybody else was digging he was walking around setting up the mortars, which is a big job. It’s hard to set up an 81 mm mortar by yourself, pretty heavy job. But he did it, and I think they decorated him for that. He should have gotten something for it.

LC: Now, this is while the fire’s taking place or—?

WL: Yeah, while artillery was coming in.

LC: Wow. What about the guys who had taken pretty serious wounds?

WL: Well, we had a company medic and he patched, I guess he must have patched up Jensen and he probably patched up Sergeant Hathaway too.

LC: Did he have anywhere to relocate them such that they were out of fire?
WL: I’m sure that by this time they were setting up the battalion headquarters and
the battalion aid station down on the beach. There was another escarpment, a cliff, below
the airfield that went down to the beach and they had some protection from direct fire
down there. So they set up the battalion headquarters down behind that cliff and I’m sure
they had a little battalion aid station with a battalion surgeon down there. I don’t know, I
never got down there. I stayed up there with the gun.

LC: So the shelling is proceeding and at least you guys have your mortars set up?
WL: Yeah. We got the mortars set up and the Japanese did not follow this up
with a ground attack. They didn’t come in. We could have pretty well taken care of
them if they had. By this time, of course, we still had naval gunfire supporting us. We
had some destroyers and I think there was a cruiser out there that fired counter battery
fire against the Japanese guns that were up on the ridge. But it was very difficult for
them to hit anything up there because of the caves. The visibility, you couldn’t see where
the firing was coming from very well. At night the Japs sent over an observation
airplane. But I don’t what they could see much at night. You didn’t have any lights or
anything, but every night there was a Japanese observation plane. We had our own
artillery forward observers were beginning to come into the airfield with their little
airplanes and giving some observation for their artillery. I’m sure by this time, although I
didn’t see them, we had our direct support artillery battalion in and at least on the beach
somewhere where they could fire in support of us. So we could have handled the
Japanese ground attack but we didn’t get one. That firing, I don’t know how long that
artillery concentration lasted. Maybe a couple of hours at the most, and we just kept
digging. So we had the airfield but we didn’t have the ridges above it. So until we got
those ridges under control they couldn’t use the airfield because the Japanese could still
fire on it from up on the ridges with their artillery. So the next mission was to go back up
into the ridges and dig the Japanese out of those caves so that they could begin using the
airfield. That was the rest of the campaign was where we moved back up into the ridges
and dug the Japs out. That’s what we did next.

LC: Well, Bill, can you recall some of those operations and how they unfolded
because I think this is of extraordinary interest. This was so important, this kind of
warfare very important, for big policy questions later on, certainly.
WL: Later, probably in a day or so, the Army managed to land at least a company of M4 tanks, the Sherman tanks, mounting a 75 mm gun. They came ashore and they had what has been described as the first tank battle of the Pacific war. I’m not sure that’s accurate but it could’ve been. The Japanese had some light tanks there. They called them light tanks. It was hardly more than a gun carrier. They were very lightly armored. I think they carried a 37 or a 40 mm cannon on them, which could not do any significant damage to a Sherman tank. These Japanese tanks started down a trail. It went from the top of the ridge, started down against the battalion of the, it was close to the beach there. But by this time there were three or four of the Shermans that had got ashore to help support this battalion of the 162. The Japanese came down in a column and these Shermans just knocked them to pieces as they came down.

LC: Did you see that?

WL: No. I saw the remains of it later when the battle was over and you could get back down to the beach. Saw the remains of these Jap tanks. The turrets knocked off, some of them were upside down. They were a mess. But there was no damage, no significant damage, to any of the American tanks. It was a very unequal contest between a little lightly armored gun carrier that they called a tank. It was a tracked vehicle but it was a very simple little—

LC: But it had very light armor you would say.

WL: Yeah. Probably no more than a half inch armor plate. Seventy-five millimeter round would go through it and come out the other side. So we started the attack and we had a couple of tanks with us. I remember I was walking behind one with my ammunition and with the machine gun and we got some fire. It was not an intense attack. There were some machine guns off to the right and some rifle fire with rounds bouncing off of the tanks. That was kind of disconcerting because these ricochets were flying around and you didn’t know where they were coming from. But we kept on moving. We moved up to a ridge and dug in. Again, it was very hard climb. The tanks of course couldn’t come with us up there. Again, still with K Company. We dug in on a ridge and here we had some really good dirt to dig in. Unusual. We got the gun down to where it should be. My position was just to the right and behind the gun with the ammunition. I think, yeah, I was still number four. I think I still had the tool kit. I was
in this hole with my buddy named Kangaroo Jack Short. Kangaroo Jack was from
somewhere in the South, South Carolina or somewhere. He was a good old boy, a nice
guy, and he didn’t like to wear his steel helmet. He said it gave him a headache. Which
was kind of funny. He wore his cloth cap, he took his helmet off all the time and put his
cloth cap on. The first night we were there we got under a pretty heavy mortar attack,
both medium and light mortars in on our position. The Japanese light mortar was really
more accurately called a grenade launcher. But it was called a knee mortar in the Pacific,
mistakenly.

   LC: A knee mortar?

   WL: K-n-e-e. Because the base plate of the mortar—you are familiar what a
mortar looks like and how they’re used?

   LC: Sure. I am but go ahead and describe it for someone who might be listening.

   WL: It’s just a tube with a base plate on it and the base plate keeps the propellant
from driving the tube in to the earth. It stops it. A cannon has wheels, has a big carriage
on it, but a mortar just has a base plate. The way most of them are fired you drop the
round in the muzzle feet first as it were. It hits the bottom of the tube where there’s a
firing pin which ignites the propellant which drives the mortar round back up out of the
tube and that’s all there is to it. It’s very simple device. The Japanese knee mortar was
about forty, I think it was forty millimeters in diameter, was the diameter of the tube. A
40 mm. The base plate was curved and it looked like you would put it on your thigh to
fire it because this curved plate of steel would fit over your thigh. But that wasn’t the
way they did it. That would’ve been very—probably would have broken your femur.
Yeah, the force of the propellant would—

   LC: Not a good idea.

   WL: No.

   LC: Well, why was it curved like that then?

   WL: That’s how it got its name. That’s why people thought that Japanese put it
on their knee to fire it but actually they put it on the ground.

   LC: Why was it curved? Just for the physics of balancing it or something?

   WL: Yeah. They might have put it on a log and it would keep it from driving into
the ground, for strength too. A curved piece of metal has more strength than a flat one.
That’s probably why they did it. Anyway, the round was what we called spin stabilized. Most mortar rounds in the world are stabilized by fins. It looks like an aerial bomb. In fact the British called it a bomb and it’s fin stabilized. The fins keep it pointed in the right direction. The Japanese knee mortar was rotation stabilized like a rifle bullet. When the round comes out of the tube it’s spinning and that gives it stability in flight. So these were spin stabilized rounds. It didn’t have a fin on them. They had a long detonator on the end of them. They were rather small, about the size of a hand grenade; a little bit larger but not much, forty millimeters in diameter, and they’d fire those. We got a lot of those in on us. They weren’t a very effective round. They’d kill you if they exploded near you all right.

LC: About how near would it have to be for it to be a lethal hit? Eight feet?

WL: Five yards.

LC: Okay. Even more. Okay.

WL: It depends on where it hits you. The fragments were quite small. If they hit something it was on the way down, they tended to tumble. That is they wouldn’t maintain their direct flight and if they didn’t land on that detonator on the end of it it wouldn’t explode. Well, one of these rounds came in on us. It must have hit a branch above our hole and it hit Jack Short on the head. It caused a fracture, I’m sure, on his head because he had the cloth cap on and I didn’t know what hit him. It was black night. We were taking quite a bit of fire, direct fire also from across the ridge. He toppled over in the hole and vomited. I said, “Oh boy, he’s really had it.” At that point I still don’t know what had hit him. I called for some help and we pulled Jack out of the hole and carried him down the ridge. Oh, it must have been about three or four hundred yards. We had to carry him down to the aid station. Black night. I think there were two or three soldiers helping me. Got him down to the aid station and left him there because he was very bloody. His head was bleeding pretty bad. Didn’t have a good look at it because it was so dark so we just turned him over to the battalion surgeon and then went back, back up the hill, and back into the hole. The next morning I found this round in the hole, this knee mortar round. It had kind of a dent on the side of it on the rotating band. So that’s where it had hit Jack on the head and we didn’t see Jack again. I understand that he has
survived and I didn’t expect that. I thought he probably died because he had this hole in
his head.

LC: What a horrendous thing. Of course when you found it of course it’s still live
ordnance.

WL: I gave it a wide girth. I didn’t mess with it.

LC: I’ll bet you didn’t.

WL: So, in fact I don’t remember what I did. I must have picked it up and got it
out of there. I knew that if I didn’t hit the striker on the end of it why it wouldn’t
explode. I’m sure I didn’t just sit there with it for the rest of the night. The next night—
well, the next day K Company sent some patrols out and a good friend of mine got killed.
He was a BAR man from K Company.

LC: Now, BAR meaning—?

WL: Browning automatic rifle. That was the squad. Every squad had a BAR,
Browning automatic rifle. It was a very heavy 30 caliber. Really it could have been
called a light machine gun but it fired fully automatic or single shot. There was a selector
on it; you could do one or the other. It was a very good accurate weapon and very heavy.
BAR man always had an assistant with him carrying extra magazines for the ammunition.
They were a team. Each squad, each rifle squad, had one. Paul Hassler was a big guy
from Wisconsin or somewhere, a good soldier. He was out on a patrol with his squad and
he’s one of the first casualties we took there on that ridge. But that night we came under
fire again from across the ridge. I estimate that the Japanese positions were no more than
a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards from our ridge. It’s very close for infantry
combat. With the firing going on I raised up out of the hole to try to see if I could see
any targets for the machine gun. I couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t see any flashes or
anything. The night was dark and a lot of foliage, and then something hit me right
between the eyes on my helmet. It hit my helmet, knocked me over in the hole, knocked
my helmet off, and I didn’t know what hit me. It didn’t knock me out but I picked up my
helmet and I noticed it was split right down the middle, a big split in it. The next
morning I found what hit me. It was a 20 mm armor piercing round that had apparently
ricocheted from in front of my hole and hit me broad side. That is the broad side of the
round hit my helmet and that’s what split it open and knocked me down. I put that in my pocket. I kept it. I still have it.

LC: Do you really?

WL: Yeah. Again, the rotating band—these rounds had rotating bands around the round and it was flattened on one side. That’s where it hit me in the helmet, or maybe it was flattened by wherever it hit on the ground before it spun up and hit me. If it had hit me another inch or two lower it would have hit me right in the nose, across the bridge of the nose. That’s how—I wouldn’t have much of a nose left if I were still here.

LC: Yeah. Could easily have killed you no question. Bill, did you lose consciousness or—?

WL: No. No. I was perfectly okay.

LC: It split your helmet in half?

WL: Well, it did knock a big crack in it all the way from the rim all the way up to the crown of it was a big hole. It kind of messed up my helmet liner, the inside the helmet too. Problem there was our helmets were used for washing our socks and doing anything with water like a little bucket, you know. Had to go down to the aid station where casualties were moved out and they moved out without their helmets. There was a pile of helmets there so I could pick up one from somebody that had left. Replenished my protective gear that way. But that was my big incident on Biak.

LC: Did this incident, I mean did it shake you up?

WL: Not too much.

LC: At the time?

WL: I can’t remember that too much. You know what? My biggest memory of Biak was two things. One, being under artillery fire for the first time, every once in a while a little bit. But I can say this, the artillery fire that we received from the Japs wasn’t anything compared to artillery fire that our soldiers had against the Germans in the European war. In fact, other places like in Okinawa and other battles during the Pacific, as far as I’m concerned, artillery fire that we received was relatively light compared to many other battles that the soldiers were in. We were lucky. Japanese weren’t really good at artillery in Biak and it was dispersed. They had many different calibers of guns apparently. Most of them were pointed in the wrong direction and in caves. They
couldn’t mass their artillery the way the Germans did and the way the Japs did in other battles. We were lucky. That’s one memory is the artillery fire and the mortar fire. That was kind of scary. The other one was the intense fatigue and being without water day after day and not getting much to eat.

LC: Was there any relief from the fatigue? It sounds like you were constantly being moved from one operation to another. Not rotated back to a sort of secure area for rest at any time during the Biak mission anyway.

WL: You know, it only lasted about forty-five days or so. No, there was no relief. When Jack left I became number three on the gun so I got rid of the tool kit and I picked up the water can. So it was an even swap, more or less. At least I was moving up towards where I would get to touch the gun now.

LC: Did you get a new number four guy?

WL: Yeah. Number five moved up to number four and I don’t think we got a replacement until after the battle was over. I think we were down to four men in the squad rather than five.

LC: Now, after you got hit in the head, or in the helmet really, what happened as far as the continuing development of the mission?

WL: Well, there was more patrolling. Remember now, we had six infantry battalions working there in Biak. We were only one of them and we did our share, I’m sure. We had as many caves to dig out as the others did. There were some very deep caves. One of the techniques for clearing the caves was to pour fuel down, gasoline and diesel fuel, and lower explosives, that is TNT, on ropes and ignite them down there and blow them up. Because getting down into them and fighting them wasn’t a good option. So, that’s the way they cleared the caves, one of the systems that they used. These caves were immense. I’m talking about a cave that would probably enclose an entire city hall or something. Big places. That’s what they did. They dropped down explosives and fuel and that’s the way they killed the Japs, those that didn’t come out.

LC: Did any come out that you know of or saw?

WL: Yeah. There were a few. When I went down to—later on when I was a—how did I get into this one? Yeah. When I went down—I guess it was when I went down to the aid station with Jack Short I saw a couple of Japs in that aid station badly
wounded that were being evacuated. You didn’t see very many. Their tendency, their
creed, as it were, were not to be captured. They weren’t captured unless they were so
weak and badly wounded that they couldn’t resist capture. They didn’t voluntarily be
captured. There was an attack on our perimeter. While we were up on that ridge the
Japanese made one of their several, we called, banzai attacks because they screamed
“Banzai” as they came in. It was pretty nerve-wracking. But they came in and got into
the battalion headquarters perimeter. Our guns there killed a number of them. In fact one
of them, he fell right on the gun. They got that close.

LC: This was on the battalion—

WL: Right into the gunfire. They didn’t stop until they were dead.

LC: You said that the screaming that they did as they came forward was nerve
wracking.

WL: Yeah! It’s still scary. To me it was. I don’t know if everybody reacted the
same.

LC: I think probably they did. Did you understand what they were doing or why
they were doing it? Was there scuttlebutt about why they would do this?

WL: Well, yeah. They’d done this for the entire war. I’m sure they did it on
Guadalcanal and they did it Buna and Sanananda. They did everywhere; they made these
ferocious human wave attacks. Banzai, (Translates, “Ten thousand years”) apparently
was a cheer for the governor or rather for the emperor. I don’t know what it means. I
don’t know if it’s translatable.

LC: But it was a little intimidating?

WL: Yeah, it was.

LC: I believe you.

WL: Because you knew they were going to come in and kill you if you didn’t kill
them. I mean that was the point. There was no skill involved in this, no attempt to
envelop or fake you out or hit you with artillery fire first or wear you down. It was just a
human wave attack and you just had to deal with it that way. Almost always we were
successful. Very few occasions, I think, in the entire Pacific war were American rifle
battalions were overrun by this sort of a tactic. We had our guns and we had our artillery
fire and we had our mortars.
LC: And some nerve.

WL: Well, yeah. You’re fighting for your squad and for your unit. I mean that was just what you did.

LC: Now, you mentioned in terms of clearing the caves—and I don’t want to just kind of bypass that because this is extremely important in terms of developing a tactical plan to deal with this position that the Japanese were in. You mentioned using essentially gasoline and explosives. Were there any times that American guys had to basically get into the caves and do hand-to-hand combat? Or at least identify who was in there, how much effort it would take, that kind of thing?

WL: Well, they did. I’m sure they fought into the caves but once they got in a little ways and discovered that this thing went for endless miles inside your island there wasn’t any point in risking your life to track people into that. All you had to do was close up the mouths. Some of the caves they closed them up. If they could get a bulldozer up in there, and they did here and there, they were able to make a road. They eventually did make a road across the top where we went, where we walked. Eventually the engineers of the Division got up there and built a trail wide enough to take vehicles. Once they could get bulldozers up into those areas they could close off some of the caves that way.

LC: Was it basically understood that the Japanese in those caves—I mean it was understood on some level they were not going to surrender—so, you know, throwing a handful of leaflets or something like that in there to get them to understand that they were about to be killed was pointless?

WL: I don’t know if we ever tried leaflets but I kind of doubt it. The Japanese creed and their code was to die fighting and there wasn’t any much point in trying to talk them out of it. They were stuck with it.

LC: How long did the operation on the caves take for at least for your battalion?

WL: It took us three or four, five weeks I suppose to finally clear it out. Our Regiment joined us after about three or four weeks on Biak. The division commander—again, this is kind of a footnote I guess to him—but he was relieved of command. The division commander we went in with, because we weren’t securing the airfield quickly enough for the following operations that MacArthur insisted that he be relieved. So
General Eichelberger put in a new commander. They expected us to do it faster than we did.

LC: The regimental commander was relieved?
WL: No. The regimental commander wasn’t. The division commander was relieved.
LC: Okay. Of the Division?
WL: Yeah. I think he was a good commander. He was doing as well as could be expected. He had only two regiments to deal with to use. When the 163 joined us the 163 was used largely for logistical support, carrying ammunition and carrying water for us. Then after they got that road built and cleared the beach area things settled down a little bit and we had enough logistical support. But while the Japs were still in that Parai Defile it was very difficult to supply us over at Mockmer Drome. There was a coral shelf that went way out into the bay and it was hard to get anything on the beach.

LC: Ships couldn’t get up there, the landing craft?
WL: Yeah. They couldn’t get close enough. So, once they cleared the Parai Defile and got that road built, why, things improved a great deal.

LC: So, is it fair to say that the commander was having to use a substantial portion of his manpower to basically hump water and ammunition around?
WL: Yeah. That’s right. Also the terrain itself was against us. In order to fight them you had to find them first, and finding them was pretty difficult unless they came out and exposed themselves. But you had to go find them first. So, it was a tough deal.

LC: Yeah, time consuming process.
WL: I can’t make judgment really on whether the division commander should or should not have been relieved. Still, I can only look in retrospect. Seemed to me that was probably not a proper thing. But things like that happened. If you don’t produce a result in the Army whether it’s your fault or not you’ve had it. I think of the poor artillery battalion commanders whose batteries [were deployed] like in Vietnam. They’re separated by several kilometers. They put a single battery out on a firebase and then that battery happens to mess things up and fire a round into a schoolhouse or something, which happened in Vietnam, battalion commander is relieved. Well, he’s not even close
to the action. He’s got no control over anything that that battery is doing at that time and
still he’s relieved of command. That’s what happens.

LC: That’s the system.

WL: That’s the system. Yeah. Anyway, we dug the Japs out and of course I didn’t have anything to do with this part of it. I was in the machine gun squad. We didn’t do that sort of stuff. I don’t know where I was.

LC: We were talking about the next phase of the mission. You were saying that you didn’t really have anything to do with it because you were a gunner, or the machine gun team.

WL: With machine guns you didn’t do patrolling. Ours is just a matter of a rifle platoon being given an area to look at and to find, patrol in. If they find anything then the rest of the company comes up, follows them, and they start digging things out. The Japanese did attack our perimeter from time to time but that lasted only for two or three weeks. Then, essentially, with all three regiments working up in there they cleared out enough of the Japanese to get them away from positions that they could use to fire artillery on the airfield and the airfield was open. I can’t give you the dates. I don’t remember now.

LC: That’s okay. Anyone can look that up, I’m sure.

WL: Sure. So then we dug in, not dug in, we cleared off an area up on the ridge and the entire battalion put up tents. We put up what they called then squad tents or pyramidal tents. These were the old square tents made to hold one squad, eight men, tent. We set up a company area. Rows, very regular with the company headquarters tent and the supply tent and the mess tent in the middle. Began having hot food, regular rations, morning, noon, and night. We rested, I guess, for a few days, not very many. Then started training again. We set up a range—set up a range may be too elaborate. We took the gun out to a ridge and were given authority to fire at targets on the ridge across the draw, no formal targets. Just pick out a tree or a bush or an area and do some field firing with the machine gun. We did that day after day. Of course we had to build a camp. We went out into the jungle and cut bamboo, large diameter bamboo—that is six inches in diameter and maybe twenty feet long—carried it back to the camp to hold the tents up high off the terrain to get some more breeze through them. Kind of a tent frame we built...
on all the tents. We were issued fifty-five gallon drums, tops cut out, to put at the eaves
of the tents to catch rainwater. That’s for bathing. We got regular water issued from the
Army. Tanker trucks would come in and fill our, what they called, Lyster bags. These
were canvas bags with little spouts, four spouts, on the bottom of them. Looked like a
huge udder.

LC: These were called Lyster bags?

WL: Lyster. Yeah. I suppose Lyster, what did he do?

LC: Well, he was a physician. I think he had something to do with inoculating
people or vaccinations or something. Or surgery, I can’t remember.

WL: I think it had something to do with—what do they call when you boil things
to—pasteurize. Well, not pasteurize either but anyway—

LC: To kill the bugs in it.

WL: To kill the bugs. I think our medic was in charge of being sure that we had
enough water purification chemicals that they threw in that. It tasted, you know, like
swimming pool water mostly. Chlorine they put in it. That’s what you drank, and we got
some old boards and put kind of a duck boards in the tent so that if it rained a lot and
there was any mud at least you had a duck board. We kept the gun in the center of the
tent. We always kept our weapons with us, we didn’t have to turn them in and kept
ammunition with us. But there was no, the Japanese resistance was gone. There wasn’t
any. There was some patrolling up in the hills. There were a few Jap stragglers that’d
come in from time to time but not much.

LC: Would they come in basically as surrendering?

WL: Well, yeah. Or they were just wandering around lost and they happened to
wander into an American area and they get snagged, get captured. Of course they were
desperately hungry. There wasn’t anything to eat on that island.

LC: Well, that brings up a question. What about civilians? Were there civilians
on the island at all?

WL: Apparently they’d all left. I didn’t see any there, but we saw a few on
Hollandia. But I didn’t see—I don’t believe I saw a single native on Biak. I don’t recall.
I should mention we did capture some Javanese. Some guys from Java, who the Japanese
had, well I guess you could say impressed into duty as laborers. We captured a few of
those on Biak.

LC: Who would have been brought over from Java or Sumatra or somewhere?

WL: Yeah, they were laborers. Captured a few of those, but those were the only
non-Japanese that were ever seen on Biak. I’m sure there were some but not up in the
hills. The people in that area, if they lived on the island at all, they lived down on the
beach because they were fishermen.

LC: Yeah, the food source was there.

WL: There were some coconuts on the island. I guess they ate cassava. Probably
had some gardens there. There was a garden up there, I remember, on Biak.

LC: What did it look like?

WL: Well, just manioc. I believe it was manioc. I don’t know whether they were
native gardens or the Japanese had planted it. It’s hard to tell. On one of those ridges we
ran across a Japanese hut that’d had some caramel candy. I remember getting some
caramel candy and there were some Sake in it and there were some badminton rackets. I
thought that was kind of weird, strange to find stuff like that. A little notebook, which I
still have.

LC: You kept it?

WL: Yeah. I think I still have it.

LC: Oh wow. How’s your Japanese Bill?

WL: Oh, not very good.

LC: Have you ever had anyone look at it to see what it said?

WL: Yeah, and it was somebody’s diary. I had somebody look at it. It was of no
significance.

LC: Intelligence wise or in terms of literary contributions?

WL: I don’t remember now what it said. Oh, a couple of incidents in that camp
that I thought were kind of interesting. One of them—did I tell you about Brody Cullum
before?

LC: No.

WL: Brody Cullum was a soldier from North Carolina, I think. He had a still in
his home area in North Carolina. He was a moonshiner, and he set one up in Biak. He
set one up not more than ten yards from our tent in the brush behind the tent. Brody was a driver. He was a jeep driver. We never saw him during the battle because we didn’t have any jeeps with us. He was with the motor pool, wherever that was. Probably back at Hollandia until everything got moved in, then Brody showed up. He bunked with us and our squad. Because he worked in the motor pool he had access to things like radiators and copper tubing and that sort of stuff. So he built himself a still behind the tent and he made what they call jungle juice. It was just pure alcohol. At night he’d go into the kitchen and steal prunes and sugar and anything else that would ferment. I think he had oatmeal and other stuff and he’d mix up his mash and he’d start cooking. This stuff was vile!

LC: I was going to say that was pretty bad.

WL: He would cut it, get this lemon powder that was in the rations and with some water and lemon powder and he’d put this jungle juice in it. Brody also he had with him a violin. It was a miniature violin, the kind that little kids learn on, small size.

LC: Where he got this who knows?

WL: I don’t know. I guess he brought it with him. He would get very sentimental. He’d get drunk drinking his jungle juice and then he’d play this tune and I only heard him play one tune. It was a little hillbilly tune and he’d play that. Then he’d begin, his eyes would get all watery. He told me once that he found out that after he got into Hollandia he got news from home that his wife had gone off with a traveling man. That’s what he would think about when he was playing his tune. He couldn’t read or write so we helped him with that. We’d write letters for him. But the other part of this is that the company commander, we called Whiskey Bill. Because in those days officers got a monthly, when it was possible, they got a monthly liquor ration. I don’t know if they paid for it or not. Kind of doubt it. But anyway Whiskey Bill would go through his whiskey ration before the end of the month and then he’d get some of the jungle juice from Brody so he could endure the—

LC: Get to the end of the month?

WL: Get to the end of the month on jungle juice. Yeah.

LC: Now, Bill, did it make you sick?

WL: I drank very, very, very little.
LC: Very little. Maybe one taste and that was probably about enough.

WL: Yeah. Never made any attempt to—

LC: It sounds pretty bad. Did he get caught?

WL: Brody? The company commander knew about it.

LC: Well, apparently he sort of had an inside track here to the commander.

WL: Oh yeah. Sure. I’m sure the mess sergeant knew that he was missing some oatmeal from time to time but that didn’t bother him. Brody would give his stuff away to anybody that wanted it.

LC: Okay. So he wasn’t a greedy still guy.

WL: No. He wasn’t selling anything—for his own pleasure. I suppose that’s a nice hobby. If you get a hobby like that you don’t want to lose your touch.

LC: Well, you’re certainly popular. Make you popular.

WL: I don’t know about the motor pool. I kept thinking about it later, if they missed a radiator here or there but—

LC: Well, how had he decided that he was going to hook up with your group and your tent?

WL: Oh, he was just assigned to us. In fact he might have been our driver. Every machine gun squad was supposed to have a jeep anyway. But the fact is that we never saw it because we were never anywhere where there were any roads.

LC: Right. It was useless. You guys were the jeep it sounds like, having to carry around your own stuff.

WL: Yeah. The other incident about, thinking of alcohol, soldiers were supposed to get a beer ration now and then. Maybe three cans a week, something like that. Well, we hadn’t had a beer ration for a couple of months. We hadn’t had any. In fact the last beer that we had was in Australia. So we’d been through Hollandia and here we are closing off the Biak campaign and we hadn’t seen any beer. So one day the supply sergeant was gone this day. He was down on the beach doing his business whatever it was and a truckload of beer came. It was in cans, in cases, and the supply sergeant’s assistant in those days was called the armor articifer.

LC: Ariticifer?
WL: Articifer, probably a word that goes back to the Revolutionary War. I don’t know. But anyway they called him the armor articifer and he was kind of the gunsmith. That’s really what he was. He was a gunsmith and he would make minor repairs on any firearms that you had in the company. Anything major you had to send out. But his name was Swede Larsen. Swede got this truckload of beer and nobody gave him any guidance so he counted the number of cases and he knew how many men were in the battalion, in the company, so he gave everybody, every soldier, in the company a case of beer. So I got a case. I mean in our tent we had six or seven cases of beer. There wasn’t any ice so we emptied all of the cases into the rain barrel and then we started drinking. We started doing some serious beer drinking and virtually every soldier except if he happened to be a Mormon or something got really snockered on beer. Company commander came back and the first sergeant came back, they had been gone. They looked around and saw this entire company was having a hell of a nice time singing and then there was a real serious fist fight too. Luna, this guy that had broken—well, this is before he broke his arm.

LC: Right. He hadn’t been thrown out of the hut yet.

WL: It was before that happened and my squad leader who at this time had been moved into the kitchen, Smallwood his name was. He was from the south side of Chicago. His income—well, he worked in the stockyards but he also. He told me, this is all hearsay, I never saw him do it. He told me that he used to fight in prizefights in the clubs of Chicago for five dollars a round. He looked like it. He was built like a fire plug, you know. Sturdy fellow. He and Luna got into a fight of some kind, an argument, and Smallwood hit Luna in the jaw and knocked him against the center post of the tent. Broke his jaw. Smashed it. Luna went down—by this time we’d had to turn in our ammunition to the supply tent. So Luna went down to the supply tent to get some carbine ammunition because he was going to kill Smallwood. Swede didn’t let him have any ammunition fortunately otherwise that probably would have been a murder in the company, but anyway that’s what was going on. The first sergeant, he called the platoon sergeants out and he said, “You’ve got to collect all the beer.” But the problem was about half the beer had already been drunk and the rest of it was in the rain barrels and nobody was telling where it was. So they didn’t get any of the beer back. It was just one
of the incidents that just happened and there was no cure for it, so that was it. That was
the last time we got beer too for that matter.

LC: I was going to say did Swede get in trouble?

WL: He might have. He didn’t get busted for it. He was a good guy. I mean why
blame the corporal?

LC: That’s right. Well, how long did you remain then on Biak?

WL: Let’s see, we stayed on Biak until it seems to me it was January.

Meanwhile, of course, what was going on in the Pacific War, Leyte had been invaded.
Leyte was seized and that turned out to be a very long and difficult campaign, much
harder than they expected. I believe by this time we’d also made the landing in Luzon,
although I’m not—somebody’s going to have to look that one up. I can’t recall now.
Anyway, the war in the Pacific was going pretty well.

LC: How much did you know about it Bill?

WL: We got the *Stars and Stripes*, which was a good weekly newspaper, in the
Pacific so we read up on it. We got that and that was our main source of information on
what was going on in the whole world.

LC: Right. Did you have radio?

WL: No. Nobody had any radios. There was no radio stations anyway.

LC: No, I just wondered if it was impossible—

WL: There were some. You’re right. There were some AM stations that were
broadcasting in the Pacific.

LC: I don’t know if over short wave you might have gotten something from
Australia or something.

WL: Yeah. They’ve radios too and there was this infamous woman called Tokyo
Rose who was making broadcasts from Japan, propaganda broadcast for the Japanese.

LC: But you never heard one of those, you never heard those?

WL: Didn’t have any radios. We didn’t have any electricity. I mean we didn’t
have—our light was from Coleman lanterns, that’s gasoline lanterns. That’s the way you
lit up at night and if you wanted to play—we played a lot at night. We’d play pinochle or
poker, and there was another fellow that came in after the battle. He had been on special
duty in Australia. He was one of those guys that would always find out; find something
to do rather than going into battle. His name was Morrison and he was a gambler. He set up a gambling hall in the mess tent at night where they played dice. Put up a dice board, special—well, the way they do in casinos—and he ran a gambling operation there for a while. So, there were things to do at night.

LC: Yeah. There’s a lot of creativity here.

WL: Oh yeah. The platoon sergeant—no, not the platoon sergeant, section sergeant knew how to cut hair. You don’t have to be an expert to cut a soldier’s hair, obviously, because all they did was cut it short. But anyway he cut hair for us for twenty-five cents. I think we were using Dutch guilders then. We used the currency of where we were.

LC: Were you issued that?

WL: We were paid in it. Paid once a month in cash and in Biak it was guilders. But anyway that’s just a footnote.

LC: Well, it’s interesting because it shines a little bit of light on what broader policies there were in terms of supporting the local economy.

WL: Yeah. Right.

LC: Well, Bill, when did you actually get orders to leave Biak?

WL: I think we left there in January. We got on an AKA (attack cargo ship), that was an attack transport ship, one of the fast ships. We sailed up through the edge of Indonesia into the island of Mindoro, which is a major Philippine island just off the south of—well, let’s see, southwest coast of Luzon. Mindoro. We went there to what we called staging. You staged before a battle. We went into Mindoro, built a tent camp like we had on Biak. We were there in Mindoro for, I would say, about three weeks. We were right on the edge of a landing strip, which was being used by the Navy and by the Army. I remember seeing some Corsair fighters on the edge of the runway there. Main job on Mindoro—just a minute. I’m going to close the door, somebody’s coming. On Mindoro our main job was to load the ships for our next invasion. I remember going down on the beach a couple of times and loading 155 projectiles into the hold of a landing ship tank, LST. That’s the only part of that I remember very much. One interesting event I saw there on the beach—as I say there was an airfield right there on
Mindoro. They were using that airfield to support the offensive on Luzon because they were very close and I imagine it was the closest airfield to Manila.

LC: Yeah. You know it’s just, what, forty miles maybe a little more. Sixty miles.

WL: Probably more like a hundred.


WL: Yeah. I’m not looking at the map but I think it’s probably that far. Mindoro, I don’t remember who took Mindoro. I don’t think there was any serious fighting on Mindoro. The Japanese had not defended it. At least had not defended it vigorously.

LC: But Luzon is a different story completely.

WL: Very different. Yeah. So anyway I watched a flight of P-38s. P-38 was this really neat looking twin boomed fighter plane. The cockpit was in the center, of course, and then it had these two booms that [made it a] twin-engine fighter.

LC: Very distinctive.

WL: Very distinctive and beautiful airplane. Anyway these came over and they did what they called their victory roll over the beach. The tip of one of the wings hit the other airplane and that airplane just kind of went down in pieces, just small pieces. The other one made a very swift dive right into the bay. There were no parachutes. I mean those pilots obviously were killed.

LC: How tragic. That’s just terrible.


LC: That’s just sickening.

WL: Guys just showing off. I don’t blame them for being exuberant and having a great deal of esprit. I mean, shoot, they ought to be a little bit more careful.

LC: That must have just, you know, turned your stomach.

WL: Yeah. It was terrible to see something like that. They’d gone off and they were supporting the infantry. They probably did a great job over in Luzon and then come over and screw up that way. It was sad.

LC: That is sad, very sad.

WL: Anyway, we were there only, I would say, about three weeks. Then we got onto ships again. I don’t remember what kind of a ship I went on next. I remember we did have to use the—oh, I think we had to use the cargo net to climb down the ship off
the side of the ship onto a landing craft. I think that’s what we did on this next landing.

This next landing was at the island of Palawan, P-a-l-a-w-a-n. It’s pronounced Palawan. It’s the western most island of the Philippines. Actually, on the north side of it you would call that the South China Sea and the south side would be the Sulu Sea. It kind of divides those two. It’s a very long sliver of an island. The major port and major city on it, the only major city, was Puerto Princesa. There was a small bay there, and that was our objective. We landed on, we climbed down the nets, which again is kind of tough to do when you’re carrying stuff. By this time I was the assistant gunner; I was number two. That is I carried the [gun].

LC: Now, just to clarify. Palawan is the very long island that extends sort of pointed right at Mindoro on the north end and on the south end pointing pretty much right at—

WL: Kalimantan I think is what they call it now. Japanese were still there. Yeah. There weren’t very many Japanese there apparently.

LC: Okay. Where was your landing area? Do you remember?

WL: Right at Puerto Princesa, and we went ashore. There was no opposition. There was a long, rather flat—we had to walk through a little water but not much. There was no surf to speak of. Got ashore and it’s the first time we’d seen any pavement. That thing strikes me. We had always been on dirt roads and gravel. But this looked like it was almost like it was a city, for the first time in many, many months.

LC: How did it sit relative to where you landed, relative to the beach? There must have been some kind of bay, slight inlet, or something there.

WL: There’s a little bay there. Yeah. We got in pretty close. We had to walk maybe, oh, two hundred yards off the—oh, I got a call coming in but I’m not going to take it.

LC: Are you sure?

WL: Yeah. I don’t want to take it. I know who it’s from. It’s going to buzz like that for a minute.

LC: That’s all right. I can come back in, don’t worry, and clean this all up so it’s not going to be a problem.
WL: What else? Yeah. We walked to shore there and as I say there was no
opposition. The Japanese did not defend it. We went in and set up—we didn’t set up a
formal camp there. We dug foxholes in an orchard. I remember it was an apple orchard.
No, it couldn’t have been apples—some other kind of a fruit orchard. Dug the gun in.
LC: Had there been preparatory fire onto the—?
WL: Well, I don’t remember very much preparation for that one. There probably
was. There was kind of a—that was something they always did whether there was going
to be a—because you couldn’t really predict where the defenses were. But there wasn’t
much damage. I don’t remember hardly any shell holes or anything. We dug in our
position and got set. I remember going on a patrol with K Company out into the
countryside, maybe two or three miles, left the gun behind, just to see what was going on.
LC: So, you would have just been carrying a carbine?
WL: Yes ma’am. I borrowed a carbine I think. By that time I was armed with a
pistol. I remember going through a little Filipino village, pretty little place, coming back
again. The farmer that owned this farm there gave us a heifer to eat. He killed it and we
had a couple of guys in the platoon who knew how to dress beef so we had a little beef.
It wasn’t very good. It was too fresh.
LC: Was it still welcome?
WL: Oh yeah. It was a nice change.
LC: What transpired between the farmer who did this and—?
WL: He came and greeted us. As I remember he didn’t speak much English if
any but he offered this beef to us and we took it. He was very friendly.
LC: Very interesting.
WL: Yeah. One thing about Palawan that I don’t know if you know or not but the
reason they decided to go to Palawan I guess it was two-fold. One, they wanted the
airfields again like they always did and they used the fields on Palawan to attack
Vietnam.
LC: Because it’s directly opposite Vietnam.
WL: Yeah. It’s just a short hop across the South China Sea to Saigon. The
Japanese, of course, by this time had taken control, absolute control, over Vietnam. They
had invaded it a couple of years earlier but—
LC: Right. I think the coup was in March 1945. So that makes sense.

WL: They had a major airbase at Phu Loi, which is outside of Saigon. They might have had an airbase over there at Tan Son Nhut too. I believe they did. So, the United States Air Force was beginning to bomb the Japanese on Saigon, around Saigon. That is why they wanted the airfield at Palawan. The other reason was that there was a Japanese prisoner camp there, American prisoners. There were over a hundred of them there. They had been moved out of Luzon and brought to Palawan. They were put in a cave over near Puerto Princesa. The Japanese put gasoline, [poured] gasoline inside the caves, set up machine guns at the mouth of the cave, and killed all the Americans as they were coming out. That’s what the Japanese were doing to American prisoners there on Puerto Princesa. That is why there was an attempt to get to Palawan before the Japs could kill all the American prisoners but we were too late. There were, I think, two Americans that escaped from that prison camp and somehow got over to Luzon. I don’t think we saw them there. I read about them later, that two of them managed to jump down to the beach and somehow escaped the Japanese.

LC: How did you learn that American POWs (prisoner of war) had been moved to Palawan? Was that part of what they told you as you were moving around?

WL: Told that one of the things that we were going to do was to free compatriots and American prisoners.

LC: How did you find out that they had been all, essentially, all but just—?

WL: Our officers told us that that’s what happened to them.

LC: I mean how did you guys take news like that? I mean—

WL: Pretty well, pretty well angry about that one. Well, nobody had any great sympathy for Japanese anyway. When you hear and knew about things like that, why, your tendency was not to treat Japanese with any degree of compassion that’s for sure. Not that we murdered anybody but—

LC: No, but it made this more of an emotional, more emotionally invested in—

WL: We saw very, very few Japanese on Palawan. I know that one, we did send one, that is a battalion sent one company—I don’t remember who it was, maybe it was I Company—around the other side of the island because the Japanese that were around Puerto Princesa had escaped over the mountains. There’s a mountain ridge that goes
down the length of that island, mountain chain. Not very high. But they, the Japanese, went off that way to the other side and I believe we made a landing on that north side of the island to try to block them or capture them. I don’t really know. We weren’t told really what was going on on that side. We just knew that we weren’t doing anything. We didn’t have any contact. Some of our rifle platoons I’m sure did have some contact. We took a few casualties but they were very, very light.

LC: This would be platoons still in the?

WL: Yes. Yeah. There was some contact but again, we didn’t hear much about it. I don’t remember if our battalion had any contact there or not. I think, perhaps, I or K or L Company had some. They were running patrols out into the hills to try to capture Japanese but without a great deal of success that I know about anyway.

LC: Bill, can I ask, as this was going on and you were obviously discharging whatever daily duties you were being given, were you, to any degree, studying what was happening in the sense that you were studying how patrols were run, what appeared to be working, how forces worked—?

WL: Yeah, but you see, as a machine gunner, I wasn’t really involved in that. It didn’t really matter that much. I mean we trained with the machine gun. We did some firing and took it apart and put it back together again, that sort of stuff, but—

LC: I just wonder, as your career went on and all the things that you were involved with later on, and I know of course you can’t anticipate this when you’re just a very young man in this situation. But do you look back on the different campaigns that you were involved in and realize that they taught you something about tactics?

WL: Oh sure. Well, you can’t help but soak up some knowledge about infantry operations if you’re attached to a rifle company. Even if you don’t go out on a daily patrol sort of thing here or there and you know what’s going on. You learn that you can survive under extremely bad conditions.

LC: Right, and also execute operations under very bad conditions.

WL: The other thing that happened, I think it was almost positive. It was while on Palawan. I got a letter from home that told me that my brother had been killed in action. This was probably the worst blow to my morale that I suffered during the war. Did I mention this to you before?
LC: You told me earlier when we talked about your family that your brother had—

WL: Yeah. It was about this time that he was killed in action in Luxembourg.

LC: Right. He was with the Division, is that right?

WL: True. Division.

LC: Did you find out any details at this point or was this letter from your parents telling you—?

WL: It was from my wife. It must have been from my wife. She was living with my mother and father then while I was overseas.

LC: Okay. What was her name?

WL: Mary.

LC: Okay. She wrote you to let you know?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Okay. What was your brother’s name again, Bill? I’m sorry.

WL: Tom. Thomas.

LC: You mentioned that you have visited over there.

WL: Yeah. I visited. This was a custom then. The War Department gave the families the choice of whether they wanted the remains brought back to the United States or not. My father and mother elected to have him buried in the national cemetery over there. So he was buried in the national cemetery, the U.S. National Cemetery, at Hamm, H-a-m-m, Luxembourg, which is a suburb of Luxembourg City.

LC: Why did they make that decision? Do you know? Did they ever tell you?

WL: No. They didn’t. They’re very practical folks. My dad was devastated, even worse than my mother was, by the loss. I don’t know. That’s the decision they made which was, I think, a good one. So, when I was stationed in Germany many years later in 1949 or ’50 I drove from Nuremberg over to Luxembourg and I did visit the grave.

LC: You said that it was extremely devastating to your morale, not only your personal loss but—

WL: Well, that was it. It was a personal loss. It was all it was to it. Extremely devastating, well, I carried on.
LC: I mean how could it not be? Quite frankly. I mean this kind of news is never—

WL: Some people aren’t awfully close to their brothers but I was very close to him. That is we did everything together when we were kids. Of course, after I went to college and so on and got married, why, I didn’t have an awful lot to do with him and then he—because he was going to the university then and then he went enlisted and I didn’t see him. Oh, I hadn’t seen him for a long time because by the time my last visit home he was already up in, he was up in Minnesota or somewhere, Army camp. So I didn’t get to see him.

LC: Had you guys been exchanging letters at all?

WL: Not much.

LC: Mostly letting news flow through your folks?

WL: Just a minute. That happened on Palawan. Then after Palawan—see, what was going on then? Oh! While we were in Palawan the Regiment and the had gone to Mindanao. They landed at Zamboanga, which is a tip of the Zamboanga Peninsula. So when we finished in Palawan one of those, I don’t remember which one it was. I think it was the was sent down to another part of Mindanao down closer to Davao, I suppose. The was there in Zamboanga by itself and we came in to relieve the at Zamboanga. They took the and moved it out into those islands in the Sulu Sea, the Sulu Archipelago, at the islands of Jolo and Basilan.

LC: Jolo, J-o-l-o. Jolo.

WL: Yeah. J-o-l-o. Right. They sent the out there and we went into the city of Zamboanga and began moving up into the hills above Zamboanga where the Japanese were withdrawing to, those that remained.

LC: Now, the city, Zamboanga, it’s sort of, again, sits on an inlet. Is that fair?

WL: Well, I don’t remember any bay there.

LC: Okay. But it is right on the water?

WL: Right on the coast. Yes.

LC: So, the geography is that up behind the town—

WL: Is the mountains, begin very close to the city. There are high, I can’t even estimate how, elevation, maximum elevation, is probably around two thousand feet,
maybe three thousand. These are pretty good sized hills. They are heavily forested—rain forest interspersed with grass, grasslands. We marched up, I remember now. We had some, there was a road going up there and we did, we could ride part of the way at least up to the top of this ridge and we set up there. While we were doing this the rifle companies, well, again, we were still with the K Company, they were doing patrolling. They were getting into some firefights. The Japanese had not completely given up although they were really trying to escape. They were still delaying us in moving up into the mountains.

LC: How good was the intelligence about how many there were and what kind of armament they had?

WL: I really don’t know. We didn’t get—

LC: It didn’t filter down you guys?

WL: We didn’t get any information about that.

LC: They just said, “Okay, patrol in this area.”

WL: I Company got into a fight up on a hill. Killed quite a few Japanese. Light casualties on our side. They captured, I would say there were, let’s see. There must have been about five prisoners. They were all—two of them were on litters. They were wounded so bad they couldn’t walk and the three of them could walk. They were wounded—well, in the first place, the way I got to see them I was down at battalion headquarters. Our machine gun was down at battalion headquarters. We weren’t out with K Company at that time and the battalion intelligence officer rounded up a few of us to go up and bring those prisoners back from I Company. We had to go up this hill and pick up the prisoners and bring them back to battalion headquarters for interrogation. That was the point. There were about six or eight of us in this little detail to go up and bring these prisoners back from I Company. It was about a two mile hike, very hot, very steep trail, going up to the top to get the prisoners. We got up there and I Company turned over the prisoners to us. We had these two litters. As I say, we only had—I guess one of us had about eight of us. Four to carry the litters and then the other to guard these folks as we were coming down. Somewhere along the trail the soldiers carrying the litters dumped these soldiers off the side of the cliff. So now we didn’t have anybody on litters we only had the three walking wounded. The I Company guys had stripped these
fellows naked except for little jock straps so their wounds were pretty visible. Most of them looked like they had been hit with rock fragments from mortars or artillery. They’re just kind of peppered with little wounds all over the bodies and we moved them down to the battalion headquarters. I didn’t realize that they’d dumped these guys over the cliff until we got down to battalion headquarters. I looked around and here these litters were empty and I asked somebody, “Well, where are they?” They said, “Oh, they dumped them off.” That was it. The battalion S2 was a lieutenant, he was very, very angry about that one. I don’t blame him. I thought it was a terrible thing for them to do. But I didn’t have anything to do with it and I don’t know what happened, if anything, to the soldiers responsible for it.

LC: But this is the kind of stuff that went on.

WL: Yeah. It was kind of—they might have given him some cockamamie story about they fell off or something like that. But that was one incident that sticks in my mind. Then we continued on up to the top, finally got up to the top of this ridgeline, and dug the gun in again. About that time the company commander came over and he said “LeGro, I want you to come with me on a patrol.” So, he had about five or six soldiers like me that he’d picked to go with him. I guess he knew I was a pretty good rifle shot. I borrowed the squad leader’s M1 rifle because I, again, I was just armed with a pistol.

Captain Kelly his name was. Good man. I liked Kelly. He had been the mortar platoon leader and now he was the company commander, just been promoted to captain, so he knew artillery fire. He knew how to adjust and fire a mortar battery, there’s not much difference between that and firing artillery so they picked him. I don’t know where our artillery observer was, if we had one. Usually when you want to adjust artillery fire you use an artillery officer to do it. That’s his job.

LC: His job is to—?

WL: Captain Kelly was the company commander.

LC: But an artillery observer’s job—?

WL: Artillery observer is an artillery officer attached to a rifle outfit, to an infantry company, and he’s usually a lieutenant. His job is to go with the infantry out forward and adjust and call in artillery fire. He always has a radioman with him and he can call in artillery fire and make the adjustments and put the artillery fire on the target.
for you. That’s what an observer is supposed to do. As I say I don’t know why we didn’t have an artillery observer with us. But Captain Kelly was going to adjust artillery fire on a Japanese unit that had been sighted out in the mountains. He needed some security with him when he went out, so I was picked to go with him. So, we started off down the trail and just about—I say there must have been about six or eight of us, including Captain Kelly. We went down the mountain out into the jungle. We must have gone about a mile or two. We came to a river. We forded the river. Went up the other side of the hill on the other side for another mile or two. We were way out in the jungle and got up on top of the ridge and we made contact with a Philippine guerilla unit. There must have been about, oh, maybe thirty or forty Filipinos and they were going to help us. Maybe they were the source of the intelligence about where the Japanese were, I don’t know that. I was never told. All I was told is to go out there with Captain Kelly and provide security. So, we got up on this ridge and it was very, very tall forest. The trees must have been a hundred foot or a hundred and fifty feet tall, if not taller. These were the kind of trees that you see in the Pacific that where the roots fan out from way up on the trunk of the tree like, they look like a fan, or like the fins on a fish. They stick out. You know what I mean?

LC: Yeah. You can seem them in South Florida, for example. The roots are almost above ground and they just spread out?

WL: Yeah. So we were in that kind of a forest. Captain Kelly—we had a radio operator with us of course, and he began calling in to a 155. A 155 mm artillery battery that we had in support. I don’t know whether these were guns or Howitzers. There’s a significant difference between the two but I won’t go into that.

LC: But they both come in 155 mm?

WL: Both 155 mm. The gun being a long tube canon and Howitzer being rather shorter tube and fire at a higher arc than a gun; guns rather flat trajectory.

LC: Fires a higher arc but the same kind of shell?

WL: Same shell. Yeah. High explosive, or smoke, white phosphorus. But anyway Kelly, he told us that the Japanese were supposed to be in that draw down below us. You couldn’t see anything because it was all forest. Couldn’t see a thing. But he said that’s where the Japs were and he was going to bring in its 155 fire on that Japanese
unit down there. So, he called for some registration rounds and the problem was that
even though they were firing smoke you couldn’t see this. When it hit you could hear the
explosion. You could hear the shells—we were on the gun target line, incidentally.

LC: Which means?

WL: So it means that the guns were behind us and when they fired the shells went
directly overhead. Over our head, towards the target.

LC: So you were right between the gun and the target.

WL: That’s right. The gun target line and that’s where we were. Which is not—
if you have a choice, don’t do that.

LC: Right. But you couldn’t really see the registration rounds; you couldn’t really
register them because—

WL: You couldn’t see them. You could hear them. So, Kelly was adjusting by
sound and that’s very difficult and not at all accurate because of the echoes and so on.
You’d rather see it. But he figured after a few rounds came in there and he figured he
had it just about where he wanted it. So he called, “Fire for effect.” Which means fire
whatever it was, and I think he called for six rounds per gun, “Fire for effect.” That
would have been six times four, twenty-four rounds. That’s my guess. That’s my
recollection, at least, what he called for, and a 155 battery had four guns. So, they fired.

What happened was that some of the rounds began hitting in the trees over our head.
They didn’t clear the trees and the fragments starting raining down upon us. First, one
soldier was hit beside me and then I was hit. A really good lick. It felt like I got kicked
by a mule. Hit me in the back. I had scrunched up between these folds of these tree
roots. But the thing came in and scooped out a piece of flesh in my back about the size of
two hands and apparently kept on going. It was kind of like I’d been hit with a shovel
blade and they just scooped it out and kept on going. But it really was a heavy blow. I
looked over at Kelly and I said, “Captain Kelly, I’ve been hit.” I said, “Turn it off if you
can.” But rounds kept coming in until they fired all twenty-four rounds or whatever it
was. But I and this other guy were the only ones hit. He was hit in the butt with a small
fragment or two, maybe. He was doing a lot of screaming and crying and yelling. I told
Kelly, I said, “I think I can walk.” He said, “No, you’re not.” So, they got—in those
days they used sulfanilamide powder as an antibiotic. It was before penicillin and they
sprinkled that in the wound. It was bleeding pretty good and they took two or three
pressure bandages on it to cover it and then we didn’t have any medics with us. We had
to use our own—we carried these bandages. I tried to get up on my feet and I was kind
of woozy but I told him, “I think I can make it.” He said, “No, we’re going to make a
litter for you.” I don’t remember who the other guy was. I didn’t even know him. But
anyway they made a litter. They cut some poles in the forest and made a litter out of a
poncho and we started down the hill. By this time it was rather late afternoon. It must
have been around five or six. Beginning to get dark and it was a very heavy load for
them. I really wanted to walk but they wouldn’t let me.

LC: Now, was it just—and you can decline to answer, of course—are we talking
about your lower back or up near your shoulders or—?

WL: Back. Yeah. Right in the lumbar region. It missed my spine by about an
inch. That’s it. It was a really gaping wound. We got down to the bottom of the hill and
about to cross the river and the Japanese had set up a machine gun on the other side. So,
that kind of spoiled the whole thing. We started to cross the river and then the Japs
opened up so they pulled back and put me behind a big boulder on the riverbank, on the
gravel, it was all gravel. We just had to hunker down there until dawn. I was very
uncomfortable. I wasn’t in a great deal of pain but the lying on gravel is painful enough
even if you’re not hurt.

LC: Well, and that had to be a long night too for the guys who were guarding that
position trying to—

WL: Yeah. That was a long night. The next morning we started out again and the
Japanese had withdrawn. They pulled out of there. So we managed to cross the river and
the river was about up to your waist almost. They had to hold me pretty high. These
guys were really getting exhausted carrying me. I don’t know, we started up the hill on
the other side we still had about a mile or two to go, and Kelly had managed to get their
attention up on the hill and they sent some soldiers down to help carry me back up. They
were carrying the other guy too. Turned me over to medics up at the top.

LC: How were you doing? Did you sleep that night?

WL: I didn’t sleep a lot. No, because it was sort of uncomfortable.
LC: You said that you weren’t in much pain. Did they have anything to give you?
Did they have a morphine vial or something?

WL: They didn’t give me any morphine. I wasn’t in that much pain. Apparently
in the nerves in that part of your body aren’t so acute to that kind of pain. It hurt. I won’t
say it didn’t hurt. But it wasn’t like a bad toothache. It wasn’t that bad. So anyway they
put me in an ambulance. The Army seems to have some sadistic motive behind the way
they build ambulances. They don’t put any springs on them and they had these real hard
rubber tires.

LC: So every bump.

WL: Yeah. Every one. So we drove down the hill in the ambulance, all the way
down to the evacuation hospital down in Zamboanga. It was a very uncomfortable ride.
Anyway, got down there and they had set up the evacuation hospital in a Catholic school
and they brought me immediately to the operating tent. They had a tent outside with
mosquito netting around it. I remember the doctor saying, “Well, that’s a pretty good
shot,” or something like that. “How’d you get that?” I told him and he said, “Well, I
don’t see any fragments in here.” So he did a little cutting around the edges to make it
clean and swabbed it out. I didn’t get any anesthetic and it hurt a little bit when he was
doing all of that. Then they put some—it was too broad of the thing to sew it. They
couldn’t stitch anything up. They put some clamps on it, wire clamps, and they tried to
draw it together with these wire clamps. That wasn’t real pleasant either. It’s like having
a lot of acupuncture, you know, all at once.

LC: You’re conscious, you were maintaining consciousness?

WL: Oh yeah. Then they put another heavy bandage on it and brought me back to
this room where I laid on a pad. There might have been a cot. I think they put me on a
cot by that time. Yeah.

LC: Did they have any way to X-ray you or to find out if you’d taken—?

WL: No. They didn’t try any X-rays. No. This is an evacuation hospital. This is
really to keep you from dying or bleeding to death and getting you back to a genuine
station hospital with surgical, you know—

LC: The fine knitting happening somewhere else.
WL: Yeah. So, I spent the night there at that hospital. I’m sure they gave me some more sulfa drugs and stuff like that. They might have even given me some sleeping pills. I don’t know. I don’t remember being in any great distress. Then the next morning they put me on a hospital plane. It was a DC-3, the Army Air Force version was a C-47 airplane, and loaded me aboard that. Again, they didn’t allow me to walk. They kept me flat on my face. I had to lie on my face because the wound was on the back. Got me into the airplane and flew me to Tacloban in Leyte where they had a major Army hospital. The Army had several levels of hospitals. Of course a general hospital being the highest and then they had field hospitals and then they had station hospitals. This must have been a station hospital.

LC: Do you remember if it had a number or—?
WL: Yeah, but I don’t remember what it was.
LC: Okay. What did you see when you got there?
WL: Well, they put me again in an ambulance and drove me to the hospital. It was all—Tacloban looked like downtown compared to where I’d been because it was all built up. There were a lot of—the Army had built some temporary buildings. You know they put mostly wooden temporary buildings here and there. Everything wasn’t in tents. All of the hospital was still tents. It was a tent hospital, but they had duckboards on the floor. They had real genuine nurses in nurses’ uniforms, things like that. Things looked clean and neat and very pleasant. I remember there was a Filipino nurse’s aide that took care of me too. Very pretty girl from Cebu. Told me that the prettiest girls in the Philippines were from Cebu and I could agree with that.

LC: Do you remember her name?
WL: No.
LC: Did she speak English?
WL: But, anyway, so I spent some time there. Had some really good guys there that had been hurt in many different divisions, many different regiments, been hurt. This was the surgical ward and virtually everyone in there had been hit with something or other. The guy across from me had been in a Stevedore outfit and he was smashed up against the steel bulkhead of a ship with some corrugated roofing. He lost one leg and
was going to lose another, and he died while I was there. He was in terrible shape. Guy next to me had been hit with mortars up in Zig Zag Pass.

LC: Which was—?
WL: Luzon. I think he was in the Division. Willy Paradise was from Maine.

Good guy.

LC: How did he do?
WL: Well, he was going to do all right. He had a colostomy at the time because his guts had been pretty well shredded by the mortars.

LC: Did they do a surgery on you?
WL: No. All they did was—I remember looking at the chart. It said, “Well debrided.” I never heard that word for, “Well debrided and clean.” So, apparently they’d done a good job over there in the evac hospital and they didn’t have to do anything except put in more clamps to draw it together so it would heal. Because there was so much missing. I thought maybe these days they would have tried a transplant of tissue of some kind.

LC: What you were missing, it sounds like, was muscle? Lower back muscles and—?
WL: Lower back muscle and skin, flesh.

LC: Yeah. It had just taken a gouge right out of you.

WL: Yeah. So it’s still there. I mean it took a long time to completely heal. It kept on seeping for weeks afterwards. But anyway I got very good care there.

LC: What was morale like there in the hospital on the wards?
WL: Good. Good morale.

LC: Tell me about the nurses who were there. Do you remember them? I know you remember the gal from Cebu, but the American nurses?
WL: Nurses were very professional, the gals. They did everything right. They were careful.

LC: On top of the game?
WL: Yeah. Oh yeah. They were professional gals. I didn’t tell you about it when I went to the hospital in Nadzab, did I?

LC: No.
WL: That was after Biak. I kind of skipped that but you want me to pick up there?

LC: Yes, please. Do tell me about that.

WL: Sometime before January in the fall of ’44, there was a notice on the bulletin board by the CP (command post). It said that they were accepting applications for officer candidate school in Australia. You could apply to go to OCS (officer candidate school), and there were very minimum qualifications. I already had my four years of college so I figured, “I’m one of the smartest guys here. I’ve got my experience as a soldier so I can go to OCS.” So I went to see the first sergeant, Sergeant Fox. I said, “Sergeant Fox, I’d like to talk to the company commander and get approval to go to OCS in Australia.” He said something like, “Oh sure, I’ll take you in there but don’t expect anything.” So, of course, in those days still true, you could not even go to the first sergeant until you went to your platoon sergeant and got permission to go to talk to the first sergeant, and then you saw the first sergeant. He would bring you in to the company commander if he felt like it. If he didn’t feel like it you wouldn’t see the company commander.

LC: Right. Yes, there’s a little chance here involved.

WL: So, I went in the company commander’s tent, I saluted. “Private LeGro has permission of the first sergeant to speak to company commander.” You had to speak in the third person too when you spoke to an officer. Anyway, and he says, “What do you want?” Some cordial greeting. “What do you want you dumb son of a bitch?” Anyway, I said, “I saw a notice that said you’re accepting applications for officer candidate school in Australia and I want to go to OCS.” He said something like, “You dumb son of a bitch, I wouldn’t send you anywhere.” I don’t know why he had this on for me but as I said he hadn’t even promoted me to PFC.

LC: Right. You were still waiting for that, right?

WL: He didn’t like me much.

LC: What’s not to like? I mean did he just pick certain guys out and—was it arbitrary?

WL: I don’t know. Some of the letters I wrote. You see, I mentioned this but all of our letters home were censored. The company officer’s read all of our letters before they could be sealed.
LC: Did you know that?

WL: Yes. Yeah. It was kind of weird. I don’t know if commissioned officers’
letters were being read or not. I think not but—

LC: But this was about security concerns.

WL: Anyway, I probably said some pretty scurrilous things about the company’s
doings, about the company officers. That probably marked me. But anyway he told me
he wasn’t going to send me to Australia. He said, “I haven’t seen any leadership
capabilities in you since you’ve been here.” I said something to the effect, “Well, I’ve
been carrying machine gun ammunition all over this island and there’s not much
opportunity to display my leadership capability.” He said something to the effect, “Get
the hell out of here.” So, I saluted him and left. But after that within a day, I began
feeling really, really rotten. I ached. I couldn’t eat. That is I had no appetite and really
felt bad so I went on sick call. I had a pretty high temperature. I didn’t realize it but I
did. Maybe a 102, a 103, something like that. They said, “I think you got hepatitis.” I
think they pushed around my liver and that hurt, you know. That’s what the symptom
was anyway. So they evacuated me over to Owi Island.

LC: Okay. To the hospital where they had typhus running wild.

WL: I met an old friend from the Infantry there, Jack Callow. He had come
down with typhus and he had a temperature of a 106 or something like that. He lost all
his hair. He was in terrible shape. He survived incidentally but he was in bad shape. But
anyway I only had to spend one night at Owi and then I was put on a ship, no. I was put
on an airplane. We flew first to Hollandia and spent the night in an evac hospital or
something there at Hollandia. The only thing I remember about this trip the only thing
we had to eat at Owi and at Hollandia was macaroni and cheese. I don’t know why that
was but there must have been a surplus of macaroni and cheese. I remember that. Then
put on an airplane again and flown to a place called Nadzab. Nadzab, N-a-d-z-a-b.

Nadzab, New Guinea, which is up the Markham River from Lae, L-a-e. Huon Peninsula,
I guess is there geographically. Anyway, Lae was a hospital complex. Again we were
still in tents, but at least it was a hospital. Flown into Nadzab—incidentally as a footnote
Nadzab had been captured from the Japanese by one of the, perhaps the first airborne
assault of the Pacific War. The, I don’t remember the regiment that went in there. But
anyway they made the air assault on Nadzab a year or so before. Went into the hospital there and my entire ward was hepatitis. There didn’t seem to be a specific treatment, a specific drug that they used for hepatitis. I don’t know what they do now. But for us it was just rest and Australian sour balls. This was hard candy. Figure that one out. I don’t know why it was but we were fed sour balls, and we rested. In the process I also acquired viral pneumonia, so I was pretty sick there in Nadzab. Probably that’s a result of being very run down.

LC: Oh yeah. The exhaustion, yeah.

WL: I weighed only—I’m six feet tall and I weighed about a hundred and thirty-five pounds by that time. I was really emaciated.

LC: Was part of the strategy to get some food into you? Did they have the capability to do that?

WL: Yeah. I mean as it gradually got better the fevers went down and I don’t remember what the treatment was. If anything probably some sulfa for the pneumonia. That cleared up. I don’t remember now how long I was there, maybe a month. Then when I recovered I was trucked over to the coast, put on a small ship along with about might have been another twenty soldiers, maybe that many, on a ship called the Heinrich Von Swoll, Dutch obviously. Heinrich Von Swoll, which was a lumber schooner. It was a diesel powered ship not more than two hundred feet long I’d say at the most. We were put in the hold of this ship. We said, “To heck with this stuff. I mean here we are down in the hold.” There was nothing to sleep on it was just a shell down there. So we refused to do that and we climbed up. The master of the ship was a Dutchman, the crew were Javanese, and we slept on the fantail of the ship.

LC: Yeah, I think that would be preferable.

WL: Yeah.

LC: At least you could get some air.

WL: Yeah. So we sailed down the New Guinea coast from Lae down to Oro Bay, which is near Buna. At Oro Bay there was the Replacement Depot, which was the major area through which all soldiers had to pass when they were going to or from their units. Soldiers coming from the United States to join units in New Guinea and the Southwest Pacific went into the Replacement Depot and from there they were transferred to their
units. If you got out of the hospital anywhere near the Replacement Depot you had to go through that before you could get back to your unit. It was a miserable system. We hated it. I would have much rather gone immediately from the hospital back to my battalion but I had to go through the Replacement Depot.

LC: How long did it take for them to process you to…?

WL: The processing didn’t take any time at all. The delay was arranging transportation. There wasn’t enough of it in the Pacific theater. So I was with a guy named Sweeney from the Signal Company. He had been in the hospital and he and I teamed up and we were put in a tent. These squad tents were made for eight people and there were about twenty people in a tent. The cots were just side-by-side. Oro Bay was very, very hot. Again, it’s maybe 110 degrees. They tried to keep us busy with make-work jobs. You know, they call out garbage detail or something else. Sweeney and I, we figured that if we could escape that sort of detail we would. So each day there was a roll call and after every roll call then they started picking the details. You know, you’re going out and you’re going to dig a ditch here or you’re going to go out and cut bamboo on this one or you’re going to be on the garbage detail, you’re going to do something. Keep you busy. Well, Sweeney and I we just ran for a drainage ditch, hid in the ditch, and ran down the ditch. We’d get down to the base headquarters area where there was a library. The Red Cross was running in a Nepa hut, a long building built by the natives with thatched roof, nice airy place. There was a library there. There was also a theater, an amphitheater sort of thing, built there for shows that would come in like Bob Hope. Those folks would come in and around now and then. So that’s how we spent our day. It was all illegal. We could have been in deep trouble if we’d been caught. The commander of the base was a guy named Snuffy Smith, a colonel, who rode a horse around the area. We were told that he had been relieved of command of a regiment of the Division for incompetence of one kind or another. I could believe it. He rode around the camp on a horse. He was from the old Army obviously. He had a stockade for malcontents like Sweeney and me. This was a barbed wire enclosure and the prisoners in there slept in their pup tents in the middle of this barbed wire enclosure. It was really pretty miserable situation and you didn’t want to wind up there. So we were always pretty alert.
LC: So you were risking pretty good.

WL: Yeah. We were risking arrest for being absent, AWOL (absent without leave).

LC: So, did you just not, I mean I’m just trying to get this, you just didn’t allow yourself to be recognized at roll call thus you wouldn’t have to—?

WL: Yeah. Well we’d say, “Here,” when the roll was called. Right after roll call, we’d disappear.

LC: You’d vamoose out of there.

WL: Yeah. One day we were in this Red Cross tent, Red Cross building, library, and two MP (military police) jeeps pulled up in front. “Uh oh, we’ve had it now.” We ran to the back. They didn’t have—they had windows but no glass, of course. It was all open air. We jumped out of the windows and ran for the ditch and hid and got away. We didn’t get captured. But these MPs they were putting a cordon around the building. They weren’t looking for us specifically but they were looking for anybody that didn’t have a pass. It was almost impossible to get a pass to go down there. So, we escaped that one.

LC: That was a close call.

WL: Yeah. Another day we heard that Jack Benny was coming in to give a performance. The word got around that Jack Benny was going to be there that evening in the amphitheater. So Sweeney and I decided we’d go down early and get up front where we could see it. It was a big area, probably hold a thousand soldiers or so. So we got down in front. There were log benches that you’d sit on. We brought a poncho to put over our heads to keep the sun off for the rest of the day and sat there. Just about a few minutes before the performance was to start, MPs came down and they cleared out all of the rows where we were sitting. All the first four or five rows. Said, “You guys get in the back. These rows are for the officers.” Well, of course that didn’t sit too well with us because we figured most of the officers in this area weren’t combat officers anyway. They were all quartermasters or some other off the wall. They weren’t infantry guys like us. Although Sweeney was, he was a radioman or something. But anyway I felt like I deserved better treatment than that. Not that I did. Really ticked me off. Somebody told Jack Benny about that. Someone of his staff had seen this happen. All the soldiers that had been there all day waiting for the performance were sent off to the rear, and all these
officers came in. Benny got up on the stage and he said words to the effect, “I’m not
going to start this performance until all the officers in the front rows go to the rear.”

LC: No kidding. That’s very interesting. What happened?

WL: They all got up and left.

LC: No. Did they really?

WL: Yeah. All the soldiers came down to the front. I don’t remember now if
Sweeney and I got in to the front again but at least we saw what happened.

LC: That’s very interesting.

WL: Jack Benny was my favorite from then on.

LC: I bet he was too.

WL: So Sweeney and I, we survived that. Another thing about this Oro Bay
thing, it’s kind of an interesting footnote. If you were proven to be or if they believe you
to be a homosexual you could get sent back to the States. They didn’t want any
homosexuals in the line for damn good reason. But anyway at the end of our row of tents
there, there were about six tents that were reserved for homosexuals.

LC: This is at the Replacement Depot?

WL: This is at the Replacement Depot. Yeah. The Replacement Depot. These
guys were all being processed for return to the States because they were homosexual.
Their detail during the day was to work on the mess line. They had a really large mess
hall, all tents again, and a long chow line. You’d pick up your tray and you’d go through
the line like a cafeteria and these homosexuals were the servers. They were on this detail.
I’ll tell you what, this is true, I’m not making any of this up. These guys had gotten some
mechanic’s coveralls and they’d had them tailored so they were form fitting. Tight at the
waist, you know, and around the butt and so on. They were very, very attractive suits if
you go for that sort of thing and they wore makeup. They wore lipstick and rouge on the
chow line. You’d go there and before they’d throw in the mashed potatoes or whatever it
was, which was all dehydrated of course. But anyway they’d say, “You want some more,
honey?” They’d call you honey and deary and stuff like that. It really was very, very
uncomfortable. Irritating to us.

LC: How many of those guys were faking it?
WL: Well, that was a big question. That’s a question that came up a lot. How do you know whether they were real or just faking it in order to get out? Because they knew they could get out that way. I would say that very few. I don’t know of any real soldier who would fake that to get out.

LC: So you had a sense that these guys anyway were for real.

WL: They were for real. Of course they were exaggerating the whole thing to make a point I guess. One guy told me that he said he worked with, he was detailed to the dispensary. A fellow came in and he told the surgeon, the Army surgeon, that he was queer and surgeon says, “I don’t believe you.” He says, “If you don’t believe me, Doc, drop your drawers.” You know? That kind of thing so that was the old Army. I don’t know what they do now but—

LC: Were there guys that you thought probably were queer who didn’t get put into those tents? Not necessarily just at the depot but in other situations you thought, “Oh, he probably is queer.”

WL: Yeah. I suppose there were probably a lot of guys with that persuasion that served honorably in line units and suppressed their libidos, you might say, or whatever.

LC: Right. It just didn’t surface as an issue.

WL: Yeah.

LC: That’s very interesting. Those decisions were made by the doctors? The doctors would be the one you would—?

WL: The doctors had their, I’m guessing now because I didn’t get involved in it. But apparently the fellow that was claiming that had to get a doctor to certify that he was indeed homosexual.

LC: That’s interesting. They had a segregated area where they kept—

WL: Segregated area. Yeah.

LC: A specific job that they did. That’s really interesting.

WL: I don’t know who figured that, who told them to do that. But I guess they just had to keep busy and didn’t want them mixed in with the regular details.

LC: They’re all in one place.

WL: They [kept] them under control.

LC: Well Bill, let’s take a break there.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today’s date is the thirtieth of August 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in Special Collections Building and Bill is speaking by telephone from Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, I wonder if you could take us back to the time when you were recovering in Tacloban hospital. You had, in the hospital there at Tacloban, you had told us a little bit about the staff there and some of the other men who were injured and recovering there and that you were on the surgical ward. Can you describe conditions generally, hygiene conditions and what you guys had to eat and so on?

WL: Well, I can’t remember much about the diet except it was good. I mean—

LC: Above average?

WL: Yeah. It was standard Army chow, which was for the tropics it was okay. See, most of the food down there had to be dehydrated. Potatoes were dehydrated potatoes that they mixed with, you know, like—well, now you can get it and it’s pretty standard to make mashed potatoes out of a box. But it was that and then they had eggs were powdered eggs that they made into scrambled eggs and stuff like that. I can’t remember any complaints about the food. It was okay. A couple of incidents there. While I was in the hospital President Roosevelt died and that was quite a shock to everyone.

LC: Yeah. I was going to ask you if you remembered anything about that.

WL: I remember that very well.

LC: How did you hear about it?

WL: They must have announced it. Sent a little flyer around to the wards. We didn’t, as I said, we didn’t have radios, at least I didn’t, and there were no radios in the wards. So someone came through and told us about it. There may have been—and I remember there was another message, I still have it I believe, from General MacArthur.
He sent a message around to all hospital patients thanking them for their service and that sort of stuff.

LC: You still have your copy of that?
WL: I think I do. Yeah. Yeah, I could send it to you.
LC: That would be great.
WL: Another thing that happened – I mentioned Willy Paradise, French guy from Maine, and he was hurt. Well, had a lot of shell fragments or grenade fragments in him and he got this colostomy, never seen one of those things before. I was ambulatory. I could walk around but he couldn’t. He had to go in a wheel chair and I used to push his wheel chair around to the outside to—I don’t remember where we went. We probably went down into the PX (post exchange) to get shaving cream or something like that. I don’t know. Any case I remember one time I was taking him down and I lost control of the chair, dumped him on the ground. Boy that would really upset me. It didn’t upset him nearly as much as it did me. I had to pick him up and get him back onto the chair. He was very skinny and, well, emaciated because of his wounds.

LC: I’m sure. Do you know what happened to him?
WL: No. I believe I was discharged before he was. So after my wound was pretty well along towards healing I was transferred to another hospital—well, what did they call it? Recovery or something like that. It was for soldiers that had been wounded or had been very sick and were transferred to this other hospital where we didn’t need any nursing care from there on. It was kind of a holding detachment until we got our strength back. I was in that hospital for probably three or four weeks, maybe a little longer. While I was there I was assigned to guard duty. I was given a rifle and some ammunition. My post was at a beach resort for officers. It was kind of interesting. They had some huts there, some buildings. I remember one of the cottages was a honeymoon cottage for newlyweds.

LC: Do you know where this was Bill?
WL: Pardon me?
LC: Do you know where it was? Where it was located?
WL: Well, it was right on the beach there at Tacloban. Yeah.
LC: Sounds kind of nice.
WL: Yeah. It was nice. It was a pretty place with, you know, coconut palms and sandy beach. Very nice setting. I was very envious of the whole affair for that matter. Another thing that happened there, there was a violent thunderstorm. I recall a bolt of lightning hit a palm tree right at the entrance of a tent and the bolt went into the tent and killed two soldiers right inside the tent of this hospital. That was quite an event.

LC: That’s horrendous.

WL: Yeah. There were some pretty heavy storms there from time to time as you know.

LC: Oh sure. Wow. That’s quite incredible.

WL: Yeah. What else happened there? Not very much. One footnote to the Biak thing that I should have mentioned before that just occurred to me. We made the landing on the twenty-seventh of May. My first child, my daughter, was born on the thirtieth of May in California. I found out about it through a Red Cross telegram that was delivered around the fifteenth of June so it was quite—in other words this only illustrates the point that communications were not instant the way they are these days. Took about over two weeks to find out that I’d became a father and that my—then we got our first mail shortly after that I think on Biak. Of course I got a letter from home then explaining exactly what had happened. Everything was okay but it was just—

LC: How important was mail to you guys? Do you remember that?

WL: It was very important to me. It was important to them all, I’m sure it was. I got regular mail. My wife wrote all the time, virtually everyday. So I used to get a whole stack of mail. Of course it wasn’t delivered while we were in action but once things quieted down a little bit why we got mail. I’d get a whole stack of letters from home. You know, of course I wrote whenever I had a chance, which was everyday once we got into a bivouac area.

LC: Were you issued with stationary or did you have to get it at the PX?

WL: No, we had to buy it, I think. They had what they called V-mail. That was a one sheet that folded into an envelope. It was just one page and that was probably issued to us, although I don’t remember for sure. Of course there was no charge for postage. All you did was write “free” on it. In fact, incoming mail to an overseas address, a military address, was free also.
LC: Do you remember anybody who, in your unit over time in any of the different placements that you had, that got a letter they didn’t like?

WL: Well, yeah, once in awhile. I can’t remember any specific incident. They called it the Dear John letter. “Dear John, I found another guy.” You know, that sort of stuff.

LC: That kind of stuff of course did go on.

WL: Oh sure. I mean I was overseas only, what—I went over in January and got home in December—about twenty-two months I guess, something like that. Which was relatively a short time compared to other soldiers in that division. The Division was the first division deployed overseas. When I got to it there were guys that had been there for a year and a half already. So some of them spent upwards of three years overseas without a leave, without any home leave of course. In fact once in awhile they’d put out a call—you could go for leave in Australia. But that was only about one man per company was allowed to do that, which was pretty long odds.

LC: How was that determined? Was it—?

WL: I don’t know whether it was by lot or by time. The first consideration would have been how long were you overseas. How long since you’ve had a leave. The second consideration was probably whether your conduct was acceptable. From then on it was probably by lot but I don’t remember. I was never eligible for one. I wasn’t over there long enough.

LC: Right. Well, how did you get rotated off this guard duty that you had at the…?

WL: Well, my wound had healed enough so I was finally shipped back to Mindanao where my regiment was still, my battalion was still in Mindanao. And I flew back, as I remember now. Yeah. I’m positive I flew back from Tacloban to Zamboanga. We were just outside of the city up the coast a little ways, you know, coconut plantation.

LC: Well, first of all, were the guys in the unit glad to have you back? Glad to see you back?

WL: Yeah. I had a few friends that were glad to see me back and the company commander was pretty glad. By the time I got back I got promoted to corporal. Well, Captain Kelly promoted me to PFC somewhere before. I think, before I was wounded.
Then I got back and appointed to corporal and was squad leader of the machine gun squad. Then to sergeant and I was machine gun section sergeant. I had two guns, while we’re still in Zamboanga. Then within a few weeks I was a staff sergeant, and he made me company recon sergeant. Reconnaissance sergeant in the heavy weapons company handled the maps and was to recon positions for the mortar platoon in advance of the movement, you know going to set up the mortars. So that was my job. I didn’t know anything about that. I knew map reading pretty well and, I guess, figured so long as I could read and write I could be recon sergeant. So that’s what he made me. I was glad of that. My wound still hadn’t healed. It was still seeping. Still I’d keep a dressing on it. When I wore a pack the buckle of the pack dug into the thing and that was kind of uncomfortable and a nuisance, so I didn’t wear a pack a lot.

LC: To what do you attribute this series of promotions, bill?

WL: Well, I think he began to appreciate that I was at least as smart as most of the other sergeants and should have been promoted a long time before that. So, he was a good officer and one of the best I’d known in the 186. I really don’t know. I really did advance pretty fast once I got to PFC (private first class) which took almost two years. Most people got, during that war, they got promoted to PFC within a year. But it took me a long time. Then, while we were in Zamboanga, the battalion appointed me as battalion gas NCO (non-commissioned officer), chemical warfare NCO. In addition to my duties as recon sergeant for M Company I became the battalion gas NCO. They sent me to Luzon—I flew over to Luzon to a chemical warfare school that the Army had established in what was a, I understand, a veterinary college outside of Manila. I reported in there and began training in chemical warfare, mostly in protection against rather than the employment of chemicals. I was in that school. Very close to the school was again the old Replacement Depot that had moved up from Oro Bay and was located there. I met a fellow that I had known in the old Infantry. He had been in the Replacement Depot as a cadre there all the while. He was a clerk typist. He was assigned to that because he could type. He was the only guy in the Infantry I guess that could type. So he was assigned to the Replacement Depot as a clerk. I met up with him and we had a nice reunion.

LC: What was his name? Do you remember?
WL: Yeah. His name was Johnny Gutfleisch, a good German name.
LC: Can you give a time frame for your arrival at the chemical warfare?
WL: No. If you can remember when the nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima—what was that, June?

LC: August.
WL: August? Well, that was when I was there. Because I was there when the bomb was dropped and then of course the next three days later I guess it was at Nagasaki. Then the four or five days later the Japanese surrendered and I was still there at—the place was called Laguna de Bay, as I remember. I was there when the Japs surrendered. Johnny and I went into Manila that night, we got a pass. We were in a bar in Manila and there was a great celebration out in the bay. All the Navy ships out there were firing their anti-aircraft guns into the air and the fragments were falling like rain around the place. I might say we took refuge in the bar, had been there anyway, because all this stuff was falling down. It was quite an exciting event. Of course that meant the war was over. Before I had gone over to chemical warfare school we had our first briefing on what we were going to do next. Our division, and of course our regiment and battalion, were going to be what they called floating reserve for the landing at Kyushu. I don’t remember how many divisions were going in. I saw some reports on it much later. I didn’t know all of this at that time. I just know that we were going to be in that invasion. I found out later, I believe, that we were going to be floating reserve. Means we’d be on transports out in the stream until the initial beach had been secured then we were going to go in. At that time quite a few of the veterans of the battalion were going home on points. I think you probably heard about the point system.

LC: Yeah. If you can explain a little bit about it though or outline.
WL: Yeah. I can’t give you precise figures. There were several different categories through which you got points for rotation home. The first one was time overseas, how many months overseas, you got a certain number of points for every month overseas. You got ten points, I think, for having the combat infantry badge, which we all had. You got another small amount of points for a wound, which raised my total a little bit. What other criteria? I can’t think of any others but those were the main ones. Of course, obviously, the most points you’d accrue from being overseas for a length of time.
So the guys that had come over originally with the Division and gone in to the first campaign in New Guinea and then back again, those people were rotating home pretty rapidly while we were waiting for the invasion of Japan.

LC: By virtue of time served if nothing else.

WL: Yes. By virtue of time served overseas. So we were getting quite a few replacements. In my machine gun section I got four or five young soldiers who came from the Army Air Corps engineer units. The Air Corps had its own engineer battalions and they were specialists apparently in building airstrips. They didn’t need them anymore. I mean we were already, “We’re not going to build anymore airstrips.” We had all we needed apparently because we were already up in Okinawa and Luzon. We didn’t have to build anymore island strips. So these people were reassigned as infantry. Unfortunately they hadn’t had any significant training in infantry and also their morale was not really good. They didn’t want to be in the infantry. So it was a rather difficult leadership problem motivating these folks to learn what they had to know to be in a machine gun squad.

LC: Was their some resentment do you think?

WL: They were resentful, yeah. They figured that since they didn’t need them as Air Corps engineers they should be sent home. Of course most of them hadn’t been overseas more than four or five months. I had to do a little bit of leadership there to get them motivated.

LC: How did you handle a situation like that?

WL: Well, if a fellow didn’t fall out for reveille, like we were supposed to, I’d just dump his bunk over and stomp on him a little bit, things like that. That’s what a sergeant had to do.

LC: You had to kind of put the wood to him a little.

WL: Right. Yeah. You had to get their attention. I was a little concerned really, actually not having good veterans in machine gun squads caused me a little concern. To go into a major, another major campaign with inexperienced troops. I didn’t look forward to that. I was awfully happy that they dropped the bomb and that was really a very important consideration. If the old guys that had been in the squad all through New Guinea and then Biak and so on, if they had still been there I wouldn’t have felt nearly as
apprehensive about this. The oncoming campaign if I did with these guys. You had to
do some pretty heavy training there and intense training in Zamboanga to get these
people up to speed. Not that being a machine gunner is, carrying ammunition, is a high
tech job. But at least you want people who will show you that they have the stamina and
the guts to keep up.

LC: Right. I mean in training, how do you make those qualities apparent?
WL: Well, we went out to a range. We built a range outside of the camp there.
You load them up with the ammunition and the guns and I got there, put the gun in
action, and start firing. That’s about all there is to it. We didn’t teach them things like
the leader’s rule and gunner’s rule or any of the real technical stuff with machine
gunning. That was a squad leader’s job anyway.

LC: Bill, thinking back on it with the expertise that you’ve acquired subsequently.
Do you still think it was a good idea to have used the bomb in the way that President
Truman did decide to do it?

WL: Oh yes. Yes. I’ve thought about it a lot. But in the end many more lives
were saved by ending the war at that time than going through a major invasion of Japan.
I’m talking about lives on both sides for that matter. I think much more—from a
morality standpoint I think the firebombing of Tokyo was much less excusable than the
atom bomb. Because the atom bomb had a certain, there was a certain finality to it. I
mean that really got their attention. You could have burned Japan to the ground with
firebombs I suppose and it would have been more gradual. But this sudden event, in fact
two of them back to back, really convinced them that all hope was lost. It was done with
such suddenness that—much more effective than the fire bombing and much more
justifiable I think. In retrospect, if you think about all of the terrible crimes that the
Japanese Army committed throughout the Pacific and in China, Java, and other places, I
really think they had it coming. Not that their civilians had it coming but they were
just—

LC: But the military government?
WL: Yeah. It was just they had to pay for the government. That’s about it I
guess. I don’t think there is any doubt that we would have killed a lot more Japanese on
Kyushu and we would have had a lot more of our soldiers killed too in the event if we’d
had to make that landing on Kyushu. That would have been only the beginning. We
would have had to, after we put a hold there, we would have had to go into Honshu, I
believe. It would have been a long protracted event. Morale in the American Army; I
don’t know how much longer it could have lasted at a very high level either for that
matter. The battles in Okinawa were so severe; the casualties were very high there for
the number of troops committed. In the Navy too, the kamikaze attacks on the Navy
cauised a great deal of damage. You could have anticipated more of that on the ships
making the landing on Kyushu. It would have been a very costly event, much more
costly than the result of the atom bombs. In summary that’s the way I believe.

LC: To your mind Bill, were there other pieces of the calculus in terms of
President Truman’s decision making? I don’t know how closely you’ve studied this or if
you’ve thought about it—beyond the weighing in the balance of potential casualties,
American casualties particularly. In other words, did America’s post-war relations with
the Soviet Union or the Soviet Union’s entrance in to the war against Japan—?

WL: Yeah. That might have been entered in to it too. It was probably not a wise
decision to insist that the Soviets come into Manchuria. That didn’t have a great—I don’t
think had any appreciable effect on what Japan did. But having the Soviets in there, and
of course they did go down and they recovered some islands in the northern—off of
Hokkaido, what, Sakhalin?

LC: Sakhalin.

WL: Yeah. They took the rest of Sakhalin and so on. To get it over with quickly
was probably pretty important. I don’t know whether the Soviets would have landed on
Hokkaido or not. But they might have, you know, and they would have taken that island.

LC: Of course it ensured that the United States would do most of the steering of
post-war Japan as well.

WL: Yeah. That’s right. I think that we had a stake in keeping Japan from falling
under the Soviet’s sphere. The more quickly we could get it over with the better, from
that standpoint. I’m just surmising that that was in their calculations when they made the
decision.

LC: Bill, let me ask you if I can a little bit about the curriculum, if you will, at the
chemical warfare’s school. Just to give people a taste of the preparations that you were
making and what the defensive capabilities were in the event that, for example the
Japanese decided to deploy?

WL: Well, the only thing I can really recall there is we were shown the different
kinds of Japanese munitions, what they had. Some of these munitions had been
recovered in the islands of the Pacific. The Japanese had some chemical warfare shells
and grenades in—which surprised me that they had grenades with chemicals in them. I
can’t recall what kind of a chemical. It might have been just tear gas sort of stuff,
probably. But we were shown that they had mustard, lewisite—I don’t recall them
talking much about nerve agents or blood agents but they probably did. I remember
seeing a glass ball that they said was filled with some sort of an agent, what kind of an
agent it was I don’t know. I don’t remember that much. But mostly we were being
taught how to train soldiers in the use of the gas mask. Of course that had been done in
basic training. Anyway, we had to review that and give classes on how to prepare. What
chemical agents smell like and so on. It was just kind of a repeat of what we’d had with a
little bit more detail from basic training.

LC: A little more urgency it sounds like too.

WL: Yeah. Right. Because they said that there’s a fair chance the Japanese, since
they had this stuff, when pressed to the wall they’d use it. Now, I found out later—I read
not long ago, that there was a strong element in the United States Army that advocated
using, us using, chemical agents in the invasion. I don’t know how true that is but I don’t
know how—

LC: Where did you come across that? Do you remember?

WL: This is two or three weeks ago. I can’t recall where I read it but—or maybe
I saw it on the History Channel. But there was a consideration given to using chemical
agents, and also to use more nuclear weapons in the invasion of Kyushu. Apparently we
had six or seven of them ready to go. I don’t know how they would use them. We didn’t
have any what they called tactical nukes at that time. These were large-scale aerial
bombs.

LC: Right. These were all going to be air dropped.

WL: Yeah. Right. They’d have to be. They didn’t have anything to, you know,
in a rocket or in an artillery projectile at that time.
LC: Right. That’s interesting.

WL: But we definitely were not told that we were going to use it in the classes that I had.

LC: It was all defensive.

WL: All defensive, yeah.

LC: How long did you stay in the Manila area after the Japanese surrender?

WL: Oh, only probably less than a week. I imagine that they shut down the school almost immediately and sent everybody back to their units. The only restraint would have been getting enough transport to get you out of there. It was only a few days.

LC: So you moved back—?

WL: Right back to my battalion.

LC: Which was—?

WL: Which was back in Zamboanga, outside of Zamboanga. Then within a short time, and I can’t remember the dates now, within a month we got on a ship and we sailed up to Japan. I remember there was a typhoon in the South China Sea as we went past there, past Okinawa. We landed at Kure, K-u-r-e, Kure, which was a major Japanese naval base on Honshu. We landed there and that place had been bombed very severely. There were some sunken ships in the harbor. There were a lot of submarines there, tied up.

LC: US subs?

WL: No. The Japanese subs. We got off the ship onto the dock at Kure. We marched down the street. We hadn’t done much marching, you know. We’d done a lot of hiking but we hadn’t done any formal drill type marching. But we formed up in a column of fours. We had our rifles. I don’t remember now where the machine guns were. We didn’t have the guns with us. They may have been on the ship in trucks or something, I don’t know. But we were all marching as riflemen at that time. We marched down the street of Kure towards the railroad station. The significant impression I have there is that in each side street off that main street that we were marching on, in each little alley there was a Japanese policeman with his back to us. They were facing away from us down the streets and down the alleys. There was not a soul on the street. We were all by ourselves. All you heard was the tramping of the boots as we marched.
down the street towards the railroad station. We got onto a Japanese—in fact Captain
Kelly had given me a map of this place. I was guiding us to the railroad station. So we
got to the railroad station, we got on the railroad cars, and we took a ride, I’m guessing
now, I can’t remember, maybe fifteen miles. Not any longer than that. We came to a
place, little town called Kaitaichi.

LC: Can you spell it?

WL: Let’s see. I’m trying. Let me write it down. Yeah. I think it was K-a-i-t-a-i
and then i-c-h-i. Ichi probably means village or town or something like that. I don’t
know. Kaitaichi was the name of the place. There was a Japanese garrison there, had
been. There were no Japanese soldiers around. There was a warehouse or a set of
warehouses and that’s where we were going to be billeted. We marched into this area
and there were no—we didn’t have any cots. We had to just put our ponchos down on
the concrete floor. In fact we didn’t have any blankets either. It wasn’t very cold.

LC: Now, was this the company or the entire .

WL: All of the . Of course, we were separated by battalions. I think all three
battalions came in there though. Of course we were Battalion. M Company stayed
together but again we didn’t have our guns. I imagine the regimental trains might have
had all the guns by that time. I guess we got them back but I can’t remember that part of
it. The one thing I remember very vividly about that warehouse is it was infested with
fleas. It was really terrible until we got the DDT going and cleaned out the fleas. It was
really miserable—all bitten badly. What else happened there?

LC: Did you come across civilians as time went on?

WL: Yes. In the first place, Captain Kelly assigned me to be kind of the provost
sergeant and he gave me a detail of two or three jeeps with soldiers. They issued us
military police brassards to wear. We became what they called security patrol or
something like that in the town of Kaitaichi because soldiers were given passes to go
down and look around in the town. So, I was in charge of the security patrol in Kaitaichi.
I can’t call it MP credentials when you get a brassard but anyway—

LC: But you had some powers like that.
WL: I didn’t have much to do. Our soldiers were pretty well behaved. I don’t remember having to apprehend anybody for doing anything out of line. There weren’t very many passes given anyway. So, one day I was driving through the village and a man came out. Did I tell you about this before?

LC: No.

WL: Probably not. A Japanese came out of his house and he waved to me and I stopped the jeep and he came up to the jeep and he introduced himself as Mr. Kenichi Kodama. Spoke excellent English. He told me that—he invited me into his house. So I went into his house with him, took off my boots of course before I went in. It was a beautiful little house with—have you been to Japan?

LC: I have not. No.

WL: Well, anyway, they have distinctive architecture. A lot of the walls are made of paper.

LC: Sure. Uh-huh.

WL: It’s a very—nice hardwood floor, so on. Went in there and sat down and his wife came in on her knees with a tray of tea, teacups and a tea pitcher and so on, and served us tea. I thought that was kind of interesting that she wouldn’t stand up in my presence. I don’t know if she treated him like that everyday. It was kind of strange. But anyway so I had tea with him and he told me that he had been the chauffeur for Mary Pickford. Remember that name?

LC: She was a silent film star. Yeah?

WL: Yeah. Yeah. She was married to Douglas Fairbanks at one time. Anyway, he was their chauffeur in Hollywood.

LC: No kidding!

WL: Yeah. That’s what he told me.

LC: It’d be tough to make something like that up. You’d have to be pretty creative.

WL: Right. He told me that before the war started, perhaps in 1940, early ’41, he had made a trip back to Japan to visit his family and then Pearl Harbor came and he was not allowed to leave so he was stuck there. That’s why he was there. He had a brother—I went to visit him two or three times after that. At one of the visits he brought his
brother in. He was tall for a Japanese. I remember that about him, very nice looking fellow. But he had been in Hiroshima. I probably should have mentioned Kaitaichi was really a suburb of Hiroshima, right on the edge. His brother had been much closer to the bomb when it went off and he was rather badly burned. I can’t tell now whether he was burned by radiation or by heat. But anyway parts of his body that were exposed and not covered by his kimono when the bomb went off were rather badly blistered. His face was blistered and so on. He was still—of course he didn’t have these blisters yet. I mean this was a month or so after the bomb, but he had been hurt by the bomb. I don’t know whether he had radiation sickness or was going to expire or not. I couldn’t tell that. But he couldn’t speak any English so we didn’t have much of a conversation. But I found that out about him. Kodama gave me some presents. He gave me a calendar. I bought a kimono from him that I brought home for my wife and he had a—what else? There was a Japanese print of a Samurai that he gave to me. It didn’t have any real monetary value but it’s a nice print. I still have it. We corresponded after I got home for a few years after that. But that kind of dried up after a few years. Another thing that I did while we were in Kaitaichi, our company supply sergeant and I became pretty good friends. His name was Guba, G-u-b-a. I can’t remember his first name. George, I think. Anyway, he was, of course, he was a staff sergeant too, or he might have been a tech sergeant. We went down to the railroad station in Kaitaichi and climbed aboard a locomotive. Of course they were still using steam locomotives. I was always attracted to steam locomotives anyway since I was a kid. We climbed into this locomotive. The engineer was up there and a fireman and they were making steam. They were headed to Hiroshima, which was about perhaps five miles. We rode in the cab of the locomotive into Hiroshima station. Hiroshima station was on the edge of the destruction. It had been damaged but it was still intact. We got off in Hiroshima and we walked down the street. By this time the Japanese had cleared off the streets with bulldozers or people that had taken the rubble off the street so you could walk. But the entire section that we were in had been virtually destroyed. It was melted glass here and there and evidence of a very large fire. Of course the blast effect had knocked almost everything down. We walked all the way into what later we found out was ground zero and climbed up into a building
that was still standing there. You’ve probably seen the pictures of, there’s a dome, a
domed building, and the skeleton of that dome is still there.

LC: Yes. It’s a very famous photograph.

WL: Yeah. Well, we were right there.

LC: You climbed up in there?

WL: Yeah. The building next to it. There’s another building next to it. Actually
there were some people working in another building very close to there. We could see
them through the windows, women, typing. They already started business again there.
Right there.

LC: You’re kidding!

WL: At ground zero. Yeah. It was weird. Of course we, George, Guba and I, we
didn’t have any understanding of residual radiation or anything like that at that time. We
didn’t know anything about it.

LC: No one stopped you?

WL: No.

LC: There was no one around probably.

WL: Actually, in thinking about it later, I took a course in nuclear effects and
employment many, many years later at the Command and General Staff College. I found
out, at least I’m pretty sure, that the fireball of that weapon did not touch the ground so
that there was very little, if any, residual radiation in the Earth around ground zero
anyway. So, we were not really in any significant danger of being there at that time. So,
that’s what we did and we went back. We walked back to the railroad station and hooked
another ride on a train going back to Kaitaichi.

LC: Bill, did that walk leave an impression on you as to the magnitude of
American military power?

WL: I don’t think I had any ideas about that. I thought that I’ve never seen
anything as thoroughly destroyed over such a wide area. Hiroshima was very flat and it’s
kind of like a bowl. The hills around were rather high around the edge of it and of course
had a very large bay. Another thing, the only other significant duty that we had, that I
had around Hiroshima, I was on a detail with a lieutenant, can’t remember who it was.

There were about five or six of us that were detailed to go around Hiroshima Bay on a
Japanese tugboat and inventory military stores that were in the several islands in the bay. So we got on this tugboat and we went to—oh, there are four or five islands. We went ashore on these islands into some bunkers, caves, and other buildings here and counted things like artillery tubes, cannon tubes. There were naval guns, there was ammunition, there was even things as mundane as paper and pencils and things like that in these store, in these military stores. Army and Navy stores around Hiroshima Bay. So our job was to inventory this stuff. Later on when we turned in our reports the Army, US Army, sent landing craft into those areas and all the stuff was loaded on to these Army landing craft and taken out into the bay there and sunk. They just destroyed all that stuff that the Japs had there.

LC: Really?

WL: Yeah. Gave us some more justification for the selection of Hiroshima as the target. It was a major Japanese logistical center. It was the headquarters of an Army group, found out later. So, it had military significance as a target.

LC: Did you pick up either from the Japanese friend that you made or along the way on any of these other travels, the sense of how individual Japanese were reacting to the loss, the surrender, or the beginnings of what was clearly going to be an American military occupation?

WL: No, I didn’t. The only Japanese I had contact with was Kodama and of course he was, well, he was unique. Well, not unique but he was different from the being a regular Japanese citizen who lived there all his life and had no other contact with Americans other than the bomb. So no I didn’t get a sense of resentment or bitterness. Remember, the Japanese, the locomotive engineer, he didn’t—if he had had a choice he wouldn’t have let us on his locomotive, put it that way. But we were there and we were the conquerors and he couldn’t say no. Not that we had to pull a gun on him or anything. But he just accepted us as being in charge, I guess, is why he let us on there.

LC: But you got the sense from him that he wasn’t too happy about it?

WL: Yeah. Yeah, that was pretty clear. We didn’t get a big smile and, “How are you?” “Good morning” or anything like that from him.

LC: Do you remember anything more about the types of supplies that you inventoried? Were there food supplies as well?
WL: I don’t recall seeing any food out on those islands. It was all ordnance or—
the only other departure from being ordnance was reams of typing paper.
LC: So, administrative—
WL: Yeah. Administrative stuff like that, but most of it was ordnance.
Ammunition of all kinds. I do remember one island had a very large number of infantry
rifles and carbines and pistols. We recovered a lot of those and brought them back to the
battalion, back to the regiment I guess. Every soldier in the regiment was given a
Japanese pistol and/or a carbine. I got a carbine and a pistol.
LC: As souvenirs?
WL: Yeah. As souvenirs. Take home. Yeah. I still have the pistol. I gave the
carbine to my father-in-law. But I kept the pistol. But he got one of those. Another
thing the regiment did—a couple of things. The division headquarters took over a
Japanese brewery that was on the edge of Hiroshima. It was still operating. So we had
plenty of good Japanese beer. Another thing they did was to establish a whorehouse for
the regiment. I never saw that one. Wasn’t interested in that. But they did have one
because they wanted to limit as much as they could the venereal disease problem. So
they had division surgeons or regimental surgeons out there examining the women before
they give them a bill of health and allow them to ply their trade there.
LC: Presumably these are Japanese women.
WL: Oh yes. The soldiers were given passes to go over there. I never saw the
place.
LC: Where was it?
WL: It was right outside of Hiroshima. I’m sure that this practice was followed
all through Japan with the other divisions that went in. In fact, my brother-in-law was a
division surgeon in the Cav Division and he had to establish that facility for them. He
didn’t establish it but he had to either himself or send other doctors over to check the
women.
LC: That’s very interesting.
WL: I don’t think they do that anymore. They didn’t do it in Vietnam. I know
that.
LC: Right. Well, I think there was some local entrepreneurial spirit there in Vietnam.

WL: Yeah. The US Army didn’t have to get involved in that. It was kind of a freelance operation.

LC: Did you have the sense that you would remain as part of the occupation force for any length of time?

WL: I didn’t give it any thought. Our main thought of everybody there was, “The war is over, let’s go home.” There was a great, you may have read about this before in other places, but there was a great hue and cry in the United States among the families of soldiers that were still overseas. “Bring them home. What are they doing over there? I mean, let’s disband the Army. We don’t need an Army anymore. Get rid of all that stuff and bring our men home.” That was the thing. People were writing their congressmen and writing the president and so on. “My boy’s been over there for two years and how come he’s not home yet?” It was a terrible strain on the Army to handle that sort of stuff. But in fact the company commander told me that if I would stay and not go home—I had enough points to go home at this time. He said, “If you’d say I’ll make you first sergeant.” So that would have been a jump from staff sergeant to master sergeant and then the company first sergeant if I’d stay. I said, “That’s very kind of you but no thanks. I want to go home too.” Of course I had a daughter now that was about, what, about eighteen months old or something I hadn’t seen. So, I wanted to go home. So I turned down that offer and within a little while I got my orders. By that time I was one of the older guys there. All of the original members had long gone. The original members of the 186 that had gone over with them in 1942, they were all gone.

LC: How did you get home?

WL: I was taken—I got on a train and went up to, I believe to Nagoya, Japan and there was put on a fast transport, can’t remember the name of that ship now. But it was a fast transport. Probably made about twenty-three knots or so. I remember going through a terrific storm in the North Pacific. The ship was almost on its side. It was almost hard to stand up, but anyway we got through that all right. We went into the port of Vancouver, Washington. That is up the Columbia River, beautiful trip up the Columbia. It’s a very narrow gorge as you steam up to—Vancouver Barracks is where it is, which is
just on the other side of the river from Portland. Got off the ship there in Vancouver
Barracks. Spent one or two days, probably not more than two days, at Vancouver
Barracks and put on trains to—I was trained down to Camp Beale, California. Beale is
just north of Sacramento and later became an Air Force base. But Camp Beale was the
separation center for the Army on the Pacific Coast and I was discharged there. Upon
discharge I signed up for the enlisted reserve corps. Not very many soldiers did that.
They didn’t want to have anything more to do with the Army. But I figured that if we
went to war again very soon—I don’t know whether I was prescient about this or not.
But I couldn’t quite believe it was all over and I figured that if we went to war again I
wanted to go back at least as a staff sergeant.

LC: You wanted to preserve your rank?

WL: Right. I didn’t want to start all over again if I had to go back so I signed up
for enlisted reserve corps as staff sergeant.

LC: Did you actually think there might be continuing conflict somewhere? I
mean it was a reasonable assumption from everything that was happening so—

WL: Yeah. I couldn’t quite believe that we were going to be lifelong friends with
our Soviet allies. I would be exaggerating if I told you that I really thought we were
going to have another war right away but I don’t know. I guess I just had the feeling that
I really did like the Army once I got over the bad parts of it and if I had to do it again I
wouldn’t resist it.

LC: Well, what did they tell you that your obligations would be as a reservist?

WL: Three years. It was a three year reserve. I didn’t have to go to a lot of
meetings. I didn’t have to do any active duty. It was called inactive reserve. There
wasn’t much more to it than that. There was no pay involved; I wouldn’t draw any pay at
all but at least I could—

LC: You didn’t have to have any exercises or—?

WL: No, no. I didn’t have to do any training or anything like that. I just had to
sign up and be ready to go if called. That was all that was to it. So then I got on the train
again and went down to—let’s see, how did I get home? I might have taken a bus from
Beale down to Oakland where my wife was and they gave me a little sticker to put on my
uniform. Of course I didn’t have any civilian clothes. I had to go home in my uniform.
But they gave a little sticker to put on your pocket that you were no longer on active duty. It was a little symbol of some kind. Some people called it the ruptured duck, which is kind of silly but—

LC: It signified that you weren’t on active duty as you were traveling and so on?

WL: Right that you were no longer really in the Army. You looked like it but with this little sticker you had on your pocket why, that showed that you weren’t really a soldier anymore.

LC: So, presumably, nobody had to give you special privileges or—?

WL: Right, right. I guess I didn’t have to salute an officer if I saw one.

LC: There you go! So, Bill, what did you think would lie before you in terms of employment and so on?

WL: Well, the main thing I had to think about was getting a job and earning a living. Now I had a wife and baby and I had to find a job and that was my main concern. What would I do? I had a college degree and I thought—my major was political science and public administration. I had always thought that eventually I would like to go to law school. But now with that family commitment that was not in the cards. I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll become a civil servant of some sort in the government bureaucracy somewhere.” But the government wasn’t hiring anybody. They were firing people.

LC: They were trying to get rid of them.

WL: Yeah. So, that wasn’t in the cards so I got another job and went to work.

LC: Well, did you stay in the bay area?

WL: Yes. My father gave me a piece of land in San Leandro, California. We built a house, five room cottage, you might say, there. We lived in an apartment for a while but then we built this house and lived there until I went back into the Army. And I worked for a company called the LA Spring and Wire Corporation. It was kind of a weird job. I started out as a timekeeper at a dollar an hour, which was fair wages. It wasn’t very good. But then within a short time I got promoted to what they called sales engineer. I did the designing of what they called, well, what did they call, industrial springs. That is you have to calculate the load of a spring and the kind of size of wire you’re going to use, the pitch of the coils, and all that stuff for engines, diesel engines and other applications. I became a spring engineer on the job. I did that. I got a raise and it
looked pretty good but I wasn’t really happy with it. It wasn’t the kind of thing I really
wanted to devote my life too.

LC: Were you bored? Is that fair to say?

WL: It wasn’t so bored. It was kind of a technical job and you had to do it right
or you cause a lot of trouble. So it wasn’t I was bored. I just felt I wasn’t contributing
much to anything. I figured I wanted to do something that I could take some credit for
later on. So there was a notice in the paper that said to the effect if you had served for
two years or more in the Army during the war, if you had had a minimum of two years of
college, you could apply for a direct commission. With that you would have kind of a
tentative commission. It would be subject to completion of the course. Anyway, I would
be commissioned in the infantry and would be sent to officer training at Fort Benning and
become an officer in the US Army Reserve and immediately be put on active duty. So
that looked pretty good to me. I figured, again, I was thinking—this was in 1949 and the
Cold War is really effectively started and things looked kind of dicey all around the
world. I thought, “Well, we might be at war again pretty soon and the next time I go I
want to be an officer. I don’t want to be a private soldier or sergeant anymore. I think I
should be an officer.” So, I applied and I was accepted I think it was the twentieth of
May 1949. It was the date of my commission. I got on a train for—wait a minute. Did I
fly? I think I flew. My first civilian air flight—I flew to Fort Benning, I believe. Any
case I got to Fort Benning and trained for three months and then got my final
commission. I was number one in my class at Fort Benning for that matter.

LC: No kidding.

WL: Yeah. I learned quite a bit about infantry over the years and a lot of the guys
in that class were not infantry to start with. They had been in other branches so they
didn’t know as much as I did about things.

LC: You’d had some on the job training for that as well.

WL: So I graduated and was—my first assignment was with the Infantry
Division in Europe: Germany. So, after the three months training—actually I’d signed up
for jump school upon graduation but as things happen, in a softball game I slipped on
some wet grass and twisted my knee. It was about the size of a soccer ball with the
swelling and so they cancelled my airborne school. I couldn’t go airborne so—in fact I
graduated on crutches.

LC: It was a fork in the road.

WL: Yeah. That’s right. That’s one of these things. If the grass hadn’t been wet
I would have been a parachutist.

LC: Bill, let me ask a little bit about Fort Benning while you were there if you
don’t mind. First of all, did your wife accompany you?

WL: No. She had to stay home.

LC: Okay. So she stayed in California.

WL: She did visit me once just before graduation. Yeah.

LC: Okay. Can I ask about how she felt about your return to the Army?

WL: She thought it was a good idea. She knew that I wasn’t really happy in what
I was doing and she thought it was okay.

LC: Okay. Did you get off base much?

WL: No. I didn’t go off hardly at all.

LC: Okay. What did the curriculum consist of? Can you talk a little bit about the
training? Was it mostly classroom stuff or—?

WL: Mostly classroom training. Yes. It was a lot of map reading, a lot of
emphasis on the ethics of being an officer. Duty, honor, country, that sort of stuff. Don’t
lie and don’t cheat. Don’t run up a lot of debts and so on. Don’t bring discredit upon the
officer corps, and then tactics, infantry platoon tactics. How you maneuver squads up to
company level. They always teach you—they teach an officer techniques and conduct of
operations at least one level above where he’s going to be assigned. That is, a platoon
leader is expected to know how to run a company. A company commander is expected to
know how to handle a battalion, et cetera.

LC: The purpose obviously—

WL: The purpose because you’re likely to be in that position very quickly at short
notice, you know.

LC: In combat, in conflict, something could happen.

WL: So, anyway, you run a company. There was emphasis on how to run a motor
pool, motor maintenance, the basic level. You’re not expected to be a mechanic but
you’re supposed to know what to look for. To be able to tell whether or not your motor
sergeant is trying to pull a wool over your eyes. How to handle a supply room. What
you’re supply sergeant’s supposed to do. There was at least a week on how to handle a
mess hall. Keep soldiers from getting sick because you’ve got contaminated food and
that sort of thing.

LC: So the gamut really.

WL: Yeah. The whole thing about how to handle affairs in the field. Sanitation.
But the emphasis largely was on platoon tactics.

LC: Were they teaching, essentially, lessons from World War II?

WL: Yes. I’m sure. Yes. The manuals. By this time the field manuals that you
used were largely edited and shaped in accordance with experiences of World War II.
Yeah.

LC: Was there a lot of emphasis on, or any emphasis, on teaching defensive, say,
fortifications, that kind of thing?

WL: Oh yeah. Sure. To learn how to—a good deal of emphasis on the defense.
How you organize a defense? In what part of a hill do you want to really put your stuff,
put your forces? Where you put your reserve, a company, a rifle company generally
speaking. Schematically at least you put two platoons forward and keep one back. In
fact the old rule of thumb in the infantry is two up, one back, and feed them a hot meal.
That was kind of the standard jargon of the infantry. You try to feed one hot meal a day.
You learn about how you get your ammunition forward. Do you go back for it or are
they supposed to bring it to you? Yeah, all kinds of little tidbits like that.

LC: Some of which would have already been familiar to you.

WL: Oh yes. Yeah. Most of them were.

LC: Did you get a charge out of this training? Did you think this—?

WL: Yeah. I enjoyed it. Enjoyed all of it. The technical part, that is, you learn
indirect fire also. You learn how to adjust artillery fire even though it’s not usually your
responsibility. Every infantry officer has to know how to adjust artillery fire and how to
handle mortars. Later on I had a mortar platoon. That was my—well, it was a weapons
platoon. I had three mortars and I had two recoilless rifles. So you had to learn a lot of
little—I mean an infantry officer is kind of, he knows a lot of different trades. He knows about pioneering and he knows about artillery and—

LC: You sort of have to be a traffic cop for—
WL: He knows all of the military trades. Supposed to be he’s a specialist in infantry, but he knows about everything else. Because you’re not always going to have the combat engineers with you or you might not even have a forward observer from the artillery so you have to know how to do that.

LC: Right. What about communications? What kind of equipment and so on were they using at that time?
WL: At that time?
LC: Do you remember?
WL: The platoon, the rifle platoon, all they had was one little handheld radio, short range radio. The company had a larger radio. But most of the communications in the rifle unit in the 1940s and 50s was by wire. Each battalion had a communications platoon with a wire section and they strung wire from the battalion, strung wire down to the companies. The regimental communications platoon brought wire up to the battalions. Communication was by telephone, largely. We didn’t have the sophisticated short wave radios that they have these days in the infantry. Nobody strings wire anymore. I don’t think they even have a wire section in the battalion somewhere.

LC: Probably not. Of course, everything is miniaturized now and—
WL: Also there’s much more emphasis on mobility. Keep moving. It doesn’t make much point to put a lot of wire up.

LC: Right. It’s also very vulnerable of course.
WL: Yeah.
LC: But that was the state of things at this time. Did you think, Bill, that you were going to be posted overseas? Was that part of—?
WL: Oh, I knew I was. They more or less told us. Another interesting thing about that part of it is they told us that if we had served in the Pacific during the World War II we would be sent to Europe. If we’d served in Europe during World War II we would be sent to the Pacific. That’s the proximate cause of me not getting into the Korean War. Because here I was, 1949, I graduated from the infantry school and I was
being sent to Germany. These guys that had served in Germany during the war were sent
to the Pacific and they all wound up in Korea in the next year. They were in the Cav
Division or in the Division or the and that’s where they wound up.

LC: What was the logic of that?

WL: I don’t know. I can’t imagine what it was except to give you a variety of
experience. Of course, our experience in the Pacific War was not—that was in the
jungles mainly and on the islands and a lot of beachheads, and that sort of amphibious
warfare sort of thing. So it didn’t have much relation to what you might face if you were
stationed in Japan. Of course, nobody could have foreseen with any precision that there
was going to be a war in Korea.

LC: Yeah. Specifically as opposed to other places where there was also
possibility.

WL: Yeah. Like China or somewhere else, or Vietnam for that matter.

LC: Right. Southeast Asia.

WL: Yeah. So, anyway that’s what happened. Quite a few of those who, in my
class at Benning, wound up in Korea and were killed. Because of the way that war
started there were a lot, as you know, very heavy casualties among the infantry, like Task
Force Smith that went over there first. Great number of casualties there.

LC: Do you remember any of those guys whose names you could put into the
record?

WL: Can’t remember any names for right now. We went over—after I graduated,
got the commission, and went home to California. Packed up the family, got their shots
and so on over at the Presidio San Francisco, I think. Bought my uniforms from over at
the Presidio. Had to buy those. I got a small allowance.

LC: Was it enough to cover the things that you needed?

WL: No, it wasn’t enough.

LC: Yeah. That’s what I thought.

WL: No, I had to borrow money to buy all my uniforms. Then we got on the train
in Oakland. This was before air travel was really affordable or really, very common for
the common folks anyway. Got on the train. Of course the Army paid for that, and we
went through Chicago to New York. Let’s see, we got off probably at Grand Central
station or one of the, Penn Station. I don’t remember which. Took a cab to Fort
Hamilton, which is on Brooklyn. Yeah, it’s Brooklyn. We stayed at Fort Hamilton for
about a week, I believe, waiting for the ship. One of the kids got pretty serious attack of
diarrhea there. He was just an infant and—

LC: Now, did you have another child by now?

WL: Yeah. By that time I had three.

LC: Oh my goodness. Okay. No wonder you needed a job.

WL: Yeah. I really did. So, here was a lieutenant making, what, 230 dollars a
month or something like that. I don’t remember what it was. It wasn’t very much. We
got on the ship. The ship was called the Parch, after General Patch. It was a nice voyage
except for the sick child. We sailed to Bremerhaven in Germany, got off the ship there,
and they put us on a train to Bad Mergentheim, which is in Bavaria. Let’s see. It’s
probably closest to Würzburg of the major city. Ever been to Germany?

LC: Yes, I have.

WL: Yeah. Well, you ought to know the terrain there. So we got off at Bad
Mergentheim, which was kind of a resort. There were several hotels there. They put my
family in a hotel and they said, “Well, now you’ve got orders to the Infantry Regiment.”
Incidentally, if you don’t know the history of this regiment, the was one of the regiments
in the first wave at Omaha Beach. The Infantry of the Division and the Infantry of the
Virginia National Guard were the two lead regiments in that landing. It’s a very famous
regiment. I was very proud to be assigned to the . In any case, by that time the had only
two battalions in Nuremberg. In fact, its regimental headquarters was in Furth, F-u-r-t-h.
Which is kind of a suburb of Nuremberg. The other battalion that I was in, the Battalion,
the headquarters and the Battalion were at Furth. But this Battalion was at a little town
called Zirndorf, Z-i-r-n-d-o-r-f, on the edge of Nuremberg also.

LC: Was that where you were?

WL: That’s where I was assigned. Battalion. I didn’t have quarters. You see,
officers were supposed to have quarters to live in with their families. But there was a
shortage of quarters there for officers. I lived right there in E Company; I was assigned
to E Company and lived right there in the barracks for a little while. What happened
next? There were too many lieutenants in the battalion. There were about two
lieutenants per platoon and I don’t know why they were so loaded up with lieutenants.
But it wasn’t a very good assignment because you didn’t have enough to do.

LC: Not enough responsibility?
WL: Yeah. But the battalion commander took notice of me for some reason or other and he made me his battalion intelligence officer, S2.

LC: Now who was the battalion commander?
WL: His name was—I’ll think about it. He’s a very nice fellow. I’ll think about it later on.

LC: That’s okay. S2 meant?
WL: S2 meant the battalion intelligence officer. A battalion staff, they all began with S. S1 was personnel and administration, S2 was intelligence, S3 was operations and training, and S4 was logistics. That was a battalion staff. So all of those positions were supposed to be captains except the S3 was supposed to be a major and usually was, usually a major. The other member of the staff was a battalion executive officer and that was a major also. Dyer was the battalion commander’s name. Kenneth Dyer, D-y-e-r. He just passed away a couple of years ago in San Francisco. Ken Dyer was the battalion commander.

LC: Do you have any idea how he picked you out? How he identified you?
WL: I was several years older than most of the lieutenants. Most of these lieutenants were regular Army officers and recent graduates of West Point. Most of them were the class of ’48 from West Point. They were then must have been in their twenties around twenty-three, something like that. I was twenty-seven already. I was one of the few lieutenants in the battalion that had any combat experience. These guys have been in West Point during the war. So, I had that experience behind me and for some reason or other he figured that I’d be a good S2, which I enjoyed doing. He sent me to school down at—where is that school? It was down in southern Bavaria close to the Austrian border. Oberammergau! You’ve heard of Oberammergau where they have the Passion Play.

LC: Sure. Absolutely.
WL: Well, that’s where the intelligence school was. So, I went to Oberammergau for combat intelligence school. That was about a, seemed to me it was about a two month course down there.

LC: Now, this was material that must have been completely new to you.

WL: Not completely. It was a lot of aerial photography. I’d done a little bit of that when I was recon sergeant. I learned how to read aerial photography. There was scouting and patrolling. I’d already known quite a bit about that. A lot on map reading, which I’d pretty expert at that by this time anyway. There was some new stuff. That is, the technique of how you handle intelligence. I mean you produce it, you analyze it, you collate it with other information, and then you disseminate it. I mean there’s a regular routine that you go through naturally in order to make things uniform so you don’t forget anything. There’s techniques of handling that. I had a very small intelligence section in a battalion. You only had about—I had two squads, about twelve men I guess, who were supposed to, not supposed to, their mission was to establish the battalion observation posts in a defensive environment. If you were on the defense they manned the observation posts. In the offense, why, they did the scouting for the battalion. So, I had those guys.

LC: So they were reporting to you?

WL: Yeah. They reported to me. They belonged to the battalion headquarters and Headquarters Company but they reported to me. I had some good soldiers in that outfit. In fact, the entire battalion was regular Army by that time. The draft had stopped and we had only regulars, and it was a good outfit. Our Battalion at that time was in Berlin. So, the regiment was split. The Battalion came down to us later. Actually, they didn’t come down. They filled up the Battalion with some other troops. Battalion in Berlin became—they gave it another designation. I think it was the Infantry. Became part of the Infantry in Berlin.

LC: So it actually split away from—?

WL: Yeah. So they brought, they organized another battalion. Our Battalion in Nuremberg and I was transferred over to the Battalion. But that came later. At that time my wife and family were still in Bad Mergentheim. Finally they offered us quarters in, of all places, down by Switzerland. I’ll think about it in a minute. Anyway they gave us
quarters way in the south of Germany. Of course I couldn’t be there. I still had to be in
Nuremberg. So about once a month the deal was I could get on a train and go down
through Munich to Ulm and then to these quarters down on the Swiss border. They were
there at Christmas time. I spent Christmas with them down there in that town on the
Swiss border.

LC: This would have been Christmas 1949?
WL: Forty-nine. Then they offered us quarters in Nuremberg. So, the battalion
commander, Colonel Dyer let me have his sedan to go down, and his driver, drove down
to this place. Dog gone it I can’t remember the name of that. I will though. Picked up
the family and drove back to Nuremberg and put them in quarters very close to the
battalion headquarters in Nuremberg.

LC: This is really instructive about how short the supply of family living quarters
were for dependents of married personnel.
WL: The thing is they hadn’t built any quarters for us. They hadn’t built any
apartment houses or anything like that. That is, the Army hadn’t. All of the houses that
we lived in had been appropriated from the Germans. Probably with emphasis on if a
Nazi had a house we’ll take it away. I mean that was it. That was the kind of house I had
down there in southern Germany too. Kempton was the name of the place! K-e-m-p-t-e-
n. Kempten, in what they called the Allgäu district of Germany. Kempten in Allgäu. It
was a beautiful place. It was a Nazi’s house. There were still some Nazi memorabilia
and there was a bier stube in the bottom in the basement. It’s a beautiful house. They
gave us a maid. She took care of us, and a fireman to keep the coal fires burning. All of
that was supplied with no charge to us. It was the same in Nuremberg. The house wasn’t
nearly as nice but it was a comfortable place and they gave us a maid and a fireman. The
fireman usually took care of three or four houses. They heated these homes with what
they called Nuremberg stoves. They were just tile stoves and they used brickets. That is,
pressed coal dust. That’s the kind of heating they used. The fireman would come in and
keep those fires banked during the wintertime. But that’s the kind of quarters we had.

LC: Now, is this what’s called living on the economy?
WL: Not really. No. When people said they lived on the economy that meant
that they were paying for their own. They were not authorized quarters so they went off
post and lived on the economy.

LC: You were assigned to these houses.

WL: These were assigned quarters and, well, the government paid for them. Of
course, in this case, why, they probably didn’t pay anything for the house because they
took it away.

LC: They seized it.

WL: Yeah. By right of conquest or whatever you might call it. “This belongs to
us now.” We lived in that house for a while and then we were given another set of very
beautiful quarters much closer to Battalion right inside Nuremberg. I think that first
house was on the edge, it was closer to Furth. But the second house had an orchard and a
number of bedrooms. It was right above the Pegnitz, Pegnitz River. The Pegnitz and the
Regnitz run through Nuremberg and, if you remember the Die Meistersinger Von
Nurnberg takes place in the meadow of the Pegnitz River.

LC: So you were practically living right in the scene.

WL: Right. Yeah. It was a beautiful place.

LC: What was the mood of civilians in Nuremberg? I mean, of course its
background and rise of the Nationalist Socialist Movement is very well known. But I just
wonder what the mood was while you were there and what civilians that you came in
contact with, how did they feel about Americans at this point?

WL: Well, the fireman that I remember more than anything and he was anxious to
tell me about his experiences on the Russian front and—

LC: Really? No kidding.

WL: Oh yeah. He had been wounded there. The only thing I can remember him
saying, almost everything he’d say, he’d tell me, “And that was the baddest time.” It was
really miserable for those guys, obviously, fighting the Russians and particularly in the
winter. But Hans, his name was Hans, which is a pretty good name for a German. Our
maid, the only thing—well, I remember a few things about her. One, she smelled pretty
bad. I think she had a condition. I remember my wife gave her a lot of deodorant to use
but it didn’t seem to have any effect. I don’t know whether she used them or thought that
they were salad dressing or what but it didn’t improve her very much. Her village was
outside of Nuremberg and everyone in a while I would drive her home to visit her mother
down in some little village outside of Nuremberg. Her name was Katy, as I remember
now, kind of a dumpy little lady. Very kind, very kind lady and she took care of the kids
very well. They all learned to speak German, which they forgot.

LC: Immediately. Right.
WL: But it was a nice quarters.
LC: I’m trying to think how old your oldest daughter would have been now.
About four or five?
WL: Let’s see. She was born in ’44 so this is—
LC: So almost five.
WL: Yeah. Yeah. Her brother was about three and little brother was only about
one by this time.
LC: Now, did your daughter start to go to school? Was there provision for
American—?
WL: There was an American school. She started—I don’t remember a great deal
about that.
LC: Your wife was in charge of that probably.
WL: Yeah. Right. As I say, they organized the Battalion in a place called
Johnson Barracks I think they called it. I was transferred over to the Battalion to
Battalion Headquarters Company and I became the assistant S3. The S3 office had the
major and usually a captain but I was still a lieutenant. But I was the assistant S3
anyway.
LC: Now, why did the transfer to the Battalion come about?
WL: Well, they had to build up the Battalion. We had too many lieutenants in
the Battalion and they got—I don’t know how I was selected. We got another battalion
commander in, obviously, Colonel McDowell, a very fine officer. He had a good deal of
combat experience.
LC: What was his first name? Do you know?
WL: Colonel Dyer didn’t have. But Dyer didn’t have much combat experience.

He was a staff officer during the war but McDowell had been a good deal of combat in
the European theater.

LC: What was his first name?

WL: Bill. Bill McDowell. He selected me to be the assistant S3 and I was
assistant to a very fine major. Can’t remember his name. Good guy. I kept in contact
with him for years afterwards. Now I’m having trouble with names.

LC: That’s okay. But your job in S3 had to do with operations and training. Can
you talk about what that actually means outside of lingo?

WL: Well, from the training standpoint it was to prepare what they called a
training schedule. When you’re not in combat you’re in training. That’s a given. That’s
all you do. You train. Each week, why, you’d publish a training schedule and tell every
company in the battalion what they were supposed to be doing during every day of the
week, virtually every hour of the day. Some of the training is by battalion, some of it’s
by the company. Some of the training you turn over entirely to the company
commanders to decide what they want to do with that time. But you have to schedule the
road marches, the ranges. You go to the rifle range or any other range, you have to
schedule that. You get clearance for a movement. Arrange for transportation if you have
to truck your unit somewhere. You have to get a transportation truck battalion scheduled
to do that for you. You take care of ammunition requirements. You do about everything.
All of the details of getting a unit moving or located or whatever.

LC: Now, did you have to take up any kind of training in order to take the S3,
assistant S3 position?

WL: No. There was no special training.

LC: Just on the job?

WL: Just the kind of thing that you do anyway.

LC: You figure it out as you go.

WL: Yeah. You are responsible for choosing the routes that you’re going to
move on. If you’re going to do what they call a field exercise—that is, battalion in the
attack or company in the attack or whatever, or in defense—you draw up the operational
plan. But the S3 has to approve it and he signs it. But as the assistant S3 you and the
operations sergeant, you do all of the detailed work. You provide the draft and he
approves it. That’s it. You have a good operations sergeant who’s experienced in this.
He’s usually a master sergeant or a tech sergeant and he’s a great help to any new
assistant S3. You got a good operations sergeant, why you’ve got it made. You don’t
have to worry about a lot of details because he’s already done that.
LC: You can rely on him.
WL: Right. So that was my job. Shortly after I got into that battalion they
offered an opportunity to any reserve officer to go on what they called competitive tour.
I was going to tell you about competitive tour. Have you ever heard of that?
LC: I have not. No. What does that mean?
WL: The Army had a program during this period, I don’t know how long it lasted,
that invited anyone, any officer in the reserves who wanted to, to go on what they called
competitive tour. What it meant was every—for one year, every three months you would
be transferred to a different unit, to a different company. Therefore you would be rated,
that is, you get an efficiency report during that year from four different officers. They’d
look at those efficiency reports that would, you know, a report on how you conducted
yourself, whether you were worthwhile or not. They’d look at those four and if they were
good enough then you would go before a board of officers, regular Army officers, for a
kind of an oral like you have when you’re going to get a degree. You would answer the
questions and they would decide whether or not you were of the caliber that they wanted
in the regular Army.
LC: So this was an opportunity to shift?
WL: Yeah. It was an opportunity to become a regular officer rather than a reserve
officer, and that would give you some career stability. Reserve officers, they serve just at
the pleasure of the government. If they weren’t needed they would be removed from
active duty and go back to reserve and they’d have to get another job. Regular officers,
they stayed on indefinitely until they reached retirement age. So, there was an advantage
if you like the Army, you wanted to stay in to become a regular. That was my point. So,
I was transferred from battalion Headquarters Company. I’d served there for over three
months and I got an efficiency report from the S3. Then I was transferred to Company I;
served there for three months under that company commander. Then I went to Company
K for three months under Captain Frankle. I can’t remember the company commander in
Company I, but Frankle was K Company, then over to L Company. In each of these
companies I was a platoon leader. Except in L Company I think I was company exec,
executive officer. Probably by that time I was the senior—I think by that time I was a
lieutenant anyway. I’d just been promoted to lieutenant and I was a company exec in L
Company under Capt. Wig Baker.

LC: Capt. Wig Baker?

WL: Yeah. They called him Wig because of his haircut. He had it parted in the
middle, it was very short, and shaved up the sides. He was a good guy. He was from
West Point. Frankle wasn’t West Point but I think the rest of them were. But anyway, so
I got ratings for those officers. I got a very poor rating from Company K. Captain
Frankle didn’t like me very much.

LC: What was wrong with him?

WL: Well, I rubbed him the wrong way a couple of times. During that time I was
in K Company I was also the defense counsel for special court-martials. Yeah, for
special court. In those days in the Army you didn’t have to be a lawyer to be a defense
counsel or what they called a trial judge advocate, which was a prosecutor, at least in
special courts.

LC: Now, what constitutes a special court? How is it different?

WL: Well, there are three levels of court-martials in the Army. The first is
summary court, and that is the trial in front of the company commander. There are no
witnesses necessary and the soldier can elect not to have a summary court. If he doesn’t
want the company commander to hear his case and to try him, why, he can demand a
special court the next echelon up. But if he accepts the summary court he can be
incarcerated for up to thirty days, lose—well, be busted one grade, I think. I can’t recall
all the details but that’s a summary court. The company commander is the judge and
final authority on that. Of course all of these have to be reviewed by the next echelon up
anyway.

LC: All the decisions.

WL: All of the decisions, no matter what court it is. All of this is reviewed, but
anyway that’s the first one. The special court, it can put somebody away, I think, for up
to six months. It’s a pretty serious court and there you have witnesses and you have a
board of officers. That is a court-martial is composed of at least, I think it’s at least three
officers. One of them is probably a senior officer, probably a major or lieutenant colonel
and couple of other captains. They hear the case and the accused in that case has a
defense counsel. The trial judge advocate, he presents the case against this miscreant and
then he’s also defended by somebody. Well, the defense at a battalion level is an officer
appointed by the battalion commander and the battalion commander appointed me to be
the defense counsel in the special court. So, we were out at a place—we were out on
bivouac out at a place called Tennenlohe outside of Nuremberg. It was really our alert
position. We were at training out there. There was a range there. Out there for about a
week or two and during that time Captain Frankle had put a soldier—I was in K
Company—he put one of his soldiers on what they called restriction. Restriction meant
that this guy had done something wrong. I don’t know what, doesn’t matter, and he was
detained in the barracks. He couldn’t leave the barracks for a specified period of time. I
don’t remember what it was. Every hour during the day he was supposed to come down
to the orderly room and sign in to prove that he was still in the barracks.

LC: Sort of like being on parole.

WL: Yeah. According to Captain Frankle, this fellow had failed to come down
and sign in every hour so Frankle charged him with willful disobedience of a lawful order
and breaking restriction. Two counts, as I remember. Conviction on either or both could
have put the guy away for six months. So again I was the, I guess something like in
civilian life, the public defender sort of thing.

LC: Right but this was unenviable position to be in.

WL: Well, it’s kind of interesting. I got to be pretty well expert on the manual for
court-martial and so on.

LC: What happened with this fellow?

WL: Anyway, I defended this fellow and I convinced the court that the record
keeping in Company K was faulty. That they couldn’t really prove that this fellow didn’t
sign in because they couldn’t find the paper or something like that. I don’t remember
what it was. But the fact was that they found him not guilty and this irritated Captain
Frankle to no end. So, I remember after the trial was over we were in a tent somewhere
out there in the woods in Tennenlohe. I went back to the company headquarters and
Frankle came out of the company orderly room tent. He says, “Well, what happened?” I
said, “Well, he was found not guilty, sir.” He said, “Oh, you son of a bitch! Who do you
think you are? Clarence Darrow or something?” No, he said Charles Dickens. He said
Charles Dickens. He was trying to think of Clarence Darrow I think but he said Charles
Dickens instead. I don’t remember what I said, probably nothing, which was probably
the best course to follow. In any case, I thought he didn’t like me after that. He gave me
a real hard time from then on and he gave me a rather poor report. One that would have
been fatal to my purpose really, but Captain, rather Colonel McDowell, he sent it back to
him. He said, “You’ve got to change this.”

LC: Really?
WL: So, he did. I went before this—I had to go down to Frankfurt, over to
Frankfurt on Main before this board of officers that—I guess it was at corps headquarters
and be interviewed by this board. I passed. I was commissioned then in the regular
Army.

LC: What was the date?
WL: It must have been in 1950 or ’51. Sometime in 1951 I would say.

LC: I’m sure it’s—you had provided us with a copy of your DD214 so I’m sure
that it’s—
WL: It might show there. Might not either for that matter. But anyway, I was
commissioned as a lieutenant, regular Army, at that time and my serial number was
changed.

LC: Is that right?
WL: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: How does that work?
WL: Reserve officers had—this is before they use the, now, they used the social
security number as your Army serial number. But in those days they didn’t. I had about
an eight digit number as a reserve officer and I had only five digits in regular Army. That
was quite a matter of distinction. That’s how you could tell whether an officer was a
regular or not, whether he had a long serial number or short one.
That’s interesting. Well, let me ask a couple of timeline questions first of all. By this point the conflict in Korea has erupted. It sounds as if, from what you said, the likelihood of you being sent over there was not good, not large.

Yeah. The reason behind that was that the Division at that time, 1949, 1950, until the Korean War started, was the only infantry division in Europe. We had a very long border and a very formidable, potential foe on the other side. We had the Guards Army of the Soviet Army on the other side of the border. We had our division with three regiments and we also had two regiments of what they called then the constabulary; sounds like Gilbert and Sullivan. But anyway, they had a constabulary and what those outfits were essentially an armored cavalry regiment. I think they had three squadrons per regiment of constabulary and I believe there were two regiments there. So effectively you had about a division and a half of US ground forces in all of Germany. Of course, there were some British, a couple of British divisions, in the north and that was about it. So it was very thinly held. The Army decided to leave the Division there so we were not deployed to Korea. That’s why I didn’t get to Korea. They were not allowing any volunteers to even leave. If your term was up in the Division you could leave and then you would no doubt be sent to Korea. We were given what they called involuntary extensions. It was supposed to be a two year assignment but I was extended for another year and a half. So I spent about three and a half years in the Division, all the way until the summer of ’53 before I left Division. I was in the Infantry the whole time. The first year in the Battalion and the rest of it in the . We moved from Nuremberg—incidentally, during that period of time we spent about at least half of that time out on maneuvers in the woods. We didn’t stay home. They called alerts and we’d pack up. Within an hour we had to be out of our barracks and headed for the Czech border to our defensive positions out there near a place called Weiden by Grafenwöhr, sometimes up further north. We had a regiment in Bamberg, the Infantry. We had another regiment in Aschaffenburg, which is near Frankfurt. That’s the Regiment. So those three divisions were, those three regiments were defending all of Bavaria.

Were there any call outs that you thought were not just drills and training?

There was one that came pretty close to being the real thing. At the time, as I say, I was commanding a rifle platoon. I’m trying to think what company, it doesn’t
matter. I think it was L Company. Anyway, I had a rifle platoon. They attached my platoon to a squadron of this constabulary, the armored cavalry unit, up in the town of Hof, H-o-f, which is right on the Czechoslovakian border there. About where Czechoslovakia ends, as I remember, and East Germany begins. There’s a large river there, [can’t recall] the name of that. Anyway, I was attached to this outfit on a hill overlooking this major bridge into the Communist side. At the time I was up there for a month, I think, I invited my wife to drive up. We had an old Chevy car and she drove up the autobahn from Nuremberg up to Hof and she was going to spend the weekend with me. I was living in a kind of an apartment in what amounted to a safe house run by a counter intelligence outfit up there. She was going to spend the weekend with me up there. Just about the day she arrived they called a red alert, what they called red alert, which meant real. What they had detected an armored division of the Guards Army headed toward the border at Hof was on the move. So they called a red alert. So I told my wife get into the car and head back for Nuremberg, which she did. In the event the car broke down about half way to Nuremberg. Had to be towed the rest of the way. It was a real screw-up.

LC: That’s frightening.

WL: Yeah. Of course I was back up on my hill with my platoon. We had – I remember there was an armored car in my position from the cav. It had a 37 mm gun on it, which wouldn’t have even been noticed if it hit one of the Soviet tanks. But that’s where we were, and that was the only red alert that I remember that we had had while I was there. Everything else was a practice.

LC: You were looking at the bridge that possibly the tank might have crossed?

WL: Yeah. The Soviets could have come over that. But I know the bridge had been prepared for demolition. It would have been blown had the Soviets got very close to it. Not that that would have stopped them for very long.

LC: So, American forces had surreptitiously prepared to blow the side, our end of the bridge essentially, our end?

WL: Yeah. They had put demolitions into the bridge and ready to blow if it had to be blown. But of course military engineers can bridge almost any span in a few hours. So, it wouldn’t have stopped them for very long.
LC: Do you have any sense if there was a larger crisis? Have you done any
reading or anything that helps you place this particular event?
WL: No. I don’t remember ever reading about that thing. It’s my conclusion that
the Soviets were just testing us to see what we’d do. It was kind of a harassing sort of
thing. I had another little incident there, I remember, thinking back on the border. I
decided to drive down the border. I had my driver, I had a jeep, I might have had a
soldier with me, I don’t remember. I drove down along the border near Hof and a lady
came out of the farmhouse and waved at me and I stopped and went in. I didn’t
understand German very well but enough so I could get by. She told me that her husband
had been kidnapped by the Czechs. Her house was right on the border. Down below the
house there was a meadow. She raised rabbits, incidentally. She had some rabbit hutchies
there and down below the house there was a meandering stream. It wasn’t more than
eight feet wide and had a lot of loops in it. There were border markers there made of
granite, little posts showing the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia. There
was a Czech soldier on the other side with her husband and this Czech had a rifle and he
was holding her husband on the other side of the stream.

LC: You could see this?
WL: Oh yeah. I went right down to the stream and I saw this guy on the other
side and I saw these border markers. The issue was is the stream the border or is the
border a straight line between these posts? The German attitude was that the stream is
the border and the Czech said, “No, it was a straight line.” This fellow was on one of the
little loops. He thought he was on his side of the border because he was on that side of
the stream. But the Czech said that the border was straight and when he went out on this
little loop he was in Czechoslovakia. So, he had trespassed into Czechoslovakia. So they
grabbed him and took him across the stream and there he was. So, I told the Czech,
apparently the spoke German, “Let this guy go. He’s a German citizen and let him go.”
Somehow or other I prevailed and they let him go. Maybe they were just harassing him,
would have done it anyway. I was armed with a pistol. I didn’t have anything to—I
didn’t want to get into a firefight with a guy with a rifle. Anyway, it wasn’t really my
job. But anyway they let him go and he waded back across the stream towards the house
and I started walking back behind him. This Czech fired a round over my head, which
is—you know, you can tell whenever a bullet’s coming close because you hear it crack as it breaks the sound barrier over your head and crackled in my head. He was just harassing me. If he’d wanted to hit me he could have. I was only about a hundred feet from him or so when he did that. That was the end of the incident except that the lady was so appreciative that she gave me two rabbits in a little cage. Later on I took the rabbits back to my family in Nuremberg. They didn’t watch them very carefully. The last they were seen they were hopping down the street, down Saarburgar Strasse between the streetcar tracks. I don’t know whatever happened to them. But we didn’t keep the rabbits very long. They thought they were headed back to home.

LC: Yeah. They were on their way back to the border. Now, Bill, there aren’t a lot of people who were shot at by Czech border patrol during this period.

WL: Well, actually, as I say, he shot near me. But if he’d wanted to hit me he would have.

LC: Oh sure. I can absolutely see that and see what he was doing. That must’ve been a little chilling.

WL: Well, it was a little bit startling anyway to hear that bullet crack over my head. I think I came to the conclusion right away that if he’d wanted to I would’ve been dead so I wasn’t really too afraid of it. I knew he was just harassing me.

LC: Kept on walking?

WL: Yeah. I kept on walking up to my jeep and picked up my rabbits and left. I probably made a report of it but I don’t think it ever amounted to anything. It wasn’t a significant international incident.

LC: No. Just barely avoided being one I think probably since you lived through it. But that sounds a little frightening. Did you, over the course of this time in Germany, you had numerous assignments and it sounds like you had probably learned quite a bit.

WL: Yeah. I learned a lot about infantry operations, about how battalions were supposed to operate. They moved the battalion, in fact they moved the entire regiment, from Nuremberg. This was in 1952, I guess. We moved from Nuremberg up to Schweinfurt, which is north of Würzburg. The division headquarters had moved into
Würzburg. We were up in Schweinfurt and at that time they gave me command of—
well, first I became the S1, that’s the battalion adjutant and administrative officer. Then
Colonel McDowell gave me command—or maybe by this time it was Colonel Drake. I
guess McDowell left and an officer named Colonel Drake took command. He gave me
command of battalion headquarters and Headquarters Company. I was still a lieutenant
but they gave me command of a company. Battalion headquarters and Headquarters
Company, it was really kind of a support company for the battalion. It had the
communications platoon, it had an anti-tank platoon. What else did it have? The pioneer
ammunition platoon. That was kind of our like a combat engineer platoon. Of course it
had the battalion headquarters staff in it. Of course it had the mess and supply and so
forth. Responsible for battalion ammunition re-supply and that sort of thing. It was a
good company. Had some good soldiers in it.

LC: This is as a lieutenant?
WL: Yeah. I was a lieutenant.

LC: How unusual was it for a lieutenant to have this kind of command?
WL: Not entirely unusual. It took awhile to become a captain and a senior
lieutenant was quite often would be in command of a company. Maybe one out of four in
a battalion. At that time as the as the company commander of Headquarters Company
you were also called the headquarters commandant, which meant that you were
responsible for the headquarters bivouac wherever it was. I was responsible for selecting
where the battalion would bivouac. I would have to go out in advance when the battalion
was on the move. On many of these maneuvers we were on I’d have to go out well in
advance and mark the route for the battalion to follow and pick the bivouac area in the
woods somewhere and assign the areas for the companies to occupy and bivouac. That
was an interesting job too because I had to move fast and I had to know how to read the
map. The battalion commander would tell me in general terms where he wanted the
battalion to be and within that area I had to select a place to drive the trucks in. You had
to have good terrain, you had to have good drainage, so on. You had some ammunition
trucks that well over five tons of ammunition on a two and half ton truck. You didn’t
want them sinking up to their ankles in mud, things like that. It was a good job. I
enjoyed doing that.
LC: Did you get to do that with relatively little oversight? I mean were you kind of on your own?

WL: I was on my own. Yeah. I always took a soldier with me with a hammer and some nails and my driver and we’d take off. Very often we had maybe only twenty minute lead on the battalion. So we had to move fast and get the right road and one that—I remember once I took a wrong turn and took them through a farmer’s barnyard, which was kind of exciting. But it was paved so it didn’t really matter. The farmer was kind of ticked off about it that I had troops driving through his farmyard but—

LC: Now, did civilians get compensated for damage caused by these kind of—?

WL: Yes they did. There was a claims officer with every regiment and if a farmer said that you tore up his wheat field or knocked down his apple trees or whatever, why they’d move up behind and they’d make an assessment and offer the fellow a payment for it. I don’t really know how they settled it, whether they had to wait a while for their money or not but we always paid them. In those days there was very little other German traffic on the highways. We more or less had the autobahn to ourselves. The Germans still didn’t have—fuel was awfully expensive for them and there weren’t very many cars on the road. Much different than it is these days.

LC: Industry hadn’t recovered really.

WL: Yeah. There was a lot of—so we had pretty much free reign. I don’t know how much we paid them if we tore up their woods. I know we were supposed to be careful not to knock down any trees. The Germans, as you know, were very meticulous about their countryside. We would usually check in with a forester, the German forester, in the area that we were operating and he’d tell us what areas we should try to stay out of if we could. But we were still the occupiers and they didn’t have a great deal of say about it. If we wanted to go somewhere we went.

LC: I was going to ask about coordinating with local authorities.

WL: I didn’t have much to do with that. I don’t know who did, probably the echelon above us that did that.

LC: That would probably consist mostly of saying we’re going to do this.

WL: Yeah.
LC: Did you have additional responsibilities during this time that you were the battalion Headquarters Company commander?

WL: Well, I was still on court-martials from time to time, the few that we had that was on court-martial boards.

LC: Do you remember any of those cases?

WL: Yeah. I remember one particular one. I was the assistant trial judge advocate on a general court for a while. Now, a general court has authority to even pass a sentence of death. I mean you got major crimes in general court.

LC: Right. This is the third highest of the highest.

WL: Yeah. It’s a highest court and of course again it’s always reviewed. A general court is convened by an Army echelon that has a general officer in command. I mean that’s the general rule. So, in the infantry a general court is a division level court.

It was a Division general court. I was detailed as assistant trial judge advocate for the general court.

LC: The job of which—

WL: Which was prosecutor. The trial that I remember most, there were a few. There was one on, it was a manslaughter trial having to do with vehicular accident—drunk driving and a soldier got killed. That was one of the cases. Another one had to do with what you would call—the charge was probably larceny or misappropriation of federal property. The case involved two or three sergeants in the tank battalion of the Division who had taken a load of gasoline. In those days our tanks were gas powered, not diesel. They had sold a truckload of five gallon cans of gasoline to the Nuremberg Nachrichten, the newspaper, the major newspaper in Nuremberg. They sold that gas to them, to the Nuremberg Nachrichten. They’d get the Marks to buy paint to paint their tanks. In those days the Army wasn’t very well funded. I guess we were spending all the money in Korea and so on. So when you had an inspection coming up, an inspector general inspection annually. You had to clean everything up and paint it and get prepared for this inspection. The battalion commander told these guys that they had to get the tanks painted with OD paint. But there wasn’t any OD paint to be issued so they had to buy the paint on the German market. They didn’t have any money so they sold the gas to buy the paint and painted their tanks. On the surface of it I thought that was kind of a bad
wrap to try these guys for doing what the company commander in effect told them to do.  
But anyway they were tried for that offense and they were convicted.  
LC: Really?
WL: I don’t remember. Just a minute. I don’t remember what sentences they got but I believe they were convicted and they did get significant sentences at Fort Leavenworth. However, I don’t know, I don’t recall what the reviewing authority might have done to the case. But these were senior sergeants of the regular Army and their careers were finished no matter what happened.  
LC: That does sound a little hard.  
WL: Yeah. The other case that I remember was a fellow in my intelligence, let’s see. I guess I was trial judge advocate in that one too. I don’t remember this one too well. But the court-martial was of another senior infantry sergeant, a good guy – his name was Sergeant Class Walsh. He was a platoon sergeant. He was a driver of a car in which they had four soldiers and four German girls in one car and they rounded a curve and smashed sideways into a big oak tree. A couple of the girls were killed and one of the soldiers were killed. Sergeant Walsh was so badly wounded he probably never walked again. But he was tried for vehicular manslaughter and sentenced to Leavenworth too, although again I don’t know what happened in the review. That’s the kind of cases you had from time to time in these general courts. There was also—in a general court-martial was a little different than a special in that they had what they called a law officer who was like the judge except that he wasn’t president of the court-martial. The senior officer was the president, but the law officer would make all the rulings pertaining to interpretations of the law. Not of the evidence but of the law like a judge does. The rest of the court is in effect comparable to a jury in a civil trial. So, there was one safeguard that on a general court you at least had somebody with legal training to be the judge. Also, the accused were in a general court could have a civil counsel who was a lawyer. They were also defended—if they couldn’t afford to pay for their own counsel they were given a military lawyer as their defense counsel. They were always given that.  
LC: Differing from the lower courts?
WL: Yeah. Differing from the special court. Yeah.  
LC: In the sense that the lower court had assigned an officer at their defense.
WL: Right. The general court had legal, really professional legal advice both in
the defense side and as the judge. In fact they called him a judge but actually he was
really called—technically he was the law officer. He was a member of the judge
advocate general corps of the Army.

LC: Well, Bill, having now become a regular Army officer, were you pleased
with how things were looking in terms of how your career was developing?

WL: Yes. I was still enjoying it. I knew that unless I got disaffected with the
Army for some reason or other I’d stay in for the thirty years or so, whatever it took.

LC: How long did you stay in Germany?

WL: Three and a half years. A little bit more than that I guess. I believe I left
there in June of ’53.

LC: What were your new orders?

WL: My orders were to Fort Ord, California, which is by Monterey, Monterey
Bay. I was assigned to—well, at first there was an officer at division headquarters who I
knew in the Infantry, Norm Tiller, he was the post S2. He knew me when I was S2 of
the Battalion. He was a regimental S2 when I knew him. Norm Tiller wanted me to be
his assistant as the assistant G2 of the Infantry Division, which was at Fort Ord. The
Infantry Division at that time was a training division. It wasn’t a tactical division but
they called it the Infantry Division. He wanted me to be in the G2 office of the
Division. So I said, “Okay, I’ll do that.” But the Army had different plans. They said,
“Wait a minute, we brought this fellow into Fort Ord to command a training company not
to be a G2.” So I was with Norm Tiller I guess about a week until they discovered that I
wasn’t supposed to be there and they assigned me to command Company E of the
Infantry Regiment, which was a training company at Fort Ord. That was my next
assignment.

LC: Now, company command is an important step, isn’t it?

WL: Well yeah. It’s a good deal of responsibility. Pay isn’t all that great but you
got a lot of responsibility. In a training company in those days we were very, very lightly
staffed. Again, this is ’53. The Korean War was just about over.

LC: Right done I think.

WL: Yeah. In June?
LC: I think so. Yes.

WL: Yeah. Fifty-three when they signed the ceasefire. Anyway, I had this company and the company strength of trainees, that is, new recruits into the company, was 320. Now that’s an awful lot of recruits in one company. You know, yeah. That’s right. It was three hundred—no it was three hundred, not 320. Three hundred. Five platoons of sixty men each. The staff that I had to work with: I had two lieutenants, brand new to the Army, they didn’t know anything. I had a sergeant who was illiterate. We called him a field sergeant and he was a staff sergeant. He was black. His name was Sergeant Faggot of all things.

LC: F-a-g-g-o-t?

WL: Yeah. He was one of the best sergeants I’ve ever had in the Army and he couldn’t read and write.

LC: How does something like that come about?

WL: I don’t know. He had been wounded in Korea. Showed me his scar across his abdomen, hit by machine guns. Had a scar of all the way around his, almost all around his waist. “You mens,” he’d say. But Sergeant Faggot, when my company was supposed to be somewhere at a particular time it was always there. That was his responsibility to see that that was done and they were always there with whatever equipment they were supposed to have. He never missed. He was fabulous. The men liked him too because he was so funny, the way he talked so funny.

LC: Where was he from, from Deep South somewhere?

WL: Alabama or somewhere. I don’t know where he was from. But he was a real rock for me because these two lieutenants, although they were well meaning enough—and one of them was pretty smart. He and Sergeant Faggot got along pretty good. The other fellow was kind of a loser but my company always did well mainly because of Sergeant Faggot. The fellow that I had to handle the company records was only a corporal. Again, he was pretty smart and he kept that stuff straight. I had a good supply sergeant, and that was essential, otherwise you could get in some serious trouble. I had a good mess sergeant, Sergeant White, I remember him. He ran a very fine mess hall. The platoon sergeants were corporals or even, I think I even had a PFC in command of sixty men. But we got along. We made it all right. One of my corporals was,
Corporal Yager, I remember him. He got in some trouble. They had what they called family day, I don’t know if they called it that. But in which all of the relatives and wives and girlfriends and mothers and so on were invited to Fort Ord to see what their sons were doing. Yager chose this occasion to expose himself from the second floor window of the barracks. That caused quite a stir. We got rid of Yager pretty swiftly.

LC: Don’t they have a facility at Fort Ord for where you can just throw people and leave them for a while?

WL: They should have. I found out later that he had done this in a parking lot in Salinas once too.

LC: Okay. That doesn’t sound very good.

WL: No. Anyway, we had things like that. I had another incident there. I remember it very well. I had a soldier, a black soldier, from San Francisco and we were just about ready to—you know we had to teach these fellows rifle marksmanship. You had to go on the range, fire weapons. This soldier came in, talked to the corporal who was my acting first sergeant, and he said he wanted to see the company commander. So he came in and he said that he was a conscientious objector and therefore could not go to the range. He couldn’t carry a weapon. I asked him, “What are your credentials for being a conscientious objector? What church do you belong to?” He said, “Well, my church just doesn’t believe in killing.” So, I said, “Okay.” I called the chaplain. We had a battalion chaplain. I said, I told a chaplain, I said, “I got a fellow here who says he’s a conscientious objector. I’d like you to check him out and find out whether his claim is valid and so on.” So, the chaplain talked to him for a while. Then, somehow or other they got his—this fellow’s pastor to come down from San Francisco to explain the situation. This fellow came in to see me, he was a black pastor from San Francisco. He said that he was pastor of the Church of the Little Foxy Foxes for Christ. I’d never heard of that denomination. I don’t think you have either.

LC: No, actually.

WL: So, anyway, the end of the whole thing was that the chaplain decided that this fellow had some bona fides, he was really a conscientious objector. So he didn’t have to go to the rifle range. So that was the end of that event but I got acquainted with the Little Foxy Foxes for Christ at that time.
LC: This is very broadening for you.

WL: Yeah. I got fellows that were on heroin. Most of them were from Los Angeles. There were only two or three of them. We had to get rid of them. I would say that about ninety percent of my time was spent dealing with about five percent of the troops. The rest of them were no problem. But five percent of three hundred, that’s fifteen.

LC: Did you find that to be pretty much true as you went on?

WL: Yeah. Although here this was kind of a weeding out process. You know, these were recruits and they were brand new to the Army. If you got rid of those fifteen, your problems from then on wouldn’t be so severe. Not in the regular units.

LC: Right. Not as those guys progressed through. You will have already gotten rid of the problems.

WL: Yeah. Most of the bad ones, got rid of them pretty early. I got a contingent of soldiers from Utah. Of course they were all Mormons. There were about twenty of them, and they came in. Boy, that was a real breath of fresh air because they were so well behaved, they were clean, they didn’t mind getting their hair cut, their uniforms were all in shape. Within a couple of weeks I made them all squad leaders.

LC: No kidding.

WL: Yeah. They were a good bunch. I don’t say anything for their goofy religion—I hope you’re not a Mormon.

LC: I’m not.

WL: But they certainly are good folks.

LC: No drug or alcohol problems with them I’m sure.


LC: The kids who were on heroin. How did you find out that was what they were doing as opposed to—?

WL: Oh, the squad leaders reported it. The platoon sergeants, they said this guy’s under the barracks. He’s crawling under there every night and he’s got these marks on his arm and so on. I just called the CID, Criminal Investigation Detachment, and they took him away.

LC: Were there any race issues? You’ve mentioned a couple of times—
WL: Race issues?
LC: Yeah. Race tensions.
WL: Not that I could see. No.
LC: That's interesting.
WL: They seemed to get along all right.
LC: Now how long did you have this command, Bill?
WL: That was about, let's see, about a year, a little less than a year. Then after
I'd had that for about a year I was moved to division headquarters where I was
responsible for all of the training scheduling for the entire division. I'd had some
experience, of course, in that sort of thing. So I was a training scheduling officer for the
G3 section of the Division from then on. That was a very interesting and demanding
job. Long hours.
LC: I can imagine. For a whole division. Yeah.
WL: All of the training areas and the training, all of the ranges—I had to schedule
all that. You couldn't have two companies going to the same place at the same time, you
know. You had to keep things sorted out.
LC: Where was the division headquarters?
WL: Division headquarters were right in the center of Fort Ord.
LC: Okay. So you didn't have to move your family again.
WL: No.
LC: Ok. Well, let's take a break there today.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 4 of 22
August 31, 2005

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today’s date is the thirtieth (Editor’s note: thirty-first) of August 2005. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. Bill is speaking to me by telephone from Virginia as he usually does. Good morning again, Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, yesterday you said that you remembered a few bits and pieces about the integration of the Division while you were a part of it. I wonder if you can share those with us.

WL: Yes. Here’s what happened, I’m thinking that it was in 1951 and somewhere towards the last part of ’51. As I recall, President Truman directed that the Army integrate. At that time I was in Company L of the Infantry Regiment, that’s Battalion, at Johnson Barracks in Nuremberg. There was a Negro, that’s what they called them, a Negro infantry, separate infantry, battalion stationed in Nuremberg also.

LC: But at a different barracks I presume?

WL: They were in different barracks clear on the other side of the city. This was what they called in those days an armored infantry battalion. They changed the designations. Later on they called them mechanized infantry. But in any case they were completely a motorized outfit. I guess they had—I don’t know what kind of vehicles they had in those days. I can’t recall now. It was before the M113 came on board, I know that much. In any case, it was a mech infantry or armored infantry battalion, separate. Didn’t belong to a division. Of course we had in Nuremberg, we had our entire regiment, three battalions. So what we were directed to do was to furnish a roster of our company, of L Company, to regimental headquarters. They picked every fifth or sixth man on our roster, I wouldn’t say it was random but they checked about every sixth man. Those men that happened to fall on that roster at that count were transferred to this mech infantry battalion. That mech infantry battalion, it did the same thing with a roster, and we got a group of them. Again, by lot you might say. So we picked up about, in the
company, I’m guessing now, probably ten to fifteen Negro soldiers of all grades. You
know, we probably got a couple of sergeants and the rest of them, maybe a corporal here
or there, and the rest were privates. That’s the way they integrated the units. In other
words, almost by lot. Just by chance.

LC: That’s very interesting. I did not know that.

WL: Yeah. That’s how they did it. It was a surprisingly smooth transition. I
don’t recall any incidents of racial problems. There weren’t any fights or anything like
that. On occasions before this happened infantry officers like myself were detailed from
time to time to augment the military police in Nuremberg on patrol of the night life of
Nuremberg, which was considerable by that time. There were certain bars that were
frequented by the black soldiers and certain others where you didn’t find any black
soldiers. They kind of migrated to their own, with their own preferences, obviously. I
remember working up a bar down in Nuremberg one night where there was a big fight
but it was all blacks. It wasn’t any black, white—

LC: Right. It wasn’t between two races.

WL: No, no. It wasn’t a racial thing. The whites got into fights too.

LC: Undoubtedly.

WL: I mean I just happened to be at a black bar when it happened. But anyway
that’s the way we integrated the Division.

LC: You know, just while we’re on the subject of Nuremberg. While you were
there, Bill, did you go to see like the great stadiums and so on where—?

WL: Yes. In fact we had a division review at what they called the Märzfeld.

That’s the one, that’s the place where you see in newsreels now and then, old newsreels,
you see the Nazi party—

LC: The rallies?

WL: The rallies, with troops too. I mean great numbers of the army out there.

It’s a huge place. We, as I say, we held a division review there. We all thought it was
kind of strange that we would bring the entire division together in one place when we
were the only division in Germany. But that’s what we did. It took about probably three
hours for us to pass and review.

LC: Who was the VIP? I mean was it a general inspection or was—?
WL: I guess it was just—I don’t recall there was anybody of a higher echelon. Perhaps a corps commander, that was about it. But it was quite a show. But that was a big place. I remember also going to a—again, you were in Germany some time. Have you ever heard of Fasching? Fasching, F-a-s-c-h-i-n-g?

LC: I don’t think so.

WL: This is a festival in Bavaria, and it might be in other parts of Germany. But I think it’s typically a Bavarian fall festival kind of thing. Their version of a harvest festival where everybody goes to the bier stube and eats and has great time with accordions and—their obscene musical instruments. But anyway, I recall being in a bar with my wife. It was a restaurant too, it wasn’t strictly a bar. The Germans got pretty well loaded and excited. We felt that we were kind of the targets and they were singing—I remember they sung the “Horst Wessel Song,” which was one of the German Nazi marching songs.

LC: They were actually singing that?

WL: They sang that. Yeah.

LC: Were you the only Americans around?

WL: We were the only Americans in there, yeah. It was a little bit exciting actually, interesting. They were throwing—they had little paper balls that, you know, people throw around on New Years and those sorts of things. We seemed to be the target of most of them.

LC: Were you in uniform Bill?

WL: Yes. We had to wear uniform. We were not allowed during that period to be in civilian clothes in Germany.

LC: At all?

WL: At all. Yeah.

LC: Was it true for enlisted men?

WL: Yes. Uh-huh. Yeah. They were not allowed to have civilian clothes. Also, the enlisted men, if they were in the grade of sergeant and above were authorized to have families there and some of them did. A few of them did, not very many. Most of our sergeants were there as single men, they lived in barracks. No soldier below the grade of sergeant was allowed to have any—to live off post. They lived in the barracks, period.
In those days in the regular Army unless you were a grade of sergeant or above you had to have permission of the company commander to get married. If you got married without permission you got a general discharge.

LC: No kidding!

WL: Yeah. You couldn’t have a family in the grade of corporal or below.

LC: So, you actually had to apply to the commander?

WL: Yeah. You had to tell the commander that you wanted to get married and you understood that as a corporal or a private that if you did you were not going to be living off post anyway. You’re not going to live off there with your wife, not in Germany anyway. You still lived in the barracks. Of course, if permission was not granted, if a soldier wanted to marry he had to apply for a discharge.

LC: Well, it was good to be sergeant then if you wanted to be married.

WL: Yeah. If you wanted to be married. Of course, there was drawbacks to being married. But in the regular Army they didn’t put up with it.

LC: You know, Bill, speaking of the barracks and living situations, did those African American, or as they were called then Negro soldiers, did they then integrate into the barracks as well? How did that go?

WL: Oh yes. They were—

LC: They were just relocated in as if—?

WL: Yeah. As if there was no distinction. They lived in the barracks and sergeants in the barracks had their own rooms. Privates lived in—it depended upon the location. In our barracks at Zirndorf, that was the Battalion. The barracks also at Johnson Barracks, these were old German kasernes. They called them kasernes, k-a-s-s-e-r-n-e-s (Editor’s note: kasernes). Yeah. Kasernes. These were substantial buildings. The one at Zirndorf had belonged to a German anti-aircraft battalion. Very solid masonry walls, a gate with an arch over it out of stone. Very good barracks. Soldiers lived about four to a room in the barracks, and the same thing at Johnson. Johnson wasn’t quite as elaborate as the one up at Zirndorf but they were good solid barracks. They weren’t like the temporary barracks that the United States Army lived in here in the United States. You know, clapboard wood, so on. They were really permanent structures, and they all had a central parade ground.
LC: Were they heated?
WL: Oh yes. They were heated with coal.
LC: Those bricks that you talked about?
WL: Oh no. In the barracks those were hot water heated radiators. There was a furnace room somewhere and of course we used a German contractor to keep the fires going in the wintertime. They were well constructed buildings.
LC: Have you been back, by the way, to Nuremberg, to that area?
WL: I haven’t. I never did get time to get back to Germany after I left in ’53.
LC: Would you want to?
WL: Oh, not particularly. Germany has changed so much. It’s so crowded and I don’t know. I just never felt much like it. I am much more attracted to the Far East than I am to Europe.

WL: Right. So, I was assigned to be to the G3 section. That is the operations, plans, and training of the Infantry Division training. It wasn’t, as I mentioned before, it wasn’t a tactical division. It was a training division. It had three regiments and its artillery battalions were what they called the school troops. They’re the ones who put on all of the training. As a training company commander when I was doing that, my responsibilities were to get the troops fed, clothed, and at their proper place for their training. The only instruction that I had to take care of was the dismounted drill, close order drill, that sort of thing. But they had—division faculty put on all of the so-called artillery battalions, they put on all the training. There was a range committee, there was a map reading committee, et cetera. That’s why they did the training. So when I went up to division headquarters to schedule this training I had a general matrix of what every soldier in the division was supposed to get and I rotated all of the companies through this master training schedule. Let’s see, how many companies? We had three regiments and each regiment had twelve companies so we had, what, thirty-six companies to train. Something like that through the system.
LC: There was already a flow pattern that you needed to get each of the companies through?

WL: Yes. The training period was, let’s see, sixteen weeks of basic training. Then there was another eight weeks of what they called advanced individual training. That’s when the soldiers did some specialization. They were either marked for heavy weapons or they’re marked for riflemen or some other specialty. That was called advanced individual and that was eight weeks. After the sixteen plus eight they graduated and moved on to their regular assignments, wherever they were going to go.

LC: Just to clarify, the Division existed for the purpose of getting all of these folks through the training itself and then once the AIT (advanced individual training) was completed they would move to another division?

WL: Yes. They’d move to somewhere else, to some other infantry division or to a separate regiment or artillery battalion or whatever.

LC: How long had the Division been in place and doing this work?

WL: Let’s see, this is 1953. They’d probably been there about three years. I’m just guessing. Probably that. The Division during World War II had been deployed to the Pacific theater. It fought in the Pacific theater. I know it was in Luzon and I believe it was in New Guinea—yeah, I know it was in New Guinea. Its three regiments fought in the Pacific War. Then it brought back and deactivated as a regular division. It was a regular Army division then it reverted to a training division, and it’s no longer an active division in the Army. I don’t know why, but it’s one of those that they deactivated.

LC: Okay. Bill, this kind of organizing and scheduling work, did it suit you?

WL: Oh yes. It got to be a little mundane after awhile. You know, very much of a routine although it was a challenge from time to time because of trying to get all the companies through their proper training program in a good, logical sequence. It was a challenge. You had limited time, you had limited space. To work it all in and not mess things up and get two companies at the same place at the same time, have conflicts, it was a little bit tough. Weather intervened a little bit, although weather wasn’t really much of a factor in that part of California.

LC: Yeah, it’s pretty nice over there. What about the division leadership? Who was the head of G3?
WL: The division commander was Major General McClure. Can’t remember his first name. He had a very distinguished combat record in World War II. There was one incident that caused some trouble there for him and some others. They built a golf course and I think there was some question about whether they had proper authority to use the funds that they did use to build the golf course at Fort Ord. I think McClure got into a little bit of a sticky situation there but he came out all right. That’s the only thing. He was a nice fellow.

LC: How long did you stay in this posting, Bill?

WL: Let’s see, I got there in late summer of ’53 and I left in ’55, summer of ’55, to go to the officers’ advanced course at Fort Knox, the armor school.

LC: How did you get selected for this? Do you know?

WL: The armor school? Well, infantry officers generally go for their officers’ advanced course to Fort Benning, infantry. The infantry branch in Washington sent me a letter and they said that if I did not object that I was going to be sent to Fort Knox and get my advanced course in armor branch, tanks. So I called up [Major Parker] that I worked for in the Division in the Infantry in the G3 section and I asked his opinion about that, whether that would be a good idea for me to do that. I think at this time I’d already been, just been promoted to captain.

LC: Oh okay.

WL: Captain by now. So I ask him about that and he said, “By all means take that opportunity. It’s an excellent idea to be cross trained because, well, essentially we all work together anyway and the more you can learn about armor branch the better off you’re going to be.” So, I took the job and I was posted to Fort Knox for the advanced course.

LC: Do you have any idea why this opportunity came to you?

WL: Why they selected me? No. I don’t know if they do that kind of by random or—I believe, more likely, they take officers who’ve had excellent efficiency reports over time. They don’t want to send a dud infantry officer to another branch.

LC: Because it doesn’t look good.

WL: No, it doesn’t look good. So there were ten of us infantrymen in this class of about a 110 officers, in our class at Fort Knox. About ten were infantry.
LC: Were there others from other branches?

WL: No.

LC: No engineers, no—?

WL: Just infantry and armor.

LC: Okay. Tell me about what it was you were supposed to derive from the experience of being there at the armor school at Fort Knox?

WL: School? You’re trained there in the tactics and techniques of fighting a battalion. Actually, in this case, essentially a tank battalion. But because of the doctrine of the US Army is combined arms you don’t have what they call a naked tank battalion without infantry attached. You don’t have an infantry battalion without a tank unit attached. So it’s combined arms all the way. I just learned a lot more about how tank battalions operate. Also, there’s an emphasis on armored cavalry at that school too. The Army still has cavalry regiments, three squadrons in the cav regiment. So I learned a lot about how to fight the tank battalion reinforced with infantry and an infantry battalion reinforced with tanks. So, a lot of map exercises.

LC: Bill, this is I think a real interesting area and I wonder if we could explore it for just a little bit. The cavalry units of course are noted for mobility. The kind of warfare that I would gather they were teaching you about was warfare of movement. Is that accurate?

WL: That’s right. The cav regiment has several different typical missions. They screen the flanks of other larger units. They are usually employed by the corps, an Army Corps. A typical corps has about three divisions in it and the corps is commanded, well, typically by a lieutenant general and his staff. They maneuver three or more divisions. Actually, two or more divisions, you might say, in a corps. They generally have a corps—assigned to the corps will be a cav regiment. They screen flanks, they move out forward to contact the enemy, try to find him. That’s their main thing. These days they also sometimes are employed to secure rear areas; provide security for the logistical elements of a field army or generally a field army.

LC: Now, was most of the curriculum, if you will, based on European theater exchanges?
WL: It was mostly based upon what we would expect in a war against the Soviet Union in Europe. There was no attempt to talk about fighting in the forests and jungles of Southeast Asia because, in the first place, we’re talking about tanks. Talking about large formations of tanks, artillery, and infantry in open warfare. At that time also there was some emphasis but not a great deal on the use of nukes. That hadn’t really come into the play very much. Got into that a lot more when I got to the Command and General Staff College a few years later.

LC: But tactical battlefield nuclear?

WL: Yeah. Right. Tactical nukes. But it was generally maneuvering against another force that was similarly equipped and organized. That is, the Soviet tank units.

LC: Do you remember much about the assessments? The comparative assessments of the American produced tanks and the Soviet tanks at this time? Do you remember what you were told about how good they were?

WL: Well, I think at this time the Army was still kind of experimenting with trying to improve on the tanks that we had used in World War II. No, we didn’t discuss that very much. I don’t know what tanks the Soviets were producing at that time. I can’t recall now. We had some fairly good tanks but the big complaint about our tanks that they were underpowered. They were also gasoline powered, which was a pretty dangerous situation if you got hit because gasoline being so volatile. They burn a lot quicker than a diesel tank will burn. So that was one consideration. We had the M41 light tank, which was really kind of a joke.

LC: Why do you say that?

WL: Had a light gun. Let’s see, it had a 76 mm gun. Then our medium tank was much too heavy for the size of gun it had. It had the 90 mm gun. You know the tanks now, our tanks now, have a 120 mm so they’re much better.

LC: Much more powerful.

WL: Yeah, much better tank. We still had what they called a siege gun on one of the tanks, of a tank company. It was a 105 mm short barreled Howitzer that they put on a tank. The idea was that was going to be used against fortifications. That didn’t make a great deal of sense either, but it took awhile for our tank forces to become equipped with a really world class tank that they have now.
LC: Why would a 105 mm Howitzer not make sense against fortifications and defenses?

WL: Well, it was okay against fortifications but it would be better to have all your tanks mounted with guns that could kill other tanks. That gun that they had on the Howitzer tank, it couldn’t do that. What you wanted was—what you really need is a high velocity, flat trajectory tank gun that will punch through armor. That’s what they have now.

LC: What was the United States best anti-tank gun at that point?

WL: That was that 90 mm.

LC: Was it good?

WL: Yeah. It was a good gun. It had different kinds of rounds. It had what they called a discarding sabot round, which would punch through. It had no explosive on it. Then the high explosive round was shaped charge round, which would punch a hole in a tank with molten metal. Those two rounds were the tank killing rounds of the gun.

LC: It sounds like they had to be, if I’m understanding you correctly, they had to be fired in sequence?

WL: No.

LC: So you could just have the shell that just punched the hole in the armor?

WL: Yeah, um-hm.

LC: Then separately you could also have a shell that punched a hole in the armor and had this kind of—?

WL: Yeah. The explosive round was the same thing only—actually, I don’t know what their preference was in firing. I think most of the time if they had it they’d fire that discarded sabot. Sabot meaning the round would leave the tube and part of the projectile would drop off and all of what remained would be something like a dart. Looked like a dart, a pretty heavy dart, and that would punch the hole in the armor.

LC: Do you know what it was composed of? What the material was?

WL: Tungsten steel of some sort. Now they use depleted uranium.

LC: Right, because it’s heavier.

WL: Heavier. Yeah. Much more dense and more effective. But in those days they didn’t have that discard; they didn’t have that depleted uranium material. In other
words, the main point of having a tank is to kill other tanks. That’s its main mission and
you didn’t—if you wanted to bust holes in fortifications you could do that with the shape
charged round just as well.
LC: Meaning from stationary artillery or mortar rounds?
WL: Yeah. You could use artillery or you could use that high explosive round
from the tank gun. You didn’t need a 105 mm Howitzer shell to do that.
LC: So that was kind of overkill for the only purpose it could serve.
WL: Think it was.
LC: Did they talk to you at all about the ratio of tanks to infantry and what that
ought to be in the field?
WL: Oh no. That consideration depends entirely on the mission and the kind of
enemy you’re against and the terrain. If you’re in close terrain, that is in woods, you’d
want more infantry to keep enemy infantry from getting too close to the tanks where they
could kill tanks with their hand held anti-tank weapons. If you’re in very open terrain
you’d want more tanks because you could see.
LC: You can move.
WL: Yeah. You can move. Yes. So it’s that kind of consideration. If you’re
fighting mostly enemy infantry without very many tanks you’d want more infantry so
you can close with some—
LC: Because up close a tank is vulnerable. I mean if a handful of enemy soldiers
get up close to it—
WL: Infantry in those days were even becoming equipped with some pretty
effective weapons that infantry could use against tanks. You got recoilless rifles and the
wire guided anti-tank missiles, so on. So, with a very heavy charge on them you could
knock out tanks if you get close enough to them.
LC: Is that what we call a TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided
(antitank missile system)) missile now, that kind of—?
WL: Uh-huh.
LC: Okay. Did they talk to you at all about how many tanks, what the tank
strength was of the Warsaw Pact forces? I guess Warsaw Pact by now, 1955. Did they
talk to you about what the strength of the enemy was likely to be relative to the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) strength in a European tank war?

WL: We just knew up front that we were going to be outnumbered.
LC: You did?
WL: Yeah. Right.
LC: So how do you manage that? I mean what’s the fix for that? Be better than they are?
WL: Yeah. Be better, be more accurate, have better equipment. Of course we didn’t know that we had better equipment. We didn’t have the great range finders that they have now. We had an optical range finder where you had to parallax. You had to turn a little knob and you’d have what they called flying geese. You got these geese lined up in the reticle of the sight, and once you had them lined up then you look at a chart and you could see what the range was.

LC: Oh, you had to look it up?
WL: Well, yeah. There was a chart right there.
LC: But you had to refer to—?
WL: You had some sort of a primitive computer on the gun that would give you the correct elevation for whatever range you were going to fire at. But it wasn’t nearly as neat as the ones they have now with the lasers and so on.
LC: I’ll bet. It’s pretty high-tech now.
WL: Had a lot of practice with that. They had one barracks, an old barracks, that they converted into that training area. They had the range finders pointing out the windows and you’d sit behind that range finder for hours and line up the geese and somebody would come by and check to see whether you were doing it right or not. It took some skill and some practice to get very good at that.

LC: Was there any thought at all, I guess you mentioned this before but I just want to reiterate, any thinking that you could pick up from your experience at the Army school about utilizing tanks in a non-European context?
WL: No, except that I was aware even then that people would say that this isn’t tank country therefore we’re not going to move tanks in here. Probably overestimating, or put it this way, underestimating the ability of a tank to operate in close terrain and to
be very effective in opposing an enemy, even if it’s just infantry. If you have two or
three tanks along with a battalion of infantry in a jungle, why, you’re in pretty good
shape. The tanks seem to have a great deal of fear factor to the enemy and shock. You
start firing the main tank gun and also its machine gun in dense forest and you can have a
good effect on the infantry of the enemy. So I would say that too many people have
made bad decisions about not bringing tanks in where we could have used them.

LC: Underutilizing them.

WL: Yeah. In fact, as a footnote to that, what General DePuy—I’m going way
ahead to—but General DePuy who I worked for in the Infantry Division, was the J3.
That is the chief of operations for Military Assistance Command Vietnam for General
Westmoreland. When the Division was being readied to deploy to Vietnam from Fort
Riley and DePuy made the decision to leave the Division’s tank battalion behind. They
didn’t move the Tank Battalion to Vietnam with the Division because DePuy had
determined that Division was going to operate in country, in terrain that wasn’t suited to
tanks. He told me later, he said, “That was one of the dumbest decisions I ever made to
leave that tank battalion behind. When we started operation of Route 13 we had to
borrow a tank company from the Division because we really needed tanks. But we
didn’t have any.” So that’s just kind of an object lesson.

LC: Are we talking about 1965?

WL: Yeah. We’re talking about 1965 when—the division went in ’65. I joined
them in ’66.

LC: So, are we talking about the Ia Drang battles?

WL: No. We’re talking about Route 13 up in Binh Duong province.

LC: Oh okay.

WL: Binh Duong up towards the Cambodian border.

LC: Yeah. Where the Division was down there.

WL: Twenty-fifth was on our left. They were in Cu Chi, were operating in Tay
Ninh, and we were operating on their right up through Binh Duong. We went in to Tay
Ninh too but—

LC: But primarily you were north of them.

WL: No. Actually we were east. We were east of the—
LC: Oh okay. You were even closer to the border.

WL: Kind of side by side. You’re going to have to—when we talk about that—
you’ll have to pull out a map because most people, in fact I had this problem too. I
thought of north being towards North Vietnam. But when you’re sitting in Saigon north
is towards Cambodia, directly towards Phnom Penh. You know, that’s where you’re
looking when you’re looking north because of the curve.

LC: Okay. I’m actually looking at a map right now and doing it with a pencil and
you’re absolutely right. You’re absolutely right. Okay. That’s actually an interesting
observation. I’ll make a note that we can come back and explore that. How long were
you at the armor school itself?

WL: The standard term for all of the Army’s advanced courses is one year. If
you’re in the regular course it’s a one year course. Well, actually it’s about ten months
because the summer is when you start moving. We graduate probably around mid-June
and then you’re off to a new assignment. I should backtrack a little bit to Fort Ord
because one thing that happened there resulted in my assignment after the armor school.
While I was at Fort Ord I was offered the opportunity to attend what they called the air-ground
operations course at Fort Bragg and Polk Airfield in North Carolina. Air-ground
operations means a staff officer who has a specialty of operating reconnaissance, air
reconnaissance, and air strikes. In other words, he’s an infantry officer or an artillery
officer or armor. But when he’s on the staff of a division he’s the liaison and planner
with the Air Force in planning and operating aerial reconnaissance and aerial air strikes in
the division area. He becomes a specialist either as the intelligence that is officer for air
meaning reconnaissance or the chief in the operations side, the G3 side, air strikes.
Planning air strikes, that sort of thing. You become much more acquainted with the
techniques and tactics that the Air Force uses in those two areas: reconnaissance and
strikes. So I went to Fort Bragg. That was only a two week course. One week with the
Army at Fort Bragg. Then we moved over to Polk Airfield next to Fort Bragg where the
instructors were Air Force and learned more about what they did. So, with that I got a
specialty designator that I was an air-ground operations and intelligence officer, which
came into play with my assignment after Fort Knox. That’s what happened there.

LC: So you had this two week opportunity before you went to armor school?
WL: Before I went to armor school, yes.

LC: So, you know the way that this is shaping up is really interesting because you’re getting quite a breadth of experience from company command to the training and scheduling to the specialized air operations and intelligence and then armor school. Almost like guys who go to West Point who spend, you know, whatever the summers going around to—they go to Fort Knox, right? They go to Fort Sill, you know. They go and check out each of the different sections within the Army. So they’re putting you through that only on a sort of faster pace, I guess. Abbreviated.

WL: Yeah. I got quite a variety of experiences and training. I had to look for this stuff. It didn’t just happen.

LC: Can you explain a little about that? I mean how do you put yourself in a position to get these kinds of opportunities? Do you have to make it known to your commanding officer that you’re interested or—?

WL: You keep track of where the Army schools are and what courses are and when they’re being held. The Army publishes bulletins. Now, I’m sure it’s all online or something. They used to send bulletins out and announce the courses that every Army school, whether it’s artillery or armor or airborne or something, they’d announce that. Let’s say that the pathfinder school for airborne will start on the twelfth of September, make your applications, and so on. So you get sent to that. I saw this notice about air-ground ops and so I thought, “Well that sounds like a pretty good deal.” So I went to the G3 lieutenant colonel and I showed him this thing. I said, “I’d like to take this course.” He said, “Sure, go ahead.” So I applied and that was all there was to it.

LC: But it’s pretty helpful to have a commanding officer who’s willing to, for example, let you go?

WL: Oh sure. Yeah. If I’d been screwed up or something, why he wouldn’t have said so. I had a pretty good deputy who could handle that stuff and I had a very good operations sergeant who could handle the stuff while I was away. So that worked out okay.

LC: Do each one of these training experiences that you have, at this point you’re starting to be more or less mid-career I suppose would be safe to say as a captain. Does each one of these prepare you? Did you feel like you were becoming more prepared for
future opportunities the more breadth of training that you could get? Because of course there’s an alternative argument—and I don’t know whether it’s a strong one or not, perhaps you could say—that what you need to do is do what you do, do more of what you do, do it over and over and over, and become the absolute best at what you do, your tiny little area.

WL: No, I think that it’s much more valuable to get a more breadth of experience and training because you’re entire career you’re not going to be with troops. There are not that many troops around where you can spend your entire career with rifle battalions. You’re going to be on staff sometime or other. You’re going to be on higher level staffs that, like Army headquarters or like I was later on on the Army General Staff. So the more experience and training you can get with other arms and services and more breadth the better off you are.

LC: The more likely, would you say that you are going to—?
WL: That you’re going to get the assignments. Yeah.
LC: Be promoted and all the rest?
WL: Yes.
LC: So, is it fair to say then Bill that you were at this point taking an active role in trying to help design your own career?
WL: Bet you some people did. I was looking to assignments that I would enjoy as well as profit by, you know. I liked being with troops and anytime I could be with troops I did my best to be with them is all.
LC: Let me ask a timeline question here before I ask about your next assignment after armor school and that has to do with events in 1953, ’54 in Indochina. Were you paying attention to the French experience there?
WL: Not much. No. No more than just reading articles and journals. The Army did publish some items. We had a very good infantry journal. I remember that some of those articles were about Indochina. The Command and General Staff College publishes a very good journal, monthly, and they had articles about Dien Bien Phu and so on.
LC: What’s the title of that journal? Do you remember?
WL: Got that one right here.
LC: Okay.
WL: It’s called *Military Review*. That’s what it was called. I have an article and also some book reviews in the *Military Review* from time to time.

LC: Meaning that you’ve written? Yes, I think I have a couple of them here with me, which we’ll talk about. But yes, so that journal had some analysis I’m sure of the experience over there. But Dien Bien Phu as a siege battle wasn’t something that was really being taken up as a source of instruction at this point.

WL: No. The United States Army, if it ever got itself in that kind of a shape, you’d want the leadership somewhere but—

LC: Well, what did you think at the time, Bill, about that? About the whole Navarre Plan and so on or did you not have time to be thinking about it?

WL: I didn’t pay much attention to what was going on there. Actually, the focus was on Europe. Of course the Korean War had just ended about that time so there was a good deal of interest still in Korea. But most of our attention was towards the European theater.

LC: Okay. What were you tasked with after your time at Fort Knox?

WL: Well, I was assigned to—everybody was going to have to Korea. Now the Korean War was just over, well, it was over in ’53. I left armor school in the summer ['56] for Korea. I moved my family from Fort Knox to California. We rented a house near Los Gatos near San Jose, California. We rented a house there for them and then I took off for Korea. In those days it was kind of an arduous flight. It was before jets, before we had any jet airplanes and so it was in an old Boeing four engine, what’d they call it? The crashmaster, I think. Its real name was the Globemaster I think. But we had to go through Hawaii and then from Hawaii to Tokyo and then from Tokyo to Korea. It was a long flight in those old buckets seats, very noisy airplane. But anyway, that’s part of the drill.

LC: Yeah. That’s right. They didn’t give you a lot of choice.

WL: I was assigned to headquarters of the Infantry Division, and beyond that to the G2 section. That’s the intelligence section of the general staff of the Infantry Division, which the headquarters was at a place called Tong Du Chon. It was up on the main highway that went from Seoul up to the border, to the North Korean border. They had three regiments, of course, in the Division. I had hoped that I was going to get
command of a company. Again I was a captain and I wanted one of the rifle companies in the Division but that wasn’t to be the case. I was assigned to the G2 section and I became the assistant—no, I became the G2 air. That’s what it was for the G2. Now, that’s why I mentioned I went to the air-ground operations course. That was on my record so when they saw that they said, “Oh, this is the greatest living expert on air-ground operations so he’s the G2 air.”

LC: So they popped you right in to that slot, huh?

WL: That’s exactly what happened, which wasn’t bad. I got to fly around a lot in the little O-1 airplanes down to corps headquarters at Uijŏngbu and back. I had a good time but it didn’t last very long. The standard tour in Korea for officers and men actually was sixteen months at that time. I was going to be in Korea for sixteen months. I was there about three months and I got a call—or the division headquarters got a call from Army headquarters down in Seoul. They said that they wanted to interview me for a job at G2 Army headquarters. That was Army headquarters. I didn’t really want to do that. I wanted to stay with Division but I didn’t have a choice either. So I went down to Seoul and was interviewed by the G2, a bird colonel named Truly, Colonel Truly, just like it sounds. Also with the fellow I was going to be replacing if I got the job, who was a major, a real nice guy. The job was chief of current intelligence for G2 Army. I thought, “Geez, that’s kind of a heavy assignment for a captain without any real experience at that level for intelligence.” I think I mentioned before I was S2 of a rifle battalion in the Division, but that didn’t have much preparation there for G2 Army and current intelligence. But they explained to me what that job was, which was kind of interesting.

LC: What did they tell you?

WL: They said that the word current intelligence is kind of a cover for little office that you’ve got here that is going to have—you’re going to report on the South Koreans, not on the North Koreans. That’s a little different. Kind of gets into the area of counter-intelligence, and you have two questions to keep answers for. One of them is what is going to happen when Syngman Rhee, who was then president, disappears from the scene by whatever means? Who’s the successor and what does that [mean for] successive government, what’s it going to look like? The second question is South Korea going to
march north? They called it (speaking in Korean) in Korean, “The march north.” Are the
South Koreans going to attack the North? Those were my two what they called EEI,
esthetic elements of information. Those were the questions you have to keep answers
for. So I thought, “Well, this is going to be pretty interesting,” and it was. It was really
political intelligence. The reason they had selected me, they looked through a lot of files
of folks and they decided that since I had a degree in political science that I was probably
an expert on all of this kind of thing, which was kind of screwy. But that’s what they
were looking for. Somebody with a degree in political science that could read and write,
I guess. I was fortunate because my deputy was a lieutenant. Actually, he was an
artillery lieutenant but he was a lawyer. He had graduated from Penn, University of
Pennsylvania, and he was an honor graduate in the law school. He was editor of the Penn
Law Review, so you can see the caliber of folks I had there. He could really write and he
was a good analyst. I had a lady, Nancy Gager, she was a young lady. She was only
about twenty-seven or so, five maybe. She was a graduate of Wellesley and had taken
advanced work in Oxford. So, she was also a really smart gal and excellent writer.

LC: She was an Army officer as well?
WL: Was a civilian employee. Well, I had a couple of Army sergeants who were
kind of the gofers. They ran mimeograph machine and stuff like that. They didn’t do
any writing. But they were good guys to have around. Lieutenant Klepner was his name.

LC: That’s the Penn fellow?
WL: He was from Pennsylvania. Yeah.

LC: Klepner.
WL: Klepner. He’s probably a big time corporation lawyer by now.

LC: Raking it in hand over fist.

WL: Pardon?
LC: Raking it in hand over fist.

WL: I’m sure he is. Nancy Gager, she was my other gal. Then they brought in a
GS15 from the States who was absolutely worthless and I finally got rid of him because
he couldn’t write and he wasn’t interested in finding out anything about Korea either for
that matter.

LC: What was his background? Do you know it?
WL: Well, he was a career Army civil servant who had been in intelligence. But probably at some other level or interest. He might have been a Yugoslav expert. I don’t know what he was but he certainly didn’t fit in.

LC: So you were able to kind of shuffle him off?

WL: I just didn’t give him much. After I found out that he couldn’t write I didn’t give him any work to do. Finally got rid of him. But between Klepner, Nancy, and me—and they actually taught me how to write a lot better than I had been able to do. They corrected my stuff and edited whatever I wrote to make it more readable. I learned quite a bit from those two young folks. What else? Oh, there was a doctor. Doctor Mel Krant. Mel Krant was an Army doctor, he was a captain, well, he was a reserve officer. He was a graduate from Harvard Medical School. He was an internist and he was an awfully good doctor. He was smart as could be and a lot of fun. He was also an excellent pianist. He used to play piano for us now and then, a real smart guy. He was assigned to be Syngman Rhee’s personal physician. So, in the end, what happened was he’d go see Rhee about three or four times a week, take his blood pressure, check his bowel movements, and all the other things that he was supposed to be doing, and listen to his heart. Then he’d come back and report to me what his health was at that particular time. I’d write that up and put it in our—we had to produce a daily intelligence report for the commanding general Army who was then I.D. White. In fact our report was pretty widely circulated among the higher echelons of the Pacific theater and Korea. It was kind of a best seller. I really liked it because it was so earthy and had so many details in it, particularly from Dr. Krant. Oh, what else? Oh, and also, I had a Korean who spoke excellent English and he was a member of the National Assembly in the opposition party. So he didn’t get into the National Assembly everyday. Sometimes they’d lock up, they’d lock the opposition out. They didn’t have a really great deal of experience in running a parliament. But they were doing the best they could. He would report to me everyday. The legislature was in session he’d come back and tell us what was happening in the legislature. So we had some pretty good sources. We had some other sources. I had good liaison with the embassy and the station chief there, CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) guy. So we collaborated on other things. But all in all it was a very interesting experience.
LC: Were the Foreign Service officers much help?
WL: Oh yeah. We had good relations with them, with the political section of the
embassy as well as with the chief of station.
LC: How big was the—I don’t know whether you can mention this, although I
suspect some of this is declassified. But do you know how big the CIA station was at
that point?
WL: No. I have no idea.
LC: How many folks?
WL: I only met with—they assigned one fellow to be the liaison to me. So I
never met with the station chief himself.
LC: Now, did you try to keep your reports to one page?
WL: No. It was usually two or three pages.
LC: Really? You turned these out everyday?
WL: Everyday.
LC: Were you like the final editor?
WL: Yes. I signed off on them.
LC: You had to get this done by a certain time probably for distribution?
WL: Around by 1700 at night, in the afternoon, that’s five o’clock, take it over to
Colonel Truly. He’d read it and say, “Okay, let her go.” We’d put it on the wire and
send it out.
LC: Now, did you get any blow back from any of your analyses or your articles?
Do you ever remember getting comments?
WL: Most of them were—we got some. I got in a little bit of difficulty at one
time but it blew over. Sometime during the period there was a criminal trial of a— let’s
see, by that time he was a major general I think of the Korean Army. He was
commander, he might have been higher than, he might have been a lieutenant general.
He was commander of what they called the ROK (Republic of Korea) Army. They had
a strange organization there. The ROK Army was on the line. That was a regular
infantry army. The ROK Army was the logistical support for that ROK Army. The
ROK Army was commanded by this general who had been a very good division
commander during the war. He had run a really good show and was a good friend of
Gen. I.D. White, in command, four-star general, US Army. This guy was indicted for stealing, stealing Army equipment and selling it on the black market. Mostly he was dealing in tires, tires and fuel, mainly. He was indicted and he was being tried. The judge advocate general of the Army, a lieutenant colonel, another really good officer, was detailed by General White to go to the trial everyday as a spectator and report to me about what happened in the trial that day, all the testimony and so on. That was a pretty heavy load both for him and for me. He’d come back and he’d tell me what happened and we’d write it all down and put it in the report. Well, each day we did that and on one particular day things began to look very, very bleak for this general. I think his name was Kang Moon Bong. That name comes to me. Anyway, it looked like he was just about ready to be convicted. We offered the opinion, I’m sure, that he probably deserves it. So, we put that in the report and went up to I.D. White and I got a phone call from his chief of staff up there. “Come up and see General White.” So I went up and reported to General White and he was livid. He said, “You’ve decided apparently that General Kang Moon Bong is guilty.” I said, “Well, it sure looks like that to me. I’m only going by the reports that the JAG has given me.” “I don’t want you writing anymore about this trial. Stop writing about that.” He just didn’t like that at all.

LC: That was the end of your trial coverage.

WL: Cover the trial. Well, we didn’t put it in the report. We still—

LC: Monitored?

WL: Yeah. We still monitored and the JAG still came to see me everyday and told me what went on. Interestingly enough when I left Korea sixteen months after my tour, General White asked me to stop by in Hawaii and brief him on what was going on at that time when I left. So I had about five days in Hawaii. Went up and briefed him personally. At that time he was commanding United States Army Pacific. So I went in and gave him a rundown on the latest events, political/military events in Korea. So, it didn’t really hurt me. Also at that time his chief of staff, General Corcoran, was chief of staff for, he was a major general. He was chief of staff for General White there in the Pacific. Charlie Corcoran, he was a real nice fellow. He talked to me some length too. So I made some—he was a pretty good contact to make too. But anyway that was my
experience there. There was another terrific event: The chief of national police was murdered by his enemies. Shot in the face with a .45 caliber pistol on his way to work.

LC: In Seoul?

WL: In Seoul. Yeah. So things were pretty turbulent. Rhee was running the place with pretty much an iron hand and the prime minister was Yi Ki-bung and he had kind of an ill reputation. Shortly after I left—this is just a footnote, I didn’t experience this—they had a coup. Rhee was kicked out. They allowed him to leave, they allowed him to go to Hawaii, which he did. Yi-Ki-bung murdered his family and killed himself because he didn’t want them to take him alive. So, it was a lot of interesting things going on there.

LC: How far removed in time was the coup from your departure?

WL: It was only a few months. I don’t remember now. I’d say probably three or four months.

LC: Had you and the staff seen rumblings?

WL: Well, there were rumblings all the while. There was always people who were, we suspected, who were planning things, plotting things against them. I had some contact with their Army chief of staff, Paik Sun-yup. I think he later became the prime minister and he had a brother named Paik In-yeop. He was a corps commander. I think they were somehow involved in the coup but I could be wrong on that.

LC: This is, you know, a very interesting case in comparison with what happened in Saigon in 1963. Of course in the case of South Vietnam great debate at the time and ever since about the degree of US involvement in pushing, leading, cajoling, hinting to those who might, to the generals who eventually did overthrow Diem, that the United States would or would not support them, what benefits they might have if they were successful, and so on. Did it feel like there were those kinds of intrigues going on that you may not have been a part of but that may have been developing in other areas of the US stationed there?

WL: Well, there could very well have been. But, you see, nobody at the embassy was going to talk to me about things like that. Sure. Mel Krant, when he was reporting to me he would tell me who came to see. He knew Yi Ki-bung, the prime minister. He could come back and tell me that so and so came to visit the president at this time and

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place, and that sort of thing we reported. We kept track of those things. I’m sure that our
information, although it was kind of anecdotal in a sense, was of interest to the people
who were really doing spade work at the CIA. They would be interested in who came
and went. I had the only real entrée to that kind of information with Mel Krant. Mel
eventually left and he was replaced by another very fine doctor also from Harvard, of all
places.

LC: Who was that, Bill?
WL: Let’s see. Can’t come up with it.
LC: It’ll come to you, I’m sure.
WL: Probably will. Klepner left and he was replaced by another lieutenant from
Penn. I don’t know how this happened but he was another law review guy and a friend of
Klepner. I think Klepner might have found him, might have, you know—he was
assigned to an infantry or artillery unit in Korea. Klepner probably found him and said,
“Okay Jerry,” Jerry Flood was his name, “Here’s a job for you.” So that’s how I got him.
He was also very fine young fellow and smart, good writer. That’s really what you need
on a job like that. There was only three of us doing all of the reporting.

LC: You need to be able to do it pretty much on the dot.
WL: Oh, you have to be fast. Of course, again, this is before computers. You
didn’t have word processing machines. You had typewriters.

LC: No email.
WL: No emails.

LC: So the distribution on your report, you mentioned, was quite broad.
WL: Yes. It went by wire. Of course Teletype in those days, and it was all
encrypted. It went back to Washington here and to the Pacific command, and also
internally to Army.

LC: Would it go to civilian agencies too?
WL: It went to CIA.
LC: Okay. State department?
WL: State. Yes.
LC: I wonder whether this was, I mean certainly this was a different ball game
from commanding troops. But did you get your teeth into this Bill?
WL: Oh yes! I enjoyed it. Yeah. I became quite acquainted with Korean history and when we went out on the—we made some friends with some Koreans. Mr. Lee, who was a fellow—which is kind of like a Mr. Smith anywhere else. He had a very nice daughter, very beautiful young lady who played the violin. He introduced us to some Koreans. We went out for dinner now and then with them. We got to see a lot of the countryside because—I didn’t have a jeep but the doctors did. We’d get in the jeep and on a weekend, like a Sunday, we didn’t have to report on a Sunday. We’d drive out into the countryside. Do some hiking, looked at the temples, that sort of thing.

LC: Did you take photographs? Were you much of a photographer?
WL: I’ve lost them all but—
LC: You’ve lost them all?
WL: Oh yeah. I’ve lost a lot of stuff when you do your moving.
LC: Oh I see. Um-hm. Let me ask about your own read of the political situation in South Korea while you were there. In addition to reporting the bits and pieces that came into you from the various sources you’ve described, did you also formulate an opinion about whether Syngman Rhee was the kind of leader that South Korea needed or that, for example, the United States needed in South Korea?
WL: I felt that he was a man for that time. They needed a strong leader. They needed strong leadership because they were still under serious threat from the North. But also I felt that he was a tyrant that had to be replaced eventually if they were ever going to move along the road to democracy. What they had then was a kind of a sham for democracy. Rhee’s party was ran ruff shod over the opposition. The opposition party was called the Democratic Party. Anytime that they got a little bit too far out of line, too much criticism here and there, why, the national police would descend on them and break up their rallies and things like that. They’d hire hoodlums to threaten them, throw rocks, and things like that. It was a volatile political situation. There was an opposition newspaper, the Korea Times, published in English. Well, of course they had a Korean edition too but they published that in English and it was shut down from time to time.

LC: If you could, can you give an appraisal about the degree of actual internal security problems that the Rhee government faced? I mean was there an opposition that
you know had the steam to eliminate him or to undermine what progress had been made
towards democratic institutions?

WL: Well, I think their main threat was still the intelligence and the seditious
threat from the North more than internal. That was pretty serious. There was a lot of
infiltration seen. Across the land frontier spies and what we would now call terrorists
were picked up quite frequently. Of course, the South had a very extensive counter-
intelligence network, which we participated in—our side participated in. There was a
serious threat from the North, mostly in the intelligence. Well, you could predict that
they would try to assassinate any South Korean leader that they could find vulnerable.

LC: Now, you mentioned the chief of national police.
WL: Yeah. That was a rival of some sort.
LC: Rival to Rhee?
WL: No, rival to the chief of police. I mean he was also an operator. I’m sure he
was on the take of some kind or another. It was kind of like a gangland atmosphere.
LC: Chicago in the ’30s, huh?
WL: Right. Yeah.
LC: Was the chief of national police, I’m thinking he’s primarily responsible for
internal security—?
WL: Yes, he was. He was one of Rhee’s right-hand men. Rhee could, if he
wanted somebody taken out, he could just tell the chief of police to take care of it and it
would be done.

LC: Do you know whether the US had any advisory programs that were trying to
assist the development of the police?
WL: Yes. Well, are you talking about military or civil?
LC: Actually, I’m talking about the police to start off with and then I’ll ask also
about the military. But in terms of a civilian police force.
WL: I’m sure we did but I didn’t have any contact with them. USAID (United
States Agency for International Development), they had that sort of responsibility.
LC: Because of course at almost exactly this time in Vietnam there was a program
to assist the development of the police there. I think it was Michigan State University
had that contract with USAID. I’d wondered if anything came to mind in terms of a parallel—

WL: I didn’t have any contact with it but we did have a large USAID activity there and you can assume they were doing that.

LC: Okay. How was the US advisory effort for the South Korean military organized? Was there a MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group)?

WL: Yes. There was.

LC: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the MAAG and the different Army headquarters?

WL: I had no contact with them. I really can’t speak to that.

LC: Okay. They were just entirely separate though from, say, the Army?

WL: Separate from—they were under Army control, but I had no contact with them. They had advisors at all of the Korean divisions and down to at least a regimental level. I don’t know if they had any advisors at battalion level or not. But I would see them now and then and meet them at different events but had no contact, no official contact, with them.

LC: It sounds like it was a very interesting position to be in in that you had good people helping you. Did you look forward to a rotation out of Korea though on some level?

WL: Oh yes. I wanted to see my family again. I mean, sixteen months is a long time to be away from your—

LC: You were not able to go back or to meet them at all in that space?

WL: No. I had one trip. I had one short leave in Japan in conjunction with a meeting at Army rear headquarters at Camp Zama in Tokyo. I had to go back there for a meeting of some sort and I expanded that in to about a five day leave. But other than that I didn’t have any time off.

LC: Can you just explain what Camp Zama was for those who don’t get that reference?

WL: Camp Zama, Z-a-m-a, was a large United States military, Army, military base right in Tokyo on the outskirts of Tokyo. It was headquarters for US Army and
also for US Army Japan and US Army Korea. The rear headquarters was there at Camp
Zama. It was a large installation and I suppose it had some logistical responsibilities too.

LC: Do you remember what the meeting was for?
WL: It was an intelligence meeting of some sort.

LC: Okay. Is there anything else that you recall about it?
WL: It was nice to be there. See, in Korea, in those days, Korea was still
recovering from the war. No streetlights, the streets were full of potholes. It was very,
very rundown and we lived rather primitively. My office was in a what they called a
Jamesway hut on the edge, right next door to Army headquarters, which was a large
brick building. But living conditions and everything, it was still fairly primitive in Korea.
Up on the line, up in the Division, we lived again in Jamesway huts. These were
insulated. They looked like a Quonset hut only they were made of fabric and were
insulated. They were pretty good in the wintertime. Winters are pretty severe in Korea.
In that part of Korea anyway.

LC: When did you actually get to see your family again?
WL: Let’s see. When did I leave? I left in, I think, in December or January.
Let’s see. Left there in ’57, ’58! Fifty-eight.

LC: So, at the end of ’58?
WL: January ’58 I think is when I got home.

LC: January ’58?
WL: Then, I was assigned to the Presidio of San Francisco, which was
headquarters for Army. In those days, why, the Army had I guess you call them
territorial Army areas and Army headquarters was at the Presidio of San Francisco and I
was assigned there. So I moved. After I got quarters up to Presidio I moved the family
from Los Gatos up to Presidio.

LC: Okay. Let’s take a break there.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 5 of 22
September 13, 2005

LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the thirteenth of September 2005. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and Bill is again at his home in Virginia speaking to me by telephone. Bill, thank you again for your time. I really do appreciate it as does the entire project here.

WL: That’s my pleasure.

LC: Last time we ended with your accepting a new posting to the Presidio. Can you tell me a little bit about what you walked into when you arrived there?

WL: Yes. It was a real surprise to me because I didn’t ever expect ever to be assigned to the Presidio. It was at that time the headquarters of the Army when we still had Army areas in the United States.

LC: Now, can you talk about the change there Bill just to put people in the know who might be listening and not aware of that reorganization?

WL: Yeah. I can’t give you any details because I don’t remember too well. But in that period of time the United States was divided geographically into, I think it was five Army areas. The Army commander in those areas had responsibilities that were regional in nature, you might say. He was responsible for all the military posts and garrisons within the area from the standpoint of real estate and maintenance and that sort of thing. He didn’t have control of divisions that were situated in those areas, but he did have responsibilities with regard to the post and garrisons. I guess he had some civil defense responsibilities too if they ever occurred.

LC: Right; if there was a special action by the president that would bring that into play.

WL: Yeah. That’s right. Sixth Army area included the entire Pacific Coast and I don’t know how far east it went, probably into Nevada. As I remember now, Army had headquarters in Fort Dearborn, Chicago. Third Army was probably still down at Fort Benning, Georgia or somewhere in Georgia. I can’t recall now. First Army was in the...
northeast. Fourth I believe was in Texas. That’s the way the situation was. As far as I
know they don’t have that structure any longer.

LC: I believe that’s correct but I’m not a hundred percent sure. But at this time,
and we’re talking about early 1958, the Army’s responsibilities were essentially internal,
inside the United States.

WL: Definitely.

LC: Tell me what your work was there?

WL: Well, I was assigned to be commander of the honor guard of Army
headquarters, very unusual and sort of a big surprise to me. The honor guard was a
company. I think I had about a 130 soldiers in it and non-commissioned officers. I had
two lieutenants. Our major functions were two. One was to participate in all of the
ceremonies, that is military ceremonies, in the San Francisco area. For example, when
the president of Germany visited San Francisco we held an honor guard ceremony out in
the middle of the San Francisco Bay at Treasure Island. It was a joint services honor
guard. I had a platoon from the Army, one from the Navy, one from the Marine Corps,
and one from the Air Force. The Army being the senior service was in command, so I
commanded that. We put on a parade for the president of Germany. It happened quite
frequently. There weren’t very many joint services honor guards but every Saturday
morning we would put on a parade at the Presidio—my entire company.

LC: Every weekend?

WL: Every weekend, yeah. We had a Friday, I think it was Friday night, we put
on a retreat parade at the parade ground on the Presidio. We wore dress blue uniforms,
very similar in appearance to the Infantry here at Fort Myer, Virginia, the presidential
honor guard. Only of course that outfit has about three battalions. I had one company.

LC: Right. They get a lot of work.

WL: Yes. Besides its ceremonies we were responsible for the military funerals in
the military cemetery at—we had a small one at the Presidio itself and there were very
few ceremonies there because that cemetery was virtually filled. But the other one was at
San Bruno down the coast, down in San Mateo County, south of San Francisco. I kept a
detail down there or sent a detail down there everyday. Usually, two firing squads and
two squads for pallbearers, along with a couple of buglers from the Army band, and two
or three sergeants to participate in the burials. We did as many as fifteen, eighteen burials a day down there. It was during the period when veterans from World War I were just about disappearing. It was beginning to get burials from World War II. In fact, during that period I buried my father down there at San Bruno.

LC: Tell me about that, Bill, if you can, if you feel like it.

WL: Well, my dad had a heart condition that—he didn’t take care of it very well. In fact, those were the days before anybody was doing any open-heart surgery. The drugs for heart problems weren’t as good either as they are now. Anyway, he died. He was about fifty-eight or sixty. He was pretty young.

LC: Had he had a heart attack or did he have heart disease?

WL: Heart attack. Right. At the time I still didn’t have quarters at the Presidio. My wife and family were still living about a hundred miles away down in Los Gatos. I was living in bachelor quarters at the Presidio when he died. I took care of that for my mother, all the arrangements for the funeral and so on.

LC: Actually, if I remember correctly, your father had joined the service at the Presidio.

WL: Yes. That’s right. When the Infantry Regiment was there and that’s where he joined the Army in 1917.

LC: That’s very interesting. That must have been very, I mean in addition to obviously the sense of loss, very moving for you to have him—your involvement in that.

WL: It was. The ceremonies for military funerals are always kind of moving for anybody that spent much time in it. But we got through that okay.

LC: Was this work that you did something that you had to do on site? In other words, did you have to be down at San Bruno on a regular basis?

WL: No. The only time I had to go to these funerals is when they had a funeral with full honors. That is, when they wanted the entire company. That was only for officers. Usually as I recall now that was for general officers and colonels. If you had a funeral of that size you were expected to turn out the entire company and you would also have the entire band, the Army band. That didn’t happen very often.

LC: But that took a little more organization, obviously, than the other more—I hate to say this—but routine operations.
WL: Yeah. It was really a routine. We had a regular bus that took the fellows
down and they had two sergeants in the company who were qualified to drive buses. I
was very fortunate in this assignment because I had a first class, really great sergeant,
Sergeant Van Kirk. I had three or four outstanding platoon sergeants. Everyone in the
company, every soldier in the company, had to be at least five ten tall and to be slender
and a good bearing. They were handpicked. The sergeant and the platoon sergeants
interviewed soldiers for the position of being in that company and if they didn’t measure
up they were rejected.

LC: Yeah. Sometimes I think in later years a misconception arose that the folks
who were stationed and posted to honor guards were people who, you know, didn’t have
other skills or whatever. But in fact that’s the opposite of the case, isn’t it?
WL: Yeah. These had to be very good soldiers and stuff. I instituted a training
program when I got there because I found that they were getting a little bit stale with
regard to their basic qualifications as infantrymen. So I took them out on field exercises
as frequently as I could. The demands of the scheduling of these funerals and so on put
kind of a strain on that. It was hard to do it but we managed to do it. We got out quite a
bit and they enjoyed it.

LC: Now where did you go when you would try to get a group out on some kind
of field exercises?
WL: About the only place I could go was across the bridge over to Fort Baker on
the northern peninsula there of the bay. There’s a little training area there and run them
up and down the hills at Fort Baker. Have you ever been there?
LC: I haven’t been to Fort Baker but obviously yes, the bay area. Quite a bit.
WL: You have been?
LC: It’s beautiful. I mean the Presidio is absolutely gorgeous.
WL: Very good. All the little forts there were coast artillery forts. They had
some of the old bunkers for the coast artillery guns and mortars were still there.
LC: I mean there have been many rounds of base closing. Is Fort Baker still
there?
WL: It’s probably not. Probably part of a state park by now, as the Presidio is.
LC: Right. It’s unimaginably valuable real estate so one would hope that it stayed in public hands somehow. Must have been.

WL: My quarters were up at what they called Fort Scott, which was the northern—well, the western edge of the Presidio was Fort Scott. I had the barracks for my troops, for the company, was a nice old stone, rather, brick two-story barracks. My quarters were a nice little kind of a bungalow across the parade ground from the barracks. So I didn’t even need a car there.

LC: Sounds gorgeous.

WL: Across the street from the company.

LC: Yep. That works pretty well. Did you in fact get out and about in San Francisco much while you were there?

WL: Oh, not much. I had grown up in Oakland across the bay anyway so it wasn’t exotic country to me any longer.

LC: Right. You didn’t need to do the tourist things.

WL: No. We did. You know, we went down to Fisherman’s Wharf and we saw the sights now and then but we weren’t great on nightlife anyway. Not with three by that time four kids, I guess.

LC: Four kids under the age of—?

WL: Under the age of—I’m trying to think how old she was. The oldest was—

LC: Eight or nine? Something like that?

WL: Born in ’44 and here we are—

LC: Little older. Twelve.

WL: Yeah. So she was fourteen years old. She was in high school. Yeah. She was going into high school then I guess.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the relationships, if you made any observations on this, between the civilians in San Francisco and the military stationed at the Presidio? Was it just part of the fabric of the city at that point and no points of tension or anything? We’re talking about 1958.

WL: No tension at all. The soldiers during this period, they didn’t go into town in uniform anyway. Nobody knew them or singled them out as soldiers anyway. I never wore my uniform off the post so we just blended into the community.
LC: Bill, did you see this position as a good one for you or did you have some concerns?

WL: I had a little bit of concern about it because it was so offline. It wasn’t like commanding a rifle company in a regular battalion. It was kind of strange, but at least it was a command and that was good. I had responsibilities that any company commander would have. So that part was good. I got contact with a few general officers. Charlie Corcoran, Maj. Gen. Charles Corcoran was the chief of staff there. In fact he had been chief of staff in Korea so I had known him then. I think he may have had something to do with my assignment but I didn’t ask him about it. But those sorts of things don’t hurt you. Also I had considerable free time. It wasn’t a demanding job like it is when you’re commanding a regular battalion or a regular company.

LC: Did you have discretion as to how you would put that time to use?

WL: Quite a bit. Yes. In fact, I knew that I was in line for the Command and General Staff College so I applied for their correspondence course, which is to prepare you for the resident course at Fort Leavenworth. I worked on that for the last, maybe the last six months I was at the Presidio. I was pretty busy with the math problems and the rest of the courses that they sent me out from Leavenworth. I kept busy.

LC: When did they develop this, what we might call distance learning package to prepare people?

WL: I don’t know how long it has been in business but—and I don’t really recall now how I got involved in it, whether it was my own initiative or somebody told me about it. I may have gotten a letter from Leavenworth telling me that I was in the zone of consideration as they called it for the course and it would be a good idea to take it. That’s probably what happened. I knew I was in the zone. Not everybody gets picked for Leavenworth.

LC: That’s certainly true.

WL: But a small, maybe fifty-five, sixty percent do.

LC: For someone who doesn’t get this language, how do you find out that you are in the zone for a certain either promotion or new billet or command?

WL: Well, a lot of our information came through the Army Times newspaper, which is not an official publication. But it published, always, it would publish the
promotion lists and it would tell you what classes or years were being considered for
promotion to what ranks and so on. So you kind of kept track of your career as much as
anything through the *Army Times*, which was accurate and timely.

LC: My guess would be that not everyone paid equal amounts of attention to that.
I mean I’m sure some people would scour it and there—

WL: Yeah. Most officers did if they had any sense at all. Not all of them did
have a lot of sense, but most of them did. They followed that pretty carefully.

LC: What was your rank at this time, Bill?
WL: I was a captain.

LC: Okay. What would going to being selected for the CGSC (Command and
General Staff College) mean for someone who had the career path that you had? What
did you think it might mean for you?

WL: Well, it was essential to be considered for promotion after that. Particularly
if you were a line officer. If you were in the armor, infantry, artillery, or engineer corps,
particularly, if you didn’t go to the Command and General Staff College you couldn’t
look forward to career in the Army. They expected you to be able to be qualified to go to
that course and complete it or you wouldn’t be promoted. At that time also I recall one
other thing I did. The Army had a program called advanced civil schooling. It allowed
you to apply to go to graduate school and you could select a number of different
disciplines. I put down international relations, I believe, is what I put down as my
preferred course to get an advanced degree in. So I made the application for that. The
Army told you upfront, “You’re not going to hear from us for a year or so. We’re not
going to tell you you’ve been selected as soon as we get your application.” So I wrote
this letter to my branch. You dealt with your branch. I dealt with infantry branch
because I was an infantryman. That was the system in those days.

LC: The branch was headquartered—?
WL: Yeah. The branch was in charge of your career and you dealt with—they
had two or three officers who dealt with each grade. I would write to the office that had
responsibility for infantry captains. That’s the guy I dealt with.

LC: This happens in Washington?
WL: Yes. They were in Washington, Army headquarters. That’s the way the thing worked. So I made this application and then I forgot about it and didn’t pay any more attention to it. It came up later. So that’s what I did at the Presidio. It was enjoyable. It was relatively relaxing because I had such a great crew of sergeants and a couple of fine lieutenants to do all the real work.

LC: Did it also put you at all in a kind of introspective frame of mind? I mean essentially you’re arranging funerals for servicemen.

WL: No. I don’t dwell on things like that.

LC: Okay. Certainly you were, you know, presenting an important function in terms of for the families and all of that.

WL: All of my soldiers and sergeants were very aware of that and did their best to look professional and to handle everything really very smartly and carefully. There was no horseplay and they were sincere and serious about it. They always made a good impression. I was proud of them.

LC: Bill, was there more to the job? You mentioned your continuing connection with Major General Corcoran. Were there others that you came across or other VIPs that you came across during that time that come to mind? You mentioned the president of Germany, other visitors that you remember?

WL: No. I can’t remember any offhand. Usually the visitors were military. They were general officers from outside the command. I remember I saw a clipping out of the paper that somebody clipped of me showing me with the new, I don’t know, new deputy commander of Army or something like that. You know, lieutenant generals and above, they always got the full treatment but I didn’t make any really important connections there. I think Charlie Corcoran retired soon after that. In fact, that kind of a job in the Army was usually the last—it was kind of a retirement posting for senior officers. They’d send them to the Presidio San Francisco or—assignments like that were usually kind of a last assignment for senior generals. There wasn’t any much stress involved in it and looking around for a retirement home I suppose.

LC: Sounds though like since you were still young and hungry you were able to turn it to advantage in terms of studying.

WL: Yeah. Yeah. I used that to good advantage.
LC: Can you tell me just anything more you recall about the advanced curriculum, the distance-learning curriculum? What were the kinds of things that were—

WL: Well, most of the work was on map problems. That is you’d be given an operations order and you would be told that you were in command of a rifle battalion, an attach company of tanks and you were to attack in a certain direction or on a certain axis of advance. They’d send you a map. Might be a map of—I remember one was a map of Lebanon and we were supposed to attack to Damascus along a pipeline, something like that. You’d just plan, the orders that you would be writing, you’d have to write the orders for the battalion and for the companies.

LC: So there would be scenarios that you would work through?

WL: Yeah. They’d give you this scenario and then you’d have to develop your operations plan.

LC: Did you get some feedback on your presentation?

WL: Yeah. You always got a response from them. They’d tell you what you did right and what you could improve on, that sort of thing. I’ve got a reading to it, read the field manuals on the battalion in combat and so on. You’d have to develop your early logistical plan to support your battalion. It was just good tactical training for operations. That’s what the Leavenworth course is really about. It’s training younger officers to assume command of battalions and in those days regiments, now brigades. You’d be trained up to the level of a brigade or for that matter a division staff officer. That’s what it was all about.

LC: Let me just ask one quick question about your grad school application because I know this comes up later. My assumption is that you were thinking you would build on your political science background.

WL: Yes. Yeah I didn’t have any good technical background. If I had been smarter I might’ve put in for something along the lines of business management.

LC: Organizational management—

WL: Yeah something like that, more useful. (Both laugh).

LC: Well, I don’t know. I think this ended up working out pretty well. Were you doing your own reading? Did you have a self set program that you were trying to follow
to in terms of staying current with international developments other than obviously checking the paper and so on?

WL: Yeah. That’s right. I read a lot of books on what was going on. I concentrated a good deal on military history. That’s what I was reading mostly. I wasn’t concentrating much on the doctrines of international relations. I wasn’t doing any of that kind of reading. The international relations was—once I put in the application I kind of forgot about that. I was dealing more in strictly military affairs, nothing to do with—

LC: Not theory, right?

WL: Yeah, not theory and politics.

LC: Yes. That in application is a stretch isn’t it? When did you get your answer about being selected for CGSC?

WL: They usually give you about a six months heads up. It must’ve been about January of ’59 when I got orders for Leavenworth and the reporting date on Army schools as I recall now would’ve been around the of August. They give you for a move like that, they probably give you about two weeks for travel. I must’ve had some annual leave coming up. I don’t recall exactly when I turned over the command to a replacement at the Presidio, but it must’ve been around the end of June of ’59 and then we packed up and drove to Fort Leavenworth.

LC: You had a car then?

WL: I had a car and I had a travel trailer. We camped at state and national parks on the way to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

LC: Great. So might you have gone to Yellowstone or somewhere like that?

WL: We did go through Yellowstone for that matter. We camped at a campground during an earthquake. There was a—I cannot remember now. We left this campground and the next day there was an earthquake that flooded the place. Do you remember anything like that?

LC: An earthquake in ’59?

WL: Earthquake in Wyoming and Colorado. It broke a dam that flooded this little valley where there was a state park. Now they call it Earthquake Park. There were quite a few people killed when the river flooded the campground. We’d been there the night before. That’s something I can remember.
LC: That’s frightening. (Both laugh). Another one of your close calls, it sounds
like.

WL: One of those fateful things.

LC: This time you had the whole family with you though, so that was even closer.

WL: Anyway, it was a nice trip.

LC: Yeah, I’m sure. When you arrived at Leavenworth, what kind of a billet did
you have and did your family have?

WL: Well, we lived in what they called the beehive. It was a converted barracks. I
think it was three stories high, old brick structure that was probably there in 1890 or so. It
was an old place. They called it the beehive because it was swarming with military kids
and families. It was within walking distance of the academic center of the commanding
general staff would call it, which was called Bell Hall.

LC: Called what hall?

WL: Bell.

LC: Bell?

WL: B-E-L-L for somebody named Bell, Colonel Bell or General Bell or
something. Anyway, it was a good billet. It was comfortable.

LC: Truly, did you have enough room for your four kids?

WL: Yeah. We probably had three bedrooms. I can’t recall now. It was enough
for us.

LC: What arrangements were made for schooling for the kids?

WL: There were schools on post as I recall. I don’t remember now though where
they went to school. I do know there were school buses. There was no problem involved
in it.

LC: They arrived obviously to enter their next grade?

WL: Yes. It was a strain on the kids all the way through the whole career.

LC: Yeah. I was gonna ask about that. How did they get on with that, probably
varied between?

WL: A couple of them did pretty well. A couple didn’t. They didn’t make the
adjustments very well, the travel. This was quite typical of all Army families. Some of
the kids did exceptionally well. If they were outgoing kids that made friends easily it was
good. If they were a little bit withdrawn it was hard to make the adjustments or they
would make awfully good friends and then have to leave them after a year. That was hard
on them.

LC: Was there any kind of network in place to help the kids who maybe were
introverted and having a little more difficult time or was there not at that point?
WL: I don’t remember anything like that.
LC: Just straight out classes and sink or swim kind of thing.
WL: That’s right. It was. When I averaged out my career in accordance with the
number of assignments I had, we averaged sixteen months between moves over that
thirty-year period. That shows you we moved pretty often. There were some periods
where we’d be in place for a couple of years. In Germany, we were there for over three
and a half years, but other places when you went to an Army school the Army schools
were generally one year long. That was it.

LC: One academic year.
WL: Yeah. An academic year, that’s right. That particular fact, the fact that the
Army sent their officers to schools that were one year long had an impact on all other
assignments. It was kind of a snowball effect. You’re gonna send somebody to school
every year for a year’s course, somebody had to fill his job and that job that he left, that
might only last a year before you’d be going to school. I don’t know if it’s still that way
or not. It probably is though. With the deployments in the Middle East it’s probably a lot
worse. At least we didn’t have that going on.

LC: That’s very interesting that it had this kind of knock on effect in terms of how
long one might stay at another post.

WL: Of course that persisted through the entire Vietnam War because the
standard assignment in Vietnam was one year long. The standard assignment in Korea at
that time was sixteen months. Those two facts plus the fact of the schooling, that drove
the Army assignments and that’s why over my entire career I averaged sixteen months in
one post before I moved.

LC: Well, I hope that later on we can talk a little bit more about the one-year
rotations during the Vietnam Era and what you think the impact of those—

WL: Yeah. I will when we get into Vietnam.
LC: Tell me a little bit about the curriculum that you encountered at the school?
WL: Oh if I can remember. Again it was mostly military organization and tactics. That is organization for combat and writing orders that were clear and made sense, organizing a battalion for combat involved incorporation in your battalion attachments from other units, other arms such as they might attach to you a platoon of engineers, attach to you a company of tanks, and then it’s up to you to employ these in accordance with doctrine. What are you gonna do with them? How are you going to organize your combat teams? Are you gonna split up your tanks one platoon per each company or are you gonna use it was a concentrated force and so on. That sort of thing is what you were dealing with day after day and different kinds of terrain. Also trained out to employ airborne forces. You trained on how do you organize a river crossing. What do you do when you get to the other side? How do you organize the bridgehead? How far out do you go? Where do you try to defend it in order to bring the other forces behind you? We trained with situations where you were required to make a beachhead over a hostel beach. How do you do that? That essentially is what you’re talking about. We worked on mountain operations. We worked on desert operations. There was very little emphasis in those days in 1960, ’59 ’60 on Vietnam. We were working mostly with large mechanized forces in the European theater. That’s where the emphasis was. You were working with mechanized infantry and tanks, largely. There was also a good deal of emphasis then on tactical nuclear weapons. The Army had in its inventory a large, well, they called it an atomic cannon. I don’t remember the caliber. It was a cannon. We also had a couple of tactical rockets with nuclear warheads in it.

LC: These would be artillery delivered nuclear devices? I mean, essentially artillery delivered.
WL: That was Army artillery that would be capable of delivering these weapons. It was before they had developed the eight-inch Howitzer nuke round, but we still had what they called it, the Honest John I think. We worked problems involving that. At the end of the course anybody who wanted to was offered the opportunity to stay back, stay at Leavenworth for an extra, I think it was about sixty days. It might’ve been a little bit longer to get qualified as what they called a nuclear weapons employment officer where you got down into the details of nuclear weapons effects and employment. How would
you use it? Where would you use it? You had to know what height of burst you wanted to
use. What the radius of effect would be, how far in front of your own forces was it safe,
or how close was it safe to use it, all of the technical considerations in employing tactical
nukes. That’s what you worked on. Also, the Air delivered nukes that you could call upon
the Air Force to deliver. There was a good deal of concern that if we had to fight the
Soviets in Europe that nuclear weapons would be used by both sides early on. So you had
to know how to do it. So I stayed back and I got the tickets of qualification to become a
nuclear weapons employment and effects officer. If I was ever required to do it, I could
do it.

LC: How much of the study of employing different kinds of forces, and I’ll just
leave the nuclear question aside for a moment, how much of the study that you did was
based on looking at actual operations, say from World War II?

WL: Some of it was. That is we did look at some of the problems and some of the
things that did happen in battle in Europe. Mostly we were building on experiences, that’s
for sure, of the employment of armored forces as mechanized forces in Europe. The
people who were writing the doctrine had already studied this so you didn’t have to go
over it again.

LC: So they had essentially digested experiences and then put—

WL: Yeah. No, we had some awfully good people there in faculty.

LC: Tell me. That was my next question. Tell me about the instructors. Anyone
you remember?

WL: Oh the names?

LC: Well, if you have them to hand.

WL: Well, I can remember one in particular who made a really good impression
on me. He happened to be a Fin. He was an American citizen, but he was born in Finland.

As I remember, he escaped Finland during the time of the Soviet-Finnish War. When was
that, 193—

LC: ’38, 9.

WL: Eight, yeah. Something like that. He had fought in the Finnish Army, but he
left Finland and came to the United States and got a commission in the US Army. By the
time that I knew him there and he was an instructor. He was an instructor in cold weather warfare. That was his expertise, naturally.

LC: Yeah, right. Go ahead Bill.

WL: I can remember very well a comment he made about training in the United States Army. He said, “You people, you do it wrong.” He said, “You’ve put all of your training spaces where you train your infantry and armor folks down in the very pleasant part, nice climate in the United States. You’ve got your infantry down in Georgia. It never gets cold down there and you’ve got your armor down at Fort Hood and there’s no real problem in running armor down there and so on. What you really should’ve done and should be doing is moving some of your training up to places where it’s not so comfortable all the time.”

LC: Like Sue Saint Marie, Michigan?

WL: Yeah. (Both laugh).

LC: Newberry.

WL: I thought about him later a lot when I was assigned to Alaska, G-2 up in Alaska. That guy knew what he was talking about because when you’re soldiering up here in the winter time there’s a few other things you have to be concerned about other than just moving as fast as you can and so on. I thought he was really right, right on.

LC: Well, in cold weather warfare training, was one of the things that you had to take into special consideration, let’s say inhibitions on logistical movements that might be caused by the cold? For example, equipment breaks down. Engines don’t start.

WL: Oh sure. Yeah. He mentioned that. The transmission fluid would freeze and they couldn’t start the engine. The batteries would be dead and then once you ever got going, you better be real careful because you get off the road and you may be on a lake. Hear your tank breaks through the ice and it’s going down in the lake. There’s so many things to be considered when operating in cold weather and of course—

LC: Equally.

WL: People who get cold weather injuries, they’re of no use to you once that happens.
LC: Speaking of that, would one of the factors that you would need to build into your attachment of other units in organizing for combat, would that include details on medical operations and field hospitals or aid stations and all that kind of thing?

WL: Not in the infantry division or armor division. You had a medical battalion. In World War II you had a medical company, but it was expanded later if I recall into a medical company, medical battalion rather. That was broken out and attached to infantry battalions in combat. You’d have a company or at least part of a company of medics with every battalion. They would provide your aid man, what they called medical people that you attach to every rifle platoon had to have one medic. That was automatic. That wasn’t an unusual attachment.

LC: But you didn’t, in these exercises of planning, have to think about more sophisticated or elaborate medical facilities that would be accompanying or following your forces?

WL: No. No. That was—

LC: That was a separate issue.

WL: That was somebody else’s responsibility. They had to give you and the troops. I suppose if you were a division commander in a particularly unusual environment that you might have to ask for additional medical support from the Army, from the field Army that was supporting you that you were a part of not supporting you. You could get additional help if it was needed. The division had a division surgeon in addition to a medical battalion. Division surgeon was who was gonna colonel and the medical battalion was commanded by a lieutenant colonel also.

LC: Did your experience in Germany help you think about the problems that you might encounter in a land war with Soviet or Warsaw Pact troops?

WL: Oh yeah. Having been there, been over the terrain so many times, I understood what the problems would be in maneuvering anywhere in Germany. The number of many rivers and unfordable obstacles that you had to cross, either if you were in retrograde or in the attack, yeah those things were all built into it. I understood terrain pretty well.

LC: Yeah. You had been over a lot of different terrain that’s for sure, but visualizing the area where such a conflict might actually take place because you had
spent a lot of time over there, I’m sure must’ve been helpful. It’s a lot easier to sort of see these things in an abstract way if you have some hard knowledge. The tactical nuclear weapons course that you described that was another couple of months or so, about how many attended that class?

WL: Oh there must’ve been about oh forty or fifty I suppose that elected to stay behind and do that.

LC: It was totally at your discretion or was there an invitation?

WL: Yeah. It wasn’t compelled to do it. I figured it would be a good thing to have.

LC: Yeah. All these training opportunities, it seems to me like your sort of in the cafeteria line. It’s great—

WL: I didn’t pass up anything that looked like it would help me be a better officer.

LC: Were there non-US students in this course?

WL: No. This was—the security classification was too high to allow any foreign officers in that course. There were quite a few foreign officers in the general course throughout the entire year.

LC: Do you remember any of those folks?

WL: Oh yeah. I remember quite a few of them.

LC: What can you tell me about any of them? Where they were from, what their rank was?

WL: Some very fine officers. I remember one from Afghanistan. Let’s see, what was his name, Kamarudin, Colonel Kamarudin, which was pretty high rank for that course. Most of us were captains and majors. Colonel Kamarudin was an artillery officer from the Afghan Army. He was a very bright and really pleasant fellow. We worked together quite a bit he and I. They divided you into sections for different exercises. I remember working with him on a different map problems and he was a good guy. I remember another one from Iran, Major Farboyd, I remember him pretty well too. We talked a lot about Iran and got interested in the different topography and the different zones of Iran.
LC: Did either of those two officers have any British background that you know of?
WL: No. Farboyd probably did. I think the British Army had been in their as advisors. Farboyd, I believe at that time we already had an American military mission there.
LC: By 1960, I think you’re right.
WL: So he knew our system pretty well. Who else was there? There was a Swiss officer. I didn’t get to know him very well, but I thought that was kind of strange cause since they didn’t really have an active army.
LC: Right. They’re supposed to stay out of this stuff.
WL: Yeah. There were a couple from Vietnam. There was one from Vietnam who I ran into later in Vietnam, very fine guy. By the time I saw him in Vietnam he was commanding a division. He was commanding the Division of the Vietnam Army. Yeah.
LC: Do you remember his name, Bill?
WL: Right now I can’t.
LC: Yeah because I asked you, you see.
WL: I consider him a really good friend there too and I can’t even come up with his name.
LC: It’ll come to you later and we can come back in and make sure people know.
WL: Yeah. Not much. No. Not until a year or two later did Iran (Vietnam) begin to raise it’s ugly head they say and look like it was gonna be a problem.
LC: Just quickly for interest, any Indians or Pakistanis you remember in the force?
WL: There were both. I remember a Pakistani officer. I didn’t know him very well. I’d speak to him in passing and at least one from India. Both in the grade of lieutenant colonel I believe. They’re both very good officers.
LC: What about Indonesia?
WL: Indonesia? I don’t remember now. We may have had somebody from there. I have my old yearbook here and I can look that up. Next time we talk I’ll have that.
LC: Superb. OK. That would be great. That would be very, very interesting.
WL: I know that we had a couple of Brits, at least one British officer. We had
Frenchman too. They took them from virtually every country except the Soviet block.
LC: Did you give much thought to whether this was a good policy, putting these
officers from other countries through essentially the same kind of training and planning
that American officers were receiving?
WL: I think it was an excellent idea.
LC: Why?
WL: They should continue it. Well, for two reasons, one when you work with
these people in the field later on if you ever have any operations with them, it’s good at
least to have a few there that know what they’re talking about. It’s the same system. Not
that there’s a great deal of difference. There’s not too many ways to conduct infantry
operations or armor operations. Everyone follows essentially the same common sense
rules on how you do this. It’s good to have somebody that understands your system. The
second is that you make acquaintances that later are very valuable if you have to work
with them again in the field, in real time, real events.
LC: Is your reference there Bill to personal relationships like you met this fellow
from Vietnam who you later had dealings with?
WL: Yes. That’s one example. You multiply by that by the hundreds and
thousands that have been through this and you develop a kind of a network of people, of
military officers who’ve done it. It’s not just my experience. Some of them probably
exploit that relationship to much greater degree than I ever did.
LC: What would you mean by that?
WL: Well, if I had been assigned, for instance, instead of to a US unit for most of
my time in Vietnam, if I had been assigned to a liaison with a foreign military
organization or like in Vietnam, if I had been an advisor in the advisor system rather than
in the American system, I would’ve found it even more valuable because to have been
reunited with somebody I’d been at Leavenworth with or one of the other military
schools either for that matter.
LC: Did it also to your mind create a network within the military’s of these
different potential allies and some were allies who had a good feeling about the United
States generally and the military particularly?
WL: Exactly.

LC: So it would work on both sides?

WL: It would work both ways, yeah. That’s definitely true.

LC: I don’t know the extent to which this continues, do you know?

WL: Oh it does continue. In fact it’s been expanded. It’ll come in later, but when I went to the Army War College, we didn’t have any foreign students there at all, but now they do.

LC: Oh is that right?

WL: Yeah. In fact, at that echelon, that level of command and rank, it’s even more important I would say because you’re drawing on colonels who are—when a foreign government sends a colonel to the US Army War College or to the National War College or to the Naval War College, they’re sending their cream.

LC: Yeah. It’s because they’re gonna be something else soon.

WL: These people have been marked for command and when you next see them a few years later, they’re gonna be the chief of staff of their armed forces. It’s an exceptionally advantageous position to be in.

LC: Let me ask about the sixty-day course. A little bit more about the nuclear weapons training. Did they give you some basic physics training around this?

WL: Oh yeah. You started out with how does it work. What happens when that neutron hits that—? I’ve forgotten it all now.

LC: Right and it starts a chain reaction and they’re drawing pictures and showing you what’s gonna happen. So you would start at that kind of basic level rather than talking about the weaponry first, you would talk about—

WL: You’d learn how it worked. As I remember now, it was before they began talking about the hydrogen bomb. We were talking about the fission bomb, the plutonium and uranium bombs, not the hydrogen bomb. We didn’t have that yet. I don’t believe we—we may have had it, but we weren’t being told about it.

LC: Right. You were being taught about weapons of the type used against Japan.

WL: The two types, one the implosion type and the other with a gun type, both of them, learned the mechanics of it.
LC: If you can remember anything about this it might be of interest, anything about the shells that you were most likely to be using. What kind of a destruction field will we be talking about and then a radiation field? I mean we’re talking about a very contained area, a couple miles across or—

WL: The weapons that we’re talking about in tactical use, they were around two kiloton to maybe ten KT which is about half. The ten KT seems to me, it was about half of what was used in Nagasaki. They were limited in effect and we were instructed that the best way to use it in the tactical realm was to use an airburst in which the fireball would not touch the surface and if you did that you would have very small if any residual radiation in the soils around that if you blew it high enough. So that was one of the techniques we were told about. As far as a radiation of the area of effects, I can’t tell you off hand how far they went, but we’re talking about a mile or two at the most.

LC: Was the idea essentially to use these against, for example, advancing ranks of tanks or mechanized?

WL: Yes. Yes. They were to burst it if you could over a large enemy tank formation.

LC: Rather than an infantry?

WL: Yeah. Well, infantry too, but we’re really concerned about the Soviet Armor threat. Virtually every tactical unit in the Soviet Army was mechanized. They were moving in tanks and armored personnel carriers.

LC: We talked a little bit earlier about the different strengths of the US and Soviet tanks and was it still the sense in 1960 that the US tanks were probably underpowered relative to the Soviet tanks?

WL: I don’t know that there was that much distinction in tank to tank. It was the fact that they had so many more of them.

LC: Oh is that right?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Like what kind of ratio, do you know? Do you remember?

WL: Probably around ten to one.

LC: Really?
WL: The United States, we had only about three or four armor divisions in the entire Army. The Brits probably had three or four. We’re talking about in Germany. I don’t know if we had any in the—the German Army still was in its infancy. The Soviets had maybe two or three hundred of these divisions.

LC: So in that situation, tactical nuclear device would be pretty important to have?

WL: Well, that was the doctrine. That was our only recourse would’ve been to do that. I don’t know what the Soviet capability was in tactical nukes and whether they would’ve used them or not. It wouldn’t have been a pretty sight I’m sure. We’d had to go to war and had to resort to that in Germany, in Italy, in Europe.

LC: As you were attending the course in 1959 and into 1960, of course it was an election year and I just wonder what your thinking was about the two candidates. You don’t have to share your personal political views if you don’t care to, but in terms of which of the two contenders, Richard Nixon or John Kennedy, might’ve been the better leader in the case of a confrontation. Did you have any view on that?

WL: Well, I don’t think I put it in that context, which would’ve been the best leader in time of war. I didn’t think about it in those terms. I was really impressed with Kennedy’s vigor and his interest in international affairs. He seemed to have a grasp for it and he seemed to be the person who would give the most support to the armed forces and be really interested in beefing this up. I was impressed with his inaugural speech of course later on. I think it was his inaugural speech.

LC: Yes. I think probably the—

WL: Thinking about the one sentence, ask not what your country will do for you—

LC: Yes. That was his inaugural speech and in that speech also he said, we’ll defend all friends against (inaudible).

WL: Was that inaugural too?

LC: Yeah. Yes it was. That was a pretty good speech.

WL: That was a great speech. (Both laugh).

LC: He had been sounding some of those same themes throughout and that impressed you.
WL: Yeah and that book that he, what was that book that he wrote?
LC: Profiles in Courage?
WL: Yeah. Yeah, which apparently he didn’t write entirely by himself. Anyway, it was a pretty good treatise on national goals and policies.
LC: Did you know much about his own military service or for that matter that of Richard Nixon’s?
WL: I don’t know anything about Nixon’s. I know that he served. I guess he was a little bit older.
LC: Yeah. He was out in the South Pacific.
WL: Yeah. He was a staff officer.
LC: Yes. I think so.
WL: I don’t think he was ever in any combat.
LC: Not like you, no (laughs).
WL: Not like Kennedy.
LC: Not like Kennedy, that’s also true. Of course there had been as we now know and now realize a very broad campaign to bring Kennedy’s military service to mind during that election and previous ones when he’d run for the Senate and so on. I just wonder if any of that had seeped through to you.
WL: Well, not, not—
LC: Not particularly?
WL: I’d admire any sailor or officer who sails on one of those small boats in the big ocean against huge enemy capital ships with great huge guns and torpedoes. I admire anybody that’ll go out and do that, whether they do it well or not, it’s kind of besides the point.
LC: Yes sir. I would have to agree with you. As you came to the end of your year, did you have orders in hand?
WL: Yeah. I got my orders somewhere towards the end of the course. This was a great surprise to me too. I came lined up with strange assignments. I was assigned to the staff of instructors to instruct an infantry tactics and organization at what they called then the Provost Martial General School, which was a big way of saying the military police school. I don’t know why they did that. I think they’ve changed it now so people can
understand what people are talking about. Anyway, this was the Provost Martial General
School and it was at Fort Gordon, Georgia.

LC: Where’s Fort Gordon?

WL: Fort Gordon is just on the outside of Augusta, Georgia, right on the coast of
the Savannah River. Fort Gordon was-- the male MP School kind of gets moved around.
They’re kind of low on the totem pole for good assignments. They’ve moved about three
or four times in my life span, but they were at that time at Fort Gordon. It’s an old World
War II post. It was kind of primitive. I know it’s built up nicely now because it became a
Signal Corps school later. In fact they still have some—they already had some Signal
Corps instruction down there. It was an interesting assignment because I—this is where
the nuclear weapons thing came in too because I was also the nuclear weapons
employment instructor with another officer, a military police officer, a very good one. He
was a classmate at Leavenworth with me, Jack Garrett, that was his name and he and I
developed the nuclear weapons course for MP officers. We taught only the officers
courses. It was the advanced course. I think I explained before that as captains, Army
officers go to their advanced course and this advanced course was for captains of the
military police corps. There were only about a hundred officers in the entire class. Jack
Garrett and I taught them in nuclear weapons. In fact I should also add that in the nuclear
weapons course we also had about two weeks of chemical and biological weapons
instruction. On the US Arsenal of chemicals and biologicals and new developments in
those fields and how to employ those, like how would you do it and where and so on if
ordered naturally.

LC: Can you remember now what the inventories included or—

WL: In chemicals we had both nerve and blood agents, I remember that. I can’t
remember the designation, VX comes to mind, that’s one of them, very highly lethal
agents that were percutaneous.

LC: Meaning?

WL: They can be absorbed by the skin and once they get through the skin you’ve
had it. They get into the bloodstream or into the lymph system and into the nerves—

LC: Do their work.

WL: You’re dead within a few minutes.
LC: Right.
WL: Those two kinds of agents and then in the biologicals they were working interestingly enough with anthrax and what they called, what was it, equine, Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis which sounds pretty nasty, but that was the other biological agent that I can recall that they were working with.
LC: Now those were more about disabling rather than immediately killing.
WL: Well, rather permanently disabling them unless you get pretty good medical treatment early.
LC: Did they talk to you about also, or did you have to include a section too on defense against these agents or was this—
WL: Well, yes we were told what you could do and what you had to do. Everybody would have a vile or a hypodermic syringe with, I just had the name on the tip of my tongue, atropine. If you hit by this, the nerve agent, if you gave yourself an injection of atropine and virtually, immediately, you could probably subdue the effects of that particular agent so you continue to breathe. That agent had the ability to eliminate your sympathetic nervous system. Your diaphragm wouldn’t work anymore. So you couldn’t breathe and that would spoil your whole day.
LC: This is pretty grim, but certainly of importance because these—
WL: That’s what we were studying. I’m sure I was not alone in agreeing that we would never use this stuff, but at least we were told how to do it if we had to.
LC: This was part of the whole zeit geist of the time isn’t it? That we had these weapons and in order not to use them you had to have them.
WL: Yeah. We looked at the other older, the old stocks of things like mustard and leucite, phosgene and the other things like that and we were shown the new versions of gas masks and other protective gear. The problem with most of these agents was that you didn’t have to breath it to be affected by it. If you had exposed skin and you got a drop of it, hardly larger than a pinhead, you had it. That’s virulent they were.
LC: Were infantrymen going to be or were they already being provided with any kind of detectors, like for example radiation—?
WL: Each, yeah each rifle battalion had the detection equipment, the Geiger counters and—
LC: Badges?

WL: Badges and things like that. They were just kept in the supply room. When the inspector general came by he’d always check to see if anybody knew how to use it (both laugh) and if the batteries were dead and things like that. Nobody took this stuff awful seriously.

LC: Because obviously there were what seemed to appear to be and probably in fact were more immediate issues at hand. How did the teaching go? I’m looking back and this is kind of your first foray into being in front of the classroom?

WL: Yes except that you have to remember as even as a sergeant and as a lieutenant in infantry unit, a lot of your time was spent instructing. Not always in front of, on a stage in front of an assembled group, but at least in the field. I trained people on machine guns. I trained them on mortars. I trained them on rifle marksmanship. I taught classes in map reading to my troops. I taught the classes on field sanitation, virtually everything you have to do to fight and survive on a field I taught it and I taught it to troops. Teaching more advanced subjects to officers wasn’t a great leap, wasn’t difficult. I designed most of my own infantry training. I got help from infantry school. I wrote to them and they sent me their courses for advanced infantry training. I used them as a back drop for what I taught. I tried to focus it on what a military police officer in an infantry division or in an armor division would be faced with and rear area security and that sort of thing, which they were responsible for. I taught the organization and employment of the armor division. I did that. I could draw on my experiences from the armored school. That’s where I took my advanced course.

LC: At Fort Knox.

WL: At Fort Knox. So I knew armor almost as well as I knew infantry. I taught the infantry division and it’s organization. I taught the logistics of the armor division and the nukes. I had one class I had an infantry lieutenant, rather military police lieutenant I taught. In their basic infantry course I taught them basics on that too.

LC: When they’re first coming in to the corps.

WL: That was interesting, young guys just out of college. That was a good experience for me.

LC: Did you feel it was a good experience at the time?
WL: Yes. I enjoyed being on the faculty. In fact I was voted the instructor of the year my first year there of all the instructors I had there.

LC: Really?

WL: I put on a pretty good show for them.

LC: When you say that, tell me how that would work out? How would that actually play out on a given day when you walked into the classroom?

WL: When I was teaching armor and I had to teach also cavalry, armored cavalry. When I was teaching cavalry I had a little tape player and I had the Gary Owens song there. I played that when they came in and I wore a yellow bandana or something around my neck.

LC: You got into it?

WL: Yeah I got into it. They thought I was a lot of fun.

LC: I bet they did. It sounds like it was appreciated. Were there in addition to the vote for instructor of the year, were there continuous feedback mechanisms that the students could give you?

WL: Oh yeah. They had to fill out a sheet after every section of classes. They had to rate the instructors and rate the course and the subject matter and all the rest of it. I always scored very high on those things.

LC: Could it be damaging if you came out with, on a scale of one to five, five being good, if you came out with a bunch of twos. Could it hurt you?

WL: Well, it could’ve. I would’ve been—

LC: You wouldn’t have been instructor of the year that’s for sure.

WL: That and in fact I would’ve heard pretty strongly from the chief lieutenant colonel who was in charge of the entire combat arms section. He would’ve taken me to task on that.

LC: Was he the one who was writing your fitness report at this point?

WL: Mm-hmm.

LC: Who was that? Do you remember?

WL: Bill can’t think of it, but I will.

LC: Darn. I did it to you again.
WL: He was a good guy, very good officer. He was a very—well, he wasn’t a very good instructor. He had a speech impediment of some kind and it was hard for him to present things. He was smart and he knew his infantry very well. When I had a class to give hours showed it to him first to be sure that he agreed that I was on the right track and he was good at that.

LC: Then he would give you feedback and let you go?

WL: Yeah. Sure. Yeah. He didn’t even attend hardly any of my classes. He just let me go.

LC: You function pretty well in that environment?

WL: Yes.

LC: Let me ask a little bit stepping back from your own experience. If you can, offer some overview comments about the importance and the role of the MPs within the Army structure. This is something that you can ask an MP guy and you’ll get a certain answer, but from someone with the rounded background that you had in both infantry and armor at this point and you’ve been the CGSC. Can you talk a little bit about the role of the military police corps?

WL: Well, the military police corps role has expanded greatly in the last two years, or maybe a few decades I should say because of the emphasis that the US Army places on movement, rapid movement, breakthrough type operations. It leaves the rear area vulnerable to enemy attack by small units, you might say partisans and that sort of thing. So the military police corps has had to devote a good deal more time dealing with that threat which means really infantry operations because they have to be mobile, but they still have to be able to fight as infantry. In the history of the military police corps, initially there wasn’t one. In World War II there was no military police. In World War I, I should say there was no military police corps. Officers and men were detailed as military police, a kind of an ad hoc relationship. It’s been pretty traditional in the military police corps that they train their men first as infantrymen and then they go into specialized training as military police. They should come to the military police corps with a pretty good grounding in weapons and in small unit infantry tactics. They should know what they’re up against. They usually do. The military police corps, at least it used to be, very selective in bringing people into the Corps. They don’t do that much anymore and I
think it’s to their—I’m a little bit sad about that. When I see a little woman, five foot 
three within military police brassard on, I think this is a shame.

LC: Are we talking about the woman from Abu Ghraib?

WL: Present Army. The current Army has military police women and I think if 
there’s any part of the Army besides infantry that doesn’t need women and shouldn’t 
have women it’s MPs. The MPs should be no shorter than six feet tall, broad shouldered, 
and be able to look really mean cause he’s gonna be dealing in his duty as a policeman, 
he’s gonna be dealing with folks that need—you have to get their attention, like the 
highway patrolman that we have on our highways here. It’s good to have a big guy to 
take control of the situation and a little woman no matter how dedicated and brave she 
might be, she’s not gonna make the impression that should be made on the recalcitrant 
that they have to put the cuffs on.

LC: Right. I mean, there’s that, just a lack of physical capacity if you’re a smaller 
person, but if I can pick up on the point that you made about changing role.

WL: They’re changing situation on the battlefield, yeah. You see, military police 
have two or three different roles in combat. One role is to maintain control and security 
of a line of communication. They’re supposed to be—they used to be posted at road 
junctions and so on to be sure that the convoys that were coming through didn’t make the 
wrong turn and to control traffic, to give priority to the proper unit as it came through. 
That was one of their main missions. Now apparently they’re not doing that much 
anymore. They don’t have the forces to do it. Another main mission is to control and 
move to the rear prisoners of war. That is another big mission for them. The infantry or 
armor unit captures a group of enemy soldiers, they’re not supposed to be tasked with 
moving them all the way back to the rear. They’re supposed to turn them over to the 
military police unit at the division, within the division area and the military police is 
supposed to move them back. That’s another important mission of military police. In the 
division, they also maintain security of the division command post and those are attached 
to the brigades. They maintain security around the, that is close in security, around the 
brigade command post. Then they picked up this added mission of area security and 
that’s the one that I think in a major war they might have trouble executing because I 
don’t think they have enough forces to do it.
LC: This is a manpower issue.

WL: Yeah and that will compel a division or a brigade commander to assign at least a part of his combat force of infantry back there to assist. I don’t know what the current doctrine is and who’s in command back there, but—

LC: At the time that you were teaching, as you outlined the premier areas of responsibility was in rear area security and presumably moving forward behind advancing troops.

WL: That’s right.

LC: Yes, that’s pretty manpower intensive. Did they have the forces in 1960 to execute the mission?

WL: They had only and probably still do have only one military police company in a division and that company couldn’t be more than a hundred and fifty men. I don’t think it’s big enough. It could be now and I’m just guessing that additional MPs are assigned to divisions, they should be. It might take an entire battalion of MPs to support a division in combat these days.

LC: That’s very interesting because of course the pop culture interpretation of what an MP does doesn’t fall under any of the categories that you’ve outline which is policing raucous drunken infantrymen out on the town on a pass or something like that.

WL: That’s an important function, but that’s not the battle function.

LC: How much work, what would be the ratio of the work of an MP Corp in conflict, in time of conflict, in combat between policing their own forces and executing these other important—

WL: It’s virtually all. None of it would be in controlling US forces except possibly what they call the straggler line.

LC: What’s that?

WL: Picking up soldiers that are moving to the rear without any apparent reason to do it.

LC: Or just not moving as troops advance.

WL: You catch and individual soldier to moving along a road to the rear or trail to the rear and they can’t give an account of what they’re doing there. Well, you can figure that they’re deserting or trying to desert. That’s another MP mission is picking up
stragglers. That wouldn’t be very many of those. Most of their work would be as I say on
traffic control, rear area security, and control of prisoners of war.

LC: You mentioned that there was at least in earlier days a sense of this being an
elite group.

WL: Yeah.

LC: When did that fall apart?

WL: Well, I don’t know if it has fallen apart except to the extent that they have
been less rigorous in selecting the people for the military police corps. I can only say that.
I don’t think it’s their fault. When the Army says you’re gonna have women in your rank,
they don’t have choice. They’ll bring them in. I think that’s their greatest mistake and
once you do that then you can lower the bar for the men that you’re gonna bring in. How
can you say that a man has to be five ten or taller to be in the military police corps and let
a woman in that’s only five foot three.

LC: I mean more broadly on the question of whether women should have any
connection with combat or para-combat rules. Is this something that you were against
kind of from the beginning? You’ve used their—

WL: I’ve been against that from the start, but I never had to deal with it because I
retired before they began bringing women in these numbers and these kinds of roles.

LC: Do you ever remember any discussion of this? Of course moving into the
1970s do you remember any of the discussions that preceded the actual decision as to—?

WL: I was never involved in it. I wasn’t.

LC: I mean even informally, just kind of—

WL: Oh informally among us in the Army, yeah.

LC: Like bad idea?

WL: Laterally opposed to it. Anybody in any of the combat arms didn’t want any
women within sight or sound of where we were. I can remember discussions, even in
World War II in New Guinea, a company of WAC. They called them WACs then,
Women Army Corps. Some of these WACs apparently stationed there at Buna near this
fifth replacement depot and they were kept in a barbed wire enclosure and it was a
company of military police assigned to secure their compound and we all thought, yeah,
this is kind of a waste of manpower somehow or another. You’ve got a company of
WACs that are doing the—they were all doing clerical work for the commander, but it took an entire company of military police to provide the security that they needed in their compound.

LC: Why did they need the security?
WL: Well, to keep soldiers out from breaking in.
LC: And going after them?
WL: Yeah, right or for the women getting out and selling it here and there, that sort of thing.
LC: So it just took twice as many people essentially to get the function executed.
WL: Where was the gain? Forget it. Just use men as clerics. Men can also be taught to type.
WL: I don’t know how that whole story might be apocryphal. I never saw any of it.
LC: (Both laugh). You never saw them. Actually that’s probably accurate. There certainly were units of women’s army corps moving around in the South Pacific.
WL: I’m not saying that there wasn’t a place for them somewhere sometime.
LC: But maybe not there and then.
WL: Not in those primitive situations like in Buna.
LC: Well, let’s take a break there Bill.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the fourteenth of September 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech and the colonel is speaking by telephone from Virginia. Good morning again, Bill.

WL: Good morning. Am I coming through clearly?

LC: You are, very clearly. That’s a good thing because we have some important things to talk about this morning and I’m grateful for your time. Bill, let me just ask, this is kind of a bigger picture question but it does have to do with your assignment which we were discussing yesterday in the 1960, ’61 period when you were at Fort Gordon at the provost marshal general school. Coming out of the Command and General Staff College and receiving the assignment that you did at Fort Gordon, did you have any sense of dislocation or that the track coming out of CGSC was not what you expected? Or did you think that an instructor position—I mean was that kind of a standard thing that you might take some of what you had acquired over the years now you had been through CGSC and apply that in teaching?

WL: Yeah. I think you’re right in making that, not an assumption but suggestion. That might have been a problem and it was. It seemed to be quite off track. If I had been assigned as an instructor at Fort Benning at the infantry school that would have been much better. This was really kind of offline to go through the military police. I’d never even heard of that school. It was a complete surprise to me. Another better assignment would have been to a regimental or division staff somewhere, you know, in an active unit. So I was a little disappointed.

LC: What did you make of it at the time?

WL: Well, I just thought it was kind of strange and that it’s not an assignment I would have selected. That’s for sure.

LC: It’s obvious that, I mean I’m sure it’ll be obvious to most listeners that this isn’t something that you have a lot of say about.
WL: No. You don’t have say at all. The other side of it though is that I didn’t realize when I got the assignment initially that it’s not the practice of the infantry to send dud officers to other service schools. They want people who will make at least a credible impression for the branch, for the infantry branch, in other, you know, with other schools.

LC: Now, you did not realize that so much at the time?

WL: I didn’t think about that very much at the time but I later became aware of that.

LC: How did that kind of dawn on you? Did you have a discussion?

WL: Well, when I met some of the other people that were there and Colonel Boyd, I couldn’t remember his name now. But Bill Boyd was the lieutenant colonel and he had an outstanding record in the infantry and another major, infantry major, Major Ross, I’m trying to recall his first name. He was the other infantryman on the team and he was also a very fine officer. I was slow to realize that it was really a pretty good assignment for an infantry officer to be assigned to another service school outside of the branch.

LC: It’s interesting how there’s a shine on it that one doesn’t necessarily see even with the wealth of experience that you had at that point. But internally it’s viewed in a certain way at higher levels that aren’t immediately obvious, I guess. Also, that jived very well with what you were saying yesterday about the roles of the military police corps in combat, that it does have the job of supporting infantry operations.

WL: Definitely. It’s called combat support branch. The Army has categories. The infantry armor and artillery are combat arms, call them combat arms these days. The military police is one of the combat support branches and then there’s the other branches are just, what do they call them? They’re just support. Combat support, in other words.

I mean like the quartermaster corps and so on.

LC: Like transportation, logistics?

WL: Yes. They had a different connotation.

LC: Actually Bill, while we’re talking about this, it might be useful just to outline, if you can, the combat support groups. There’s the military police corps, medical corps I would guess.
WL: Medical corps. Yeah. It’s also a service support. The other term I was searching for was service support. There are the three there are the combat arms, the combat support branches, and the service support branches. Service support includes things like transportation, medical, quartermaster, ordnance, chemical. Well, chemical I believe is a combat support branch. I’m not sure now but it used to be. The chemical corps had mortars. They had 4.2 inch mortars, battalions in the chemical corps, which was kind of a surprise to some people. But that’s because that particular mortar had a chemical shell. It could fire chemical weapons. So that was a combat support arm.

LC: But the combat arms themselves were only three?

WL: Yes armor, artillery, and infantry.

LC: Is there anything else that you recall in particular about your experience at Fort Gordon that you think is relevant and we ought to include in the record?

WL: No. I don’t believe so. I think we covered that pretty well. It was at that school that I received my orders to go to advanced civil schooling. So it cut short my tour. It was supposed to be a three year assignment at that service school. I was supposed to be there for three years. Let’s see, I got there in the summer of ’60 and I got orders to the American University in Washington, DC to report there I believe in January of ’63. So I stayed there for two and a half years at the provost marshal general school.

LC: This of course is the assignment to American University is the outcome of the application, I gather, that you had made and then kind of forgotten about.

WL: That’s true. That’s what happened. Again they didn’t give me a choice either of curriculum or the university. They said, “You’re going to the American University in Washington, DC.” So that was that.

LC: Well, it’s not a bad school to be sent to.

WL: Oh, it was pretty good.

LC: Yeah. It’s pretty good. Tell me about, first of all if you would, where you were billeted. Did you live off post?

WL: Oh yes. Yeah. There was no military housing. As I remember now I hopped an Army flight. I didn’t have much money to spend on reconnaissance so I went down to the airfield in Fort Gordon and happened to—seems to me I knew somebody in the aviation branch down there. They were flying up to the Pentagon for something or
other and they flew me up to Fort Belvoir. There’s an airfield at Fort Belvoir, Virginia just south of the Pentagon and I flew up there in this Army aircraft. I don’t remember how I got into Washington. I probably rented a car. Anyway, I’d made a reconnaissance for housing as near as possible to the American University. I found an apartment complex in Silver Spring, Maryland, which is just on the northern tip of DC, Washington DC. I rented an apartment there and then flew back home on an Army airplane and announced that I had gotten an apartment.

LC: Did you have to negotiate or did you have a certain amount of money within which you could operate or did this have to come out of your salary?

WL: Well, the Army, if you’re not living on post, Army people get a housing allowance that is not taxable. If you’re living on post you don’t get the allowance because you got the housing. If you’re living off post they’ll give you an allowance and it all depends on your grade, what grade you’re in. I was, let’s see, at Fort Gordon I was promoted to major while I was there so I was a major. I probably got about, oh I’m guessing now, maybe four hundred dollars a month as a housing allowance. That is what I used to pay for the apartment. In some locations, Washington DC is one of them now, there’s another amount of money tacked on to that because of the high—it depends on the rental picture wherever you live.

LC: What the going rate is?

WL: Yeah. So, if you had to spend more than that why you’d get this extra allowance tacked onto it, and I don’t remember what it was. I think my rental allowance probably just about covered what I had to pay for the apartment. I don’t think I lost much on it. So that’s what covers it. I bought a bicycle and most times I bicycled over to the university. I wanted to try to keep in shape anyway and it was only about maybe six miles or something like that. So, that’s what I did. My curriculum was—again, I was studying international relations. I had a pretty good course in international law, which I enjoyed very much, and other international relations theory, which was pretty dull and I think a little bit artificial. I concentrated on South and Southeast Asia, the politics of that region, the politics and history of that region. I remember emphasizing quite a bit on the Communist movement in Southeast Asia. I learned a lot about the Indonesian Communist leader, Tan Malakka. Thought he was very interesting. I learned quite a bit
about the Hukbalahap of the Philippines, that Communist movement, and went back to
the Philippine insurrection era.
LC: The turn of the century?
WL: Yeah. Those are the courses—and my emphasis, I learned quite a bit about
the history of India and Ceylon, Sri Lanka now. In fact, I wrote my master’s thesis on an
event in Sri Lanka.

LC: You were talking about your master’s thesis.
WL: Yeah. I wrote about—I don’t know whether this is relevant or not.
LC: I think it’s extremely interesting actually.
WL: Well, I was interested in Congress’s, what I felt was an apparent intrusion on
the prerogatives and the responsibilities of the Department of State in executing US
foreign policy. Not that the Congress didn’t have a role in establishing broad guidelines
for the governance, but the fact that some of the laws that they passed rather bind the
hands of the people that are in charge of day to day operations of the State Department.
An example was a law called the Hickenlooper Amendment. It was an amendment to
some foreign aid legislation. The Hickenlooper Amendment said that any nation that
expropriates property belonging to a United States citizens or United States corporations
would be eliminated from receiving any United States assistance, aid.

LC: No foreign aid at all.
WL: No foreign aid at all and I thought this could be kind of draconian in its
effect and I looked at some examples. There was an example in Brazil. But the more
interesting one to me was the case of Ceylon. The government of Ceylon had decided to
nationalize all of the petroleum commerce in Ceylon, including taking over the gas
stations. Well, there wasn’t any production. They did have a refinery or two. They took
over the refineries and they took over the gasoline stations. Some of them belonged to
Standard Oil of California and I think Texaco was involved too, as I remember. In any
case, because of that and because the Ceylon government refused to compensate
adequately the corporations that they took the property from, the foreign aid had to be
eliminated from Ceylon. I looked into that situation anyway. That’s what I wrote it
about so I had to do quite a bit of research on oil industry worldwide and on Ceylon
politics. I remember Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the prime minister of Ceylon.
Interesting individual. Kind of like a Ceylonese Imelda Marcos. I mean they kind of
got together in my mind.

LC: That’s interesting. I hadn’t thought of the two of them together. That’s
interesting.

WL: Well, I don’t know. Later on I had some ducks and I named one of them
Imelda and the other one Sirimavo. They were interesting ducks.

LC: Where was this that you had the ducks?

WL: Up in the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. I had some land up there.
I lived up there for a while in the woods.

LC: Okay. Well, let me ask you if you went into and if you recall now the origins
of Senator Hickenlooper’s amendment. I frankly can’t remember what this was in
response to but I remember he was a senator from Iowa who was a Republican, I think.
But I don’t know if you recall the precipitating event that led him to try to actually push
this through Congress.

WL: I believe it was Brazil. I believe the government in Brazil appropriated some
property and I can’t recall now what it was, whether it was a petroleum or real estate or
what it was. But I believe that was the event that kind of the straw that broke the camel’s
back sort of thing.

LC: He was quite a powerful senator.

WL: Yeah. He was for a—I can’t recall now who was—he was probably always
in the minority in those years. But at least he was pretty powerful and very conservative
and probably had a dim view of foreign aid generally.

LC: Generally. Right. I think you’re probably right. Well, Bill, the broader
question that presents itself is how it was that you decided to focus on South Asia and to
some extent Southeast Asia as well.

WL: Well, it probably related to my experience during World War II. I served in
that part of the world and was interested in the Philippines to start with and in Indonesia
because we were in Indonesia. I’m sure that was it. I was more interested in that part of
the world because of the experience there.

LC: What about the focus on Communist movements?
WL: Well, that was very important at that time. There was this very serious
insurrection in Malaysia on the Malay Peninsula before it became Malaysia and the
Hukbalahap in the Philippines. That was a very active Communist insurgency going on
there. Of course the Vietnam was on the horizon too. Well, it was more than that. It was
pretty active by 1963 it was getting very serious again.

LC: You mentioned Tan Malakka and the Indonesian Communists from the
1920s. I wonder did you see a continuity? I mean this is a broader question about your
own scholarship and your thinking about Communist movements in Southeast Asia,
maritime Southeast Asia particularly. Did you see continuities between the urban
uprisings of the 1920s and then the groups that were prosecuting the insurrections in the
1960s, early 1960s?

WL: Well, there was a historical connection to them but each of them seemed to
have its own character. I never subscribed to the theory that they were all getting their
orders from Moscow.

LC: You did not?

WL: No. I think they were rather independent, and some of them had very strong
anti-colonial impetus that would have been there whether they were communist or not.
So it was kind of a mixture of that drive to drive the foreigners out and also to establish a
utopian sort of society under the Communists.

LC: Did you see Ho Chi Minh as kind of in that group somewhere?


LC: What about the—and this is a continuing debate, Bill, and your input would
be interesting as to whether Tan Malakka and Ho Chi Minh and others were primarily
nationalists, something that you’ve mentioned, or were they primarily motivated by the
ideological strains that we call communism.

WL: Well, I don’t know if I could put a value on each of those components, I
don’t know. Ho Chi Minh was a Communist from way, way back, was part of the French
Communist Party. So he was driven by communism as well as by kicking the French out.

LC: Of course the French Communist Party wanted the French out too so that
actually lines up as not a contradiction.
WL: Yeah. So I don’t know. As far as Tan Malakka I can’t even remember very much about him but I think it was again a very good mixture of Communist ideology plus the anti-colonialism drive.

LC: You mentioned earlier that the Army didn’t give you any choice as to where you would go nor what curriculum you would pursue. But once you were in the program, once you were pursuing, this is a master’s degree, could you kind of navigate your own way? In other words the choice as to your emphasis on Asia were yours?

WL: Yes. That was my decision. Of course I had a faculty advisor and he presented the options. There were certain courses that were mandatory I had to take. I had to take things like international organization with heavy emphasis on the United Nations and what it did and how it worked and so on. International law, that was a mandatory except that I took at least two courses in that because I was so interested in it. International theory, that was mandatory. But other than that I was pretty much on my own.

LC: So you could essentially sculpt your own reading program on top of those required courses?

WL: Yes.

LC: Did the Army have other officers going through the IR program at the master’s level?

WL: I didn’t see any at American University. There was another aspect to this that will come up later. Once the Army sends you to advanced civil schooling they attempt, and I think they are successful most of the time, to give you an assignment when that’s finished. They give you an assignment to make use of your great fund of knowledge that you’ve acquired. They give you something that’s relevant to what you studied, and that’s what happened to me see.

LC: What happened to you?

WL: Well, I was assigned to the Army general staff in the office of the deputy chief of staff for operations. They call it DCSOPS, or short we just call desops, and within that office there was an office called the International Plans and Policies Directorate, IPPD. These things keep changing over the years but at that time that’s what it was called. They gave me the Indochina desk in IPPD. I was a sole person responsible
for advising the chief of staff of the Army on the political military implications of every joint action, being every decision paper that the Joint Chiefs of Staff produced. For that matter we could produce one in the Army staff and present it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These were called decision papers. So I was the person responsible for that. So every formal action that took place that was surfaced with the Joint Chiefs of Staff I had the action on it. I had to look at it, decide and advise the Chief of Staff of the Army what position he should take on this paper. We would edit it. It was a pretty high-pressure job because at that time when I went there, let’s see, I finished my master’s program in the summer of ’64. I was immediately assigned to the Pentagon. We moved out of the apartment. We rented a house in Washington DC, which was a little easier to commute to the Pentagon. I started work then probably in July of ’64 in that office of DCSOPS.

LC: Okay. There are a number of things and I do want to ask you about that Bill and I hope you’ll bear with me as we go through that. Before we get to 1964 though let me just ask a couple of timeline questions that I think might be helpful for people who are listening to get a flavor of what was happening more broadly and your responses to those things. First of all, while you were still at school at the American University obviously the president was assassinated. Do you remember anything about your own experience when that occurred?

WL: I remember I was very much upset about it. I recall that I had the car radio on. That’s how I found out about it. I heard it when it was announced on the radio. I was actually in a gas station somewhere around, I think it was at Fort Myer filling up my gas tank. I had the radio on and heard that he had been assassinated. Yeah. It was very, very serious, devastating event to me because I thought a lot of President Kennedy. I thought he was a good president and man.

LC: You were in the Washington area over the next several days. I mean what was the—can you convey anything about the mood?

WL: Virtually anyone, everyone, was depressed by it and very unhappy about it. I recall I went to the funeral parade in Washington, DC.

LC: Did you?

WL: Yes. Yeah, I was there.

LC: Whereabouts were you?
WL: Right on the sidewalk there.
LC: Near?
WL: I don’t know.
LC: On Pennsylvania Avenue?
WL: Yes.
LC: Did you try to go over to Arlington?
WL: No. No, that was much too difficult to try to do that.
LC: Yeah. I’m sure it was. I can’t imagine how crowded it must have been.
WL: Invitation only when you’re there.
LC: Did you wear your uniform?
WL: Probably. I don’t recall now.
LC: Did you take any photos?
WL: No.
LC: Did you go by yourself?
WL: Huge crowd there.
LC: Oh, I’m sure.
WL: It was a very impressive ceremony. The kind only the Old Guard can put on.
LC: Of course you had been the head of the Army’s Honor Guard so you’re watching for, no doubt, the precision of the service personnel that day. How did they do?
WL: They were terrific, the whole bunch of them. That is, of course, the Army first—I don’t know if everybody knows this but the Army is the senior service followed by there United States Marine Corps, they’re the second oldest; followed by the Navy.
WL: They were marching in step. They’re a little bit difficult to get control of. I found that out as commander of joint honor guards. They don’t show up as sharply or didn’t used to. I think they’ve improved a great deal over the years.
LC: Is that because they just spend less time doing that or they don’t have their feet on the ground?
WL: Yeah. It’s kind of a little bit parochial to say that.
LC: That’s all right. But they showed up pretty good on that day.
WL: Oh yeah. Everybody was great.

LC: But no doubt a very sad occasion. Anytime there’s a loss of a president.

WL: Then they had the horse with the boots and the stirrup facing backwards led behind the caisson where the casket is. The horse is drawing the caisson. The Infantry handles that, the whole thing, you know.

LC: Their honor guard does?

WL: Yes.

LC: Okay. So they have a particular honor company as well as—

WL: The entire Infantry regiment is—that is the parts of it that are stationed here, are the honor guard. The whole regiment is honor guard. I know that they have from time to time they send a battalion or they designate a battalion in combat. They had a battalion in one of the divisions in Vietnam, I can’t remember which one it was. They probably sent a battalion to Iraq as well. But their principal function is the presidential honor guard here in Washington. They’re based at Fort Myer.

LC: Just previous to President Kennedy’s assassination there had been the coup in South Vietnam. Did you pay attention to that in any way?

WL: I wasn’t involved directly in the planning at that time but I learned quite a bit about it after I got to the Pentagon. Yeah.

LC: Okay. When you arrived in the summer of 1964, just to sort of flesh out the situation obviously, President Johnson is not only in office but has made some changes in personnel in the State Department, for example. If you can Bill, can you run over some of the key figures starting with the chief of staff of the Army, who that was when you arrived there and what the orientation was toward the, I guess it was General Khan’s government at this time?

WL: Yes. In fact there were about three successive governments in Vietnam that happened rather rapidly as I recall. I can’t recall much detail about that. I can recall how I went in there and what happened to me. When I went in to the Pentagon—I can’t think of the name of the chief of staff of the Army. He became the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff. You probably—

LC: Not Wheeler.

WL: Wheeler. Yeah!
LC: Is that right? Earle Wheeler?
WL: Yeah.
LC: Okay. Well, that was a good guess on my part. Okay.
WL: Wheeler. When I reported in to the Pentagon, Wheeler was the chief of staff of the Army. But within a week or so or maybe a little bit longer, the president appointed him as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Of course that opened up a vacancy for the chief of staff of the Army. The deputy chief of staff for operations at that time was Harold K. Johnson, Gen. Harold K. Johnson. He was appointed then chief of staff of the Army. There were a number of generals who were senior to Harold Johnson. But that didn’t bother President Johnson, he appointed him anyway, which was an excellent choice. He was a very fine chief of staff and very fine man.

LC: What was his background Bill? Can you tell me anything about that?
WL: His background—he was a lieutenant colonel commanding a battalion of infantry in Bataan in World War II. He was captured by the Japanese or had surrendered of course. He served some time in prison camp in [Luzon] and then was one of the unfortunate few who were taken aboard a Japanese ship for a prisoner of war camp in Japan. On the way to Japan his ship was torpedoed by an American submarine and he was one of the lucky survivors. He survived that and finally arrived in Japan. He was like all of the prisoners there badly abused by the Japanese but survived it. Later on he commanded a regiment of infantry in the Korean War. After that he rose through the ranks and by the time I met him there in ’64 he had four stars and was chief of staff of the Army. Very fine soldier and not puritanical but nobody swore, used bad language, in his presence because he’d take severe exception to that. He didn’t like that at all. Much in contrast to his deputy who was General Abrams. Abrams was a rough guy with a pretty foul tongue from time to time. He didn’t mince any words and used pretty bad words. He was an old—you know, General Abrams. He was also a very fine officer but in complete contrast to Harold K. Johnson who was soft-spoken and very careful.

LC: Just very different personalities.
WL: Very different. Yeah. My first meeting with General Johnson there was a reception at the Fort McNair officers’ mess one evening to welcome General Johnson as the new chief of staff of the Army. I was invited along with everybody else in DCSOPS.
It was kind of farewell to General Johnson the new chief of staff and hello to General Palmer who became the DCSOPS. Lieutenant General Palmer, another good officer, fine officer. Anyway, I was introduced to him, to General Johnson, I think by General Bennett who was what they called the Army planner. General Bennett was a brigadier general then and they called him the Army planner. He was responsible for designing and approving all Army plans. I had a great deal of contact with him from then on because of my work in IPPD. But in any case I was introduced to General Johnson and he said, “Have you been to Vietnam?” I said, “No, sir, I haven’t.” He said, “Well I want you to get over there as quick as you can, see what it looks like, talk to the folks, and learn what’s going on. Also, go to Laos.” I said, “Yes, sir. Will do that.” So when I got back to duty the next day or so I told General Bennett what—in fact, I think General Bennett probably overheard this. I said, “General Johnson says I’ve got to get over to Vietnam.” Well, it took a little while because of the press of other work. I mean I had to wait until there was kind of a lull in the action before I could get over there. I think I got over in September or October to Vietnam. I flew to, let’s see. We were still using—no, I guess we weren’t using propeller airplanes. We had some jets by then I’m sure. Yeah. DC-6s or something. Anyway, it took quite awhile to get there. I landed at Tan Son Nhut and was met by a staff officer from the J3’s office. J3, I’m going to refresh, is the chief of operations for Military Assistance Command Vietnam. That was Brig. Gen. Bill DePuy. D-e-P-u-y with a capital P. Bill DePuy sent an action officer over to meet me at the airport and bring me to a billet in the—I think they put me in the Hotel Majestic. Which was down close to the waterfront on the Saigon River, very nice place. I can’t remember that officer’s name but he was a lieutenant colonel, he was a good guy. I was a major by that time and I had been promoted when I was down at Fort Gordon. This lieutenant colonel had been in Vietnam for a year, about, and was by that time one of the good experts on the pacification program and other things. He brought me in to meet General DePuy the next morning. I reported to him and General DePuy outlined an itinerary for me, mostly it was down in the Delta as I remember. Went down to the Ca Mau Peninsula and a couple of other places in a helicopter. Spent about four days flying around Vietnam. Visited some Vietnamese division headquarters, all with an escort from General DePuy’s office to be sure that I didn’t get lost and got to the places they wanted
me to see. I had a meeting I’m sure with General DePuy before I left there and told him
what my impressions were and thanked him for the hospitality and so on. They gave me
a nice dinner in Saigon at a beautiful French restaurant there near the capital. I was really
impressed with Vietnam, the beauty of the city, the trees, and the tree-lined boulevards
and so on. It was a very pleasant experience. Then I flew to Bangkok and asked for
permission—I met with the ambassador there in Bangkok and also the US—we had a
major general there running the military assistance program in Thailand. I met with him
and got a briefing on the insurgency that was still going on up in the northeast. You
know, up on the Korat Plateau. They had quite a bit of an insurgency movement there, a
Communist insurgency movement going on there. So they gave me a briefing on that and
I asked for permission to get into Laos. Well, Ambassador Sullivan who was the
ambassador in Vientiane, and he didn’t want any visitors. He said he had a limit on the
number of military officers that could be in the country at any one time and if I came in I
would exceed that limit. So they wouldn’t let me into Laos, despite the fact that the chief
of staff of the Army told me to go to Laos. So, I made a call to the Army intelligence
guy. I got his name from a friend of mine in ACSI (assistant chief of staff for
intelligence). Assistant chief of staff of the Army in the Pentagon gave me the name of
this fellow. He said, “If you have any trouble give him a call.” So I called him and he
agreed to come down to Udorn, which is in [Thailand] on the south side of the Mekong
River across the river from Vientiane. He would meet me there and he’d give me a
briefing on what was going on in Laos. Can’t remember his name right now but—

LC: Is that what ended up happening? You went up to Udorn?
WL: So what I did I took the train. I took the night train, from Bangkok up to
Udorn, also called Udon Thani sometimes. There was a CIA (Central Intelligence
Agency) station up there and a small airfield run by CIA, I believe. Any case, I took the
night train. I had a sleeper compartment, which I shared with a Chinese merchant whom
I didn’t know. But anyway, I got up there. The next morning they met me at the train
and brought me into the compound at Udorn and I got a briefing by this fellow, this
intelligence guy, from ACSI who was stationed up in Vientiane and he told me what was
going on there. I believe Kong Le had just taken over.

LC: Yes. I think the spring of ’64.
 WL: Yeah, something like that. Talked about Kong Le and other people. It was all pretty foggy in my mind now.

LC: Was the trip an exciting one?

WL: It was very interesting. Yeah. I wouldn’t say exciting. I didn’t get excited very much. But it was very interesting and it was valuable because there’s nothing like seeing it on the ground and talking to people who are doing the work to get—it’s kind of a reality check. You can read all of the documents and intelligence reports and analyses that you can but still you can’t put it together until you talk to the people and see the terrain and so on.

LC: Was it, thinking back or looking back even a month later or in the immediate aftermath of your trip, was it a significant deficit for you that you did not actually get into Laos as it sounds you didn’t?

WL: Not too much. I would have just gotten essentially the same briefing anyway.

LC: You would have been in Vientiane?

WL: Yeah. I would have been in Vientiane. They wouldn’t have let me go anywhere else anyway so—

LC: So it sounds like the ambassador had a pretty tight grip over who moved in and out of Laos.

WL: Oh yeah. He was absolute authority there. What’d they call him? They called him Field Marshall Sullivan. Some people called him that although he was an ambassador.

LC: I’d never heard that before. Was he a tough guy? Did you come to know him later?

WL: No. I never met Sullivan.

LC: Did you not? Okay. How did you get back?

WL: Well, I took the train back to Bangkok and then I flew home from Bangkok. I didn’t go back to Vietnam again.

LC: About those days in Saigon, what were you picking of as to the security situation? What was the read at that time? Do you remember, Bill?
WL: Well, the only thing I can recall is that the US advisors had a very good and
developing relationship with the Vietnamese, at least that was apparent to me. They did
have a definite plan that they were executing for establishing control in the countryside.
This was before there were any main force engagements of any size, at least around
Saigon. Now, I can’t remember when that first big engagement with the Cav Division
took place but I believe this is before that.

LC: With the Cav?
WL: Yeah. Up there in the—
LC: That was, yeah, 1965. I think. October/November, something like that. Yes.
WL: It was before there were any major main force engagements. So it was
before the major US deployments. When did the Marines first go in?

LC: February (Editors note: March) of ’65.
WL: So it was before that.
LC: It sounds like you were there just after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Does
that sound right?
WL: Yeah. I was involved in that one in the Pentagon. It was probably my first
joint action.
LC: Well, we better cover that. We better make sure that we get you on record
about that. Just before I go there, can I ask whether you saw or heard at any point during
the summer as you started work at IPPD or during your time in Saigon, did you hear
anything or come across any information about the beginnings of infiltration of NVA
(North Vietnamese Army) personnel into the South?
WL: I can’t put a timeline on that. I’m sorry.
LC: Okay. I just wondered if that came up.
WL: At that time, I don’t know. I did have from standpoint of intelligence I had
very good contact with an officer in the assistant chief of staff for intelligence. In those
days intelligence had a lesser role on the general staff than it does these days. There was
a deputy chief of staff for operations. There was a deputy chief of staff for personnel.
There was a deputy chief of staff for logistics. All of them three star generals. There was
an assistant chief of staff for intelligence, a two-star general. I always thought that was a
rather strange arrangement and it has changed now. There is a deputy chief of staff for
intelligence but at that time he was the ACSI, A-C-S-I.
LC: That is a little odd.
WL: Yeah. I thought it was strange. But there was a major, Maj. Al Weidhas,
was liaison to me, to IPPD, from the Southeast Asia branch in ACSI. Al Weidhas was an
exceptionally fine officer, smart and aggressive. He’s the one that really got me read on
to the intelligence that was coming out of South Vietnam. He’d got me entrée to the
ACSI’s briefing room and encouraged me to get the proper clearances so that I could read
the information. A lot of it—to digress a little bit on intelligence in those days—a lot of
it then for the entire period of the Vietnam experience was coming from intercepts. In
those days you couldn’t even talk about the fact that we even had intercepts. But now it’s
pretty well known. So I can talk about it but you had to have a special clearance to have
access to that. You still do for that matter, to the material. Al Weidhas got me into that
so that I could get up to date. If you didn’t have that clearance, I mean if you didn’t have
that access to that kind of intelligence you really were in the dark.
LC: Now, just for clarification again, the intercepts, what kind of material would
this be? What would be the generating source?
WL: The source was the Army’s activity with ground stations that intercepted
enemy communications and deciphered them then translated them, produced them as
finished intelligence. That’s the Army side of it. It was called the Army Security
Agency, ASA. They did that. They were a component of the National Security Agency,
NSA. The Air Force component of that operation flew aircraft with receivers and
analysts aboard the aircraft and they picked up the signals also. So it was a mixture. It
was practically all what they called CW, that is dot-dash sort of communications. It
wasn’t voice communications very much. There was a little bit of that I suppose. But I
never got to be a technician in the field but I do know that almost all of it was what they
called continuous wave transmissions, CW. They would intercept it. It would come back
to, eventually, back to NSA headquarters at Fort Meade and they would do the
deciphering and the translations and produce the intelligence for analysts to try to figure
out what the meaning was, you know.
LC: Right. At your level would you be seeing the analysts’ product rather than
the raw intercepts or did you see both?
WL: Yeah, the analyst would be putting—you know, they’d have to call out all of
the irrelevancies and make it a finished intelligence product. Yeah.
LC: There was also at this time a more openly known and—well, I don’t know
how openly accessible it was at the time—but a more openly known monitoring effort
which was the radio broadcast monitoring.
WL: Oh yeah. That was unclassified stuff, if that’s what you’re talking about.
LC: Yes, like FBIS.
WL: Yes. Right. FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service). We saw that
but you didn’t need a clearance for that. That was open source material. It was important
but it wasn’t as important as the other because what we’re talking about were military
communications. You’d get indications of where a particular enemy division was; where
were their regiments; where were they moving to; what were their orders; what were they
told to do. You know, you’d get pretty good indications of what was going on from those
kinds of communications. Another component was radio direction finding. Airborne
collectors would also do that for you by triangulation and the direction of the signal,
where it was coming from. They triangulate and they’d get the readings from several
different parts of the compass and they could say, “Well, this particular regiment or this
particular division headquarters is at,” and then they’d give you coordinates. Then you
can say that’s where they are.
LC: Was the focus exclusively on enemy communications in South Vietnam,
south of the DMZ (demilitarized zone), or was there also listening on the northern half?
WL: It was all over. It was the North, it was Laos—
LC: Cambodia?
WL: Cambodia. Yeah. Well, at that time I can’t recall—there were very few, if
any, North Vietnamese formations in Cambodia. There were at least two division in Laos
but—or maybe it was just one at that time. I can’t recall now, but most of them were in
North Vietnam.
LC: What about China?
WL: We didn’t get much out of China, or at least I didn’t. It wasn’t my interest.
LC: Right. Someone else might have that you did not.
WL: Oh yeah! I’m sure they were collecting out of China. They were collecting out of Soviet Union too, you know. But we didn’t.
LC: But being on the Indochina desk your responsible was kind of limited.
WL: That’s right. I guess you put it this way. My intelligence area of interest was all of Asia. I was interested in what was going on in China. My area of what they called area of influence was just Indochina and primarily just Vietnam.
LC: Bill, let’s take a break there for a second.
LC: Bill, I wanted to ask about the distribution of intelligence information. You mentioned, of course, that you were seeing Army Security Agency product. I wonder if you were seeing intelligence from other agencies, civilian agencies, for example the CIA. Did you see reports from them?
WL: Yes. They were available, again, in the same briefing room. They had classifications that they weren’t giving general distribution. But they exchanged information between CIA and the Army ACSI and the Defense Intelligence Agency also.
LC: What was the DIA’s work in all of this? Was it primarily analytical?
WL: Yes. Yeah. DIA didn’t have any collecting responsibilities. The Army still had responsibilities in the, I already mentioned, in communications intelligence as well as in counter intelligence and in what they called positive collection. That is running human intelligence operations worldwide. They were still doing quite a bit of that. I think that’s pretty well been eliminated from their mandate. But that’s what they were doing then. They had what they called Army military intelligence groups stationed around the world. In Japan they had I believe it was the MI group. The Attachment K of the was based in Bangkok and we’ll get into that later. Dealt with them when I went back as chief of intelligence for DAO (defense attaché office) Saigon. But they had—and there was a MI group which was in Vietnam, Army. All of these were Army units and they were operating human intelligence.
LC: Do you know when the was first deployed to South Vietnam?
WL: No. I don’t.
LC: Were they pretty much already on station when you—?
They were there for sure when I got to Vietnam in 1966. They were there but I don’t know how long they’d been there.

LC: Okay. This is an extremely important area of sort of the issue of the flow of information between the agencies. Did you pick up at this time or any time while you were with IPPD any tension between the civilian and military agencies in terms of exchange of information of limitations or—?

WL: No, because I wasn’t involved in, really, in intelligence. I was a consumer, you might say. I wasn’t involved in the details of it. Over the years in working in intelligence I always got the impression that I couldn’t document at all that CIA was very careful to restrict the information that they would send to other agencies while they expected us to give them everything we had. I had that impression and that persisted all through my experience in DAO Saigon. But, having said that, I think we got just about everything we really needed out of them anyway. I can’t fault them for being careful about what they put out because I had no way of knowing the source.

LC: Right. What it took to get it in the first place.

WL: Yeah. Once you disclose information, if you have a very sensitive source, you have to be careful about who you give it to because that may have been the sole source of the information and that would compromise the source itself if it got out.

LC: Right. They’re cooked.

 WL: Right.

 LC: Yes. Absolutely.

 WL: That’s that problem all the time with human intelligence, and for that matter with intercepted intelligence. Once you disclose what you know and they know on the other side that the only way we could have got it would be with intercept then they can take actions to close that source off. That’s the essential reason why intelligence is so highly classified. Not because of the content but because of the possibility that whatever you disclose would shut off the source.

 LC: These are of course the famous issues that now in the general literature; it’s now in the popular literature about World War II. For example, Winston Churchill had to deal with knowing in advance from intercepted communications that a certain bombing
run was going to take place, particularly against Coventry, I think. He had to decide to
just let it happen rather than compromise the fact that orders were being read.

WL: Right. I think there was a similar situation in the raid on Dieppe but I’m not
sure. Someway that they had some information about the German deployments at Dieppe
that they couldn’t give to the landing force.

LC: Yep. That sounds right. Did you feel like the trip out to Saigon and up into
Thailand had gotten your feet kind of on the ground and made you better prepared for the
work that it was that you had to do in Washington?

WL: Oh definitely! There was no doubt about it. When I would read the reports I
could visualize what it was and where they were and that sort of thing. It’s all very
important in deciding on what to recommend. Yeah.

LC: Well, as we noted earlier one of the things that came up right away after your
assignment to IPPD was the series of events in the Gulf of Tonkin. Bill, tell me whatever
it is that you can tell us about that incident from your point of view.

WL: From my point of view it smelled fishy from the very start. Put it this way, I
don’t believe that either one of those destroyers, I don’t remember which one it was now,
was under any kind of serious attack from the North Vietnamese. I had the impression at
the time and I haven’t been disabused of it that it was kind of a trumped up charge and it
was an excuse that the administration wanted and needed to justify the retaliation. That
was my impression that remains with me and I can’t give you any details on why I
thought that but it just didn’t ring true.

LC: Assuming that’s the case, and I think you’ll get a lot of agreement on that,
where would this idea have percolated up from? Any idea?

WL: I can’t recall now. It’s just that the timing of it, it seemed to be kind of a
delayed reaction. You wait two or three days to say, “Hey, they shot at us three days
ago,” or whatever.

LC: What about the timing in, I think it was in early August? Did it fit with other
events, the flow of events, either in Washington or in Vietnam or even in France or
elsewhere?

WL: I can’t recall that. You see, really what it had to do with, we were putting
agents ashore in North Vietnam. That’s why those destroyers were up there. The
Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, I believe—this is my reconstruction—they detected
that these boats with agents were coming ashore in North Vietnam and that’s what they
were responding to. In order to cover that particular aspect of the operation we had to
make a big issue out of it and say that they were attacking us when I don’t believe that
was true.

LC: Did you know anything about those—I think it was OPLAN 34 (operation
plan)?

WL: Yeah. OPLAN 34. You know, that was another interesting thing. I was
denied access to the real information about OPLAN 34. It was very tightly held. It was
compartmented even in the Pentagon. I’m sure the chief of staff of the Army knew about
it but when I attempted to get a briefing on it from the action officer in the Pentagon it
was refused. Said I didn’t have a need to know. I don’t fault them for that. The fewer
people that knew about things like that the better. So I wasn’t privy to it.

LC: How, if you can remember, did you try to get a briefing about it? You must
have gotten a whiff that there was some operational plan going on.

WL: Yeah. I knew about it, I knew that much. I knew that there was a covert
operation or series of covert operations that were based on that particular op plan. But
that’s all that I was told. I was told that it was compartmented and I couldn’t get any
more information about it. Just that we were doing it. That’s all.

LC: It didn’t, to my recollection, and I may be wrong, did not directly involve
Army personnel.

WL: It didn’t involve US Army. No. It was all South Vietnamese. We were
supporting it and providing the logistics for it but there were no Americans put ashore.

LC: When you say we even within that it was primarily, was it not, either a
Marine or Marine Corps or Navy operation rather than—

WL: Yes. I’m sure it was primarily Navy that were doing that particular—there
were other aspects of that plan in addition to the agents in the North. That wasn’t the sole
component of it. There were other operations, some of them in Laos. I believe we’re
involved also in OPLAN 34-A. That would have been more Army.

LC: But again you weren’t able to learn anymore about it at that time?

WL: I was interested but I was—
LC: Out of the loop?  
WL: Out of the loop on that one. Yeah.  
LC: Not high enough in the loop maybe I should say. You’re pretty high though, Indochina desk.  
WL: They figured that, and rightly so, that I didn’t really have a need to know that. I’m sure that they were briefing independently. They were briefing the chief of staff of the Army about it and the DCSOPS about it so they knew. But I didn’t have a need to know.  
LC: When did you work all this out? Was it in later reading or the Pentagon Papers or—?  
WL: Probably later. Yeah. Yeah. It must have been later. In talking to Al Weidhas, he knew more about it than I did. We’d discuss it but that’s about all that we got out of it. He may have been on the inside of that. I don’t know, but he never told me about it.  
LC: How do you spell his last name?  
LC: H-a-s?  
WL: H-a-s. Yeah. He was an infantry officer in combat in Korea and then transferred to intelligence branch after Korea.  
LC: What had he been doing in the interim? Had he, for example, gone to CGSC and so on?  
WL: I don’t think he ever went to the Command and General Staff College. He went to intelligence schools.  
LC: Oh okay. Sure. Sure. Well, were you kept busy during the public aftermath in Washington of the incidents in the Gulf?  
WL: I was very busy but once that issue, once it was common knowledge, you might say, that we were attacked by North Vietnamese gunboat in Tonkin Gulf, why, that issue kind of faded off the screen. We weren’t dealing with that anymore. US government announced that that’s what happened so that was gone. We had other issues that immediately came up. A number of them—let’s see, there was a paper generated by the Navy sometime about after Tchepone Plan that advocated mining the harbor at
Haiphong. This came up much later too but that’s about the time it was originated. I recall working on that. I was going to explain how these things work.

LC: Yes. I think that giving us the structure of how the papers were managed would be great.

WL: Yeah. So, what happens is that one of the services on behalf of the chief of staff of that service—in the Navy, of course, they called it the—there was a chief of staff of the Air Force and there was a chief of naval operations. That was the Navy’s. They didn’t call it the chief of staff of the Navy they called it the—

LC: CNO (chief of naval operations).

WL: Chief of operations. Anyway, the service would generate an idea. They’d say, “We should do this in Vietnam,” or somewhere else. In this case the Navy staff said, “We should mine the harbor at Haiphong. This will deny the flow of Soviet military assistance into Vietnam.” So, they’d write up a paper and give the justification. They’d say what they wanted to do and this is why we’re justified and essentially this is how we’re going to do it. “We’re going to tell the CINCPAC, the commander and chief of the Pacific, to do it. This is the way it’s going to happen.” It would be written up on a white paper of legal size and would be called a flimsy. That’s the initial iteration of this idea. Then there would be a meeting of action officers and I would be the action officer for the Army. I would meet with the Navy component, the Marine Corps component, and the Air Force. We would sit down at a table and discuss this. The Navy would propose, “This is what we propose.” We’d discuss it and I would read the paper and then I’d go back to my office and I’d study it some more. If there’s any research required I’d do that. Then I would take it to what they called the Army planner. This was a colonel, rather senior colonel of the Army, in the office that was run by General Bennett, who I mentioned before, who was the senior Army planner. I would be assigned to one of the colonels. There was colonel named Stu Cummings, a very good planner, and I would brief the flimsy to him. I’d say, “This is what the Navy wants to do. This is what I think about it.” I would also have some written notes I would have to hand him. I’d say, “This is why I agree with this or why I don’t agree with it.” He would think about it and we’d talk about it and then he’d say, “Okay, I accept your position.” He usually would do that. He hardly ever disagreed with me. Said, “Okay, we’ll go to the planners meeting.” So,
then the Navy would publish this thing, this particular paper, on buff paper. They called it a buff, tan colored paper that would come out with the planners. This buff paper would incorporate anything that the Navy wanted to change and probably some of the comments from us, from the action officer. They’d change a word here or there, what’s mostly kind of cosmetic changing, and it would come out as a buff. The Army planner, the colonel, would meet, along with me by his side, with a colonel from the Marine Corps, a captain from the Navy, and a colonel from the Air Force. We’d sit around the table with their action officers and discuss the buff. “Here’s what we want.” Here’s to the Army position, here’s the Navy position, the Air Force. “Maybe in this case, we disagree. We don’t want to do that. We want to bomb the dikes in the Red River Valley instead of this. We don’t want to do that.” But any case they’d get through with that and the Navy would take it back and redo it to incorporate what changes that the planners had agreed upon at that meeting if there were any. It would come out on green paper. This whole process would take, oh, maybe a week or two. Depending on the urgency of it these could move very fast if it was an urgent matter. Otherwise it would take a little while longer and it would come out green. When it was green this was the final iteration of this thing. It was my responsibility then to brief this to the DCSOPS, to the lieutenant general. In this case Lieutenant General Palmer. I would go into his office along with General Bennett, the Army planner, whom I’ve already talked to and showed it to him. He agreed or didn’t agree or whatever and we would go in together to brief General Palmer and tell him what we thought of this particular plan. We would have to tell him that we’re going to recommend that the chief of staff of the Army vote yes on this when they go to the Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting or vote no and give him the reasons why in each case. General Palmer would agree or disagree and say, “Yep, that’s what you can do.” So then once a week there would be a meeting with the chief of staff of the Army. I would sit at the end of a long oak table and General Johnson would be at the other end, the opposite end. General Bennett would be there, the DCSOPS, General Palmer, would be there. Usually other senior members of the staff, the DCSPER—

LC: The—?

WL: That’s the deputy chief of staff for personnel. The deputy chief of staff of logistics—there’d be a whole bunch of stars there around that table.
LC: And you.

WL: And me! A major. It was my turn to speak I’d tell General Johnson why I thought this was a particularly good idea for the operations in Vietnam. In most cases he’d probably already read the paper if he’d had time and he would tell us, the staff and tell me what he thought of it. The reason I bring up this mining paper is because he had a particularly interesting response to me. I recommended that we do that, that we mine the harbor at Haiphong.

LC: This is in 1964?

WL: This is probably in the spring of ’65.

LC: Spring of ’65. Okay.

WL: I said, “We ought to do that.” He said, “Now, if we do that what will the Soviets do?” Now, this isn’t something I had really thought about. What are the Soviets going to do? He said, “Is it possible that they will mine the Skagerrak?” I thought, “Wait a minute. What in the world is he talking about?” Then it came to me that the Skagerrak is a pass between Denmark and Norway in the Baltic. It’s how you get in and out of the Baltic. He said, “What if the Soviets do that?” It took me a moment because it was such a blindside attack, you know. “Well, it is highly unlikely, in fact virtually impossible that the Soviets would react to an event in Indochina by countering United States traffic into the Baltic. Which in the first place is not very important to the United States and would affect so many other nations that it’s really off the chart. They wouldn’t do that.” He accepted that. My rejoinder and—

LC: Now, just to clarify, this was General Johnson?

WL: Yeah. This was Harold K. Johnson.

LC: So he accepted your quick comeback?

WL: It wasn’t too quick. It was faltering.

LC: I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt.

WL: But that’s the way he was. He thought about everything. I didn’t think he had a point there, which I told him. That’s the kind of experiences I had. There was another case that was not a joint action but he made it—General Johnson had made an agreement with the chief of staff of the Air Force. I think they signed a paper on this that the Army would not put guns on any fixed wing airplane that the Army flew. The Army
had, of course, these light aircraft Cessnas, birddogs, for artillery and for reconnaissance
airplanes—little single engine airplanes. They had another twin engine cargo plane that
they later had to turn over to the Air Force because the Air Force thought it was too big,
exceeded the load capacity of the agreement that the Army had signed with the Air Force.
They were responsible for our air logistics operations. We had to quit the twin beavers
and so on. But we had an airplane called the Mohawk, which was the OV-1. Oscar
Victor 1. This was a twin engine turbo prop. Really hot airplane for the Army. It was
very fast. In fact it was the only airplane the Army had that had to have ejection seat in it
and it was used in three configurations. It had one for just aerial photography, had
cameras in the belly. It had a side looking airborne radar on one configuration. It had an
infrared, an IR, detector on the other one, the forward looking infrared, FLIR they called
it, on the other configuration. We had several companies of this and we had one of them
stationed in Vietnam. I think it was at Da Nang base or at the Air Force airbase up in Da
Nang we had one company of these Mohawks.

LC: Which would be approximately how many aircrafts, Bill?

WL: In a company there’s probably about six. That was kind of a standard
configuration for a Mohawk company. I believe it was six. Yes. In any case, we had
that outfit out there. I don’t know how they were configured, most of them probably
aerial [photo]. Most of them probably slick with photography. But that’s beside the
point. General Johnson made rather frequent trips over to Vietnam to talk with General
Westmoreland and with the Army units. After deployments began he went more often to
talk, just inspect Army units in Vietnam. He made a trip up to Da Nang and he
discovered that that outfit, the Army company with the Mohawks up in Da Nang, had
mounted machine guns on the wings of the Mohawks. The reason I remember is he came
back and he had a meeting in which I was present. He had the DCSLOG (deputy chief of
staff for logistics), he had the chief of Army aviation, and a few other generals there. I
have never seen him so angry because the more he thought about it the madder he got I
guess. The problem was that this unit had done this, had armed these airplanes, without
permission and they had violated his, General Johnson’s, agreement with the Air Force
which was a stain on his honor.

LC: Right. They hung him out to dry in a way.
WL: That’s what really made him mad because he was such an honest person. Someone had violated Army policy and the effect was to be a stain on his record as an honest soldier. So that was one indication of his character I would say.

LC: So I’m thinking those machine guns came off.

WL: Yeah. They came off before he got back in the Untied States, I’m sure of that. I don’t know what happened to the company commander. I suspect that he wasn’t flying Mohawks anymore.

LC: Can I ask one more follow-up question on the mining paper? What was, after you and the general had this exchange—?

WL: Oh yeah. They had a meeting in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As I recall now the JCS, they agreed to propose this to the secretary of defense. They didn’t have the authority. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the chiefs of staff as a body had no authority to do this. This was an issue that would have to go to the secretary of defense and before it even got to him, or at the same time it got to him, it had to go to the White House. I don’t know who was the national security advisor, George Bundy, possibly. Rostow?

LC: I think it might have been Rostow at this point and Bundy was over at the State Department.

WL: Yeah. They were all involved in this thing and they vetoed it so it didn’t happen.

LC: It’s interesting though that it went that far. You know?

WL: Yeah. Now, I’m not absolutely sure of that. I don’t have any records of it but that was my recollection that they did want to do it and the JCS recommended this to the sec def.

LC: Bill, you mentioned that you had early on sort of swung over and become a proponent of this. Can you explain your own thinking about the potential for this operation and how militarily it might have played out?

WL: Well, I thought in the first place it was a feasible thing to do. I knew from the briefings I got from the Navy that they had the capacity to do it. At the same time General Westmoreland was in favor of it. He was the commander in the field and he thought it would be an advantage because the North Vietnamese Army relied so heavily
on Soviet support. The Air Force was in favor of it because all of the missiles—not all of them, but most of the missiles for North Vietnam were Soviet supplied. This didn’t mean that once you closed off Haiphong it didn’t mean that you cut off logistical support entirely because there were at least two railroad lines coming down from China. They could come down that way. But those were more easily interdicted by air and probably possible to keep out of action most of the time, at least that was the Air Force’s position. So if you could block of Haiphong harbor, why, you could stop the flow of military material into North Vietnam. It was important.

LC: Did you understand why it didn’t go forward once it reached the White House?

WL: Well, there was a political decision and, again, I don’t know what their reasoning was. We were in the Cold War. Things like that would—I imagine they talked to the international lawyers and they were told that this was a violation of international law. This was an action that would have such an impact on other foreign governments besides North Vietnam. That it would be considered a delict in international law so you don’t do it. Well, an offense.

LC: An act of war?


LC: But, for example, putting ships of—

WL: But if you blow up Soviet ships, the mines that are going in there, why, that would cause a great deal of—

LC: Right. It wouldn’t be easy to smooth that over, that’s for sure.

WL: Yeah.

LC: As a military planner, essentially, it sounds as if that’s at least part of the capacity you were working in at this point. Was it disappointing to you to have an operation like this overruled for these broader political considerations or—?

WL: No, I don’t think so. I think I understood it and I could see their point of view as well. What we were doing is proposing military actions to try to defeat the North Vietnamese or stop their invasion. Actually, our mission was to, as I think McNamara put it, or maybe somebody else, to make it so unattractive or so difficult for the North Vietnamese that they would give up. This was a mission or an objective that could never
be realized and I believe I understood that too. That you’re not going to make it so hard
for them just by cutting off supplies from North Vietnam to impel them to give it up.
This war of attrition that we were running over there wasn’t going to do it either. We
looked at some of the demographics, I remember, and they could replace the losses that
they were suffering in Vietnam almost indefinitely and would continue to do that until
they won. But that’s another side of it.
LC: That’s an important side of it.
WL: At the same time we’re working—the more important aspect of what we
were advocating that was denied was what we called the Tchepone Plan. You probably
heard of that.
LC: I have but for those who don’t have that reference can you clarify?
WL: Both the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam, General Westmoreland,
and General Johnson were convinced that the most effective and in fact possibly the only
effective way to stop the North Vietnamese was to deny them the capability to move
down through Laos into South Vietnam using the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail system.
That system had one more important node at the Lao village called Tchepone, T-c-h-e-p-
o-n-e. That was just a few mile from the border of Quang Tri Province in South Vietnam
on International Route 9. That went from the coast of Vietnam through a little village
called Lao Bao on the Vietnam border and over into Tchepone. Then across Laos to the
Mekong River at Savannakhet, as I remember. That route also went through a place
called Muong Nong I believe or Muang Phine in Laos. The concept of the Tchepone
Plan was, in broad outline, the South Vietnamese Army would defend the area from the
coast to the Lao border, the forces that they had available that would be in areas such as
Khe Sanh, for that matter, across Route 9. The United States Army would put into Laos a
corps sized force of at least three divisions. That’s what we anticipated in looking at the
terrain. I was involved in the planning for the Tchepone Plan along with a Major Kretzer
in war plans division of DCSOPS. We worked together on this plan.
LC: Do you know his first name or how to spell his last name?
WL: Lon Kretzer. I know he’s deceased. We were together a lot. Along with his
boss was Colonel Mickey Marks, who was a bird colonel at that time. Mickey was
responsible for war plans, very good officer, who I served with later in Vietnam. But
anyway we worked on Tchepone Plan. The basic outline again was the corps of three US
divisions generally along the trace of Route 9 from the border at Tchepone over to
Savannakhet. The idea was that if we put a strong enough force in there we could deny
movement down out of the Mu Gia and Ban Karai Passes in North Vietnam into South
Vietnam.

LC: So all blocking action?

WL: Yeah. Really block it, physically block it with a force. We could bring
enough fire power to bear with three divisions, supported by air of course, to deny them
the capability to continue infiltration of individuals and units into South Vietnam. Well,
General Johnson was a firm believer in this and so was General Westmoreland. They
figured, as we did in the Army staff, that it was impossible to convince the North
Vietnamese to give up their mission just by attrition in the South. That we couldn’t last
that long. I didn’t at the time, think about the reaction in the United States. You know
the disaffection of the population in the war. That hadn’t begun to gather much steam by
1965 but I was impressed about that. I didn’t know that was going to happen. But I
was convinced from the very beginning that this could be done, that this was the way to
do it. So, we wrote up the complete plan, presented it to General Johnson. He said,
“Yeah, that’s good. Okay. Staff it within the Army.” That meant take it to other
elements of the Army staff and get their approval on this before you bring it to the Joint
Chiefs of Staff. The personnel staff didn’t have much interest in it. You’ve got three
divisions, we got three divisions, we didn’t have any big problem in that. But when I
went down to the G4, that’s the Army logistics, that’s the deputy chief of staff for
logistics of the Army. I took it to the action officer down there. I said, “Here’s what
General Johnson wants to do in Laos and Vietnam.” He took it to his seniors and they
discussed it for a while. It took quite a while to get it out of them, probably a week or so.
Then he brought it back to my office and he said, “DSCLOG, deputy chief of staff for
logistics, will non-concur in this plan for the following reason: The line of
communications that we would have to establish to ensure that we could support a corps
there in Laos along Route 9 would have to be through Thailand. We could not be secure
in the idea that we could support it from South Vietnam because if the South Vietnamese
Army broke there where you’ve got them defending our line of communication—that is
our logistical support for this corps, could be cut. That’s our concept so we’re going to have to support this through Thailand. We’ll have to come up through the port to Thailand, probably through Sattahip, by rail up into the Khorat Plateau and then over to Savannakhet and support it that way. Our problem is that we do not have in the active Army enough railroad battalion, we don’t have enough truck battalions, and other support units to support a corps along that long line of communications through Thailand into Laos. So the DCSLOG will non-concur in this program, in this plan.” So, that kind of killed it for a while because the Army had made earlier attempts to convince President Johnson that the Army should mobilize the elements of the National Guard and the Army Reserve where most of the logistical support units of the Army were. They were not in the active Army. We would have to mobilize truck battalions and so on out of the Army Reserve and the National Guard and President Johnson refused to do that.

LC: This would have been during the earlier stages, early ’65.
WL: They never did activate the National Guard or the reserves for Vietnam. In my recollection there was one or two reserve units that did go to Vietnam. There was a well drilling unit of some kind and there was a small Special Forces unit of reserves that did get to Vietnam. But that was it. I don’t really know how they got there because no general mobilization was authorized. Nothing like we’ve got now in Laos where a large proportion of the Army over there is reserve and National Guard.

LC: In Iraq.
WL: In Iraq. Yeah.

LC: Sure. So, Bill, let me just clarify that the logistics officer’s principal concern there was that essentially that ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) would not be able to hold across the—
WL: Yeah, the possibility. They didn’t say that they can’t hold. They just said but if they didn’t our line of communications would be cut and we need a secure LOC to ensure that we could continue to support a corps in Laos. That was their idea. I didn’t agree with it but it didn’t make any difference.

LC: Why did you not agree with it?
WL: Well, because the Army, the active Army, could have sent a couple of other divisions in behind and to reinforce the ARVN if they had to. We had that capability to
do that. I don’t know, how many divisions did we end up with in Vietnam? About seven
or eight?

LC: Yeah, at least.

WL: So we had enough to do it but that was their conclusion. Now, this did not
kill the program. Definitely. What really killed is that General Johnson could never
convince a majority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about it. The Air Force’s position was,
“We can defeat the North Vietnamese from the air if President Johnson will give us free
reign to bomb where and when we want to. We can defeat them up there by air.” The
Navy had kind of a similar point of view. “Yeah, we can do it too but from our carriers.
We can make it so difficult for them that they’re going to have to quit.” The Marine
Corps had a plan similar to ours but it involved a landing near Vinh in North Vietnam.
They said, “We can land a Marine landing force at Vinh, go across that very narrow part
of North Vietnam and block the passes over the Annamite Range. So we can do it that
way.” But neither one of these plans ever saw the light of day. They never got
anywhere. But I still think that was really unfortunate. There was a political
component to this, and you remember Ambassador Harriman?

LC: Averell Harriman. Sure.

WL: Yeah. Averell Harriman was the US author of the ’62 Accords in Laos. He
was still alive and still powerful voice in the Democratic Party and in the administration,
consequently. So anytime anybody suggested that the United States ought to put military
forces in Laos he was adamantly opposed to that and he could get the ear of the president
and the national security advisor. So anytime you even suggested that we should put
forces in Laos, Harriman was against it because he thought the ’62 Accords were a great
achievement and the United States should not violate something that he had signed for on
behalf of the United States. Never mind the fact that the North Vietnamese already had
at least—what did they have—the Division in Laos and I think there was another one
moving in about this time. That didn’t make any difference. United States had signed
this and we’re not going to violate that accord. So that was probably the fatal reason for
never adopting any plan like the Tchepone Plan.

LC: Was his weighing in with the president?
WL: Yes. Yeah. I remember he was involved in a discussion about the Tchepone Plan at some point. General Johnson felt so strongly about how badly the war was being pursued, how wrongly it was being pursued. The strategy would never give us clear victory. I mean that was his point at all times. He said that just killing more North Vietnamese soldiers and destroying North Vietnamese battalions is not going to win this war. They’re going to keep coming. That was his viewpoint and I shared that.

LC: What about General Westmoreland in all of this? You mentioned that he was also—

WL: He was right with us on the Tchepone Plan. Yeah. I had talked to him much later about it and I found out that their plan and our plan were virtually the same. It was the same thing. There was communication between General Westmoreland and General Johnson on this particular issue at all times.

LC: Oh I’m sure there must have been continuous.

WL: Yeah. It wasn’t something we were going to impose on MACV. If General Westmoreland didn’t want to do it definitely it would not have been done or he would have had to resign or leave. I mean because he was being held responsible for the war right on the spot.

LC: Well, that’s right. He’s borne the, I mean historically, has borne the burden of having made bad decisions. It’s been imputed to him that his decision making was bad and that he followed the search and destroy strategy.

WL: Well, he did the only thing he could do. I mean the only thing that was left for him to essentially, in broad terms, turn over the pacification effort to the South Vietnamese Army and use the US forces against the main forces of North Vietnamese; and couple of South Vietnamese formations that were main force. Yeah. It was the only strategy that he could pursue being denied the authority to move in to Laos and really hit them hard [before they could] even move into North Vietnam.

LC: Right. One of the suppositions that underlies the Tchepone Plan is that, well, there are a couple of them. One is that the flow of men and material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail was making a significant difference in the capabilities of the Communists in the South in early 1965. Are you clear that there was evidence in hand to suggest that was true, hard evidence?
WL: Yes. There was good evidence of that. There was another component of the
infiltration of course was by sea. There were quite a few of these trawlers that were
moving in and later on more heavy shipments into Cambodia. But that came much later.
Most of the stuff was coming down the trail.
LC: Right. After more effective bombing of the trail then the other sea routes
became more important again. What evaluation was made, if you remember Bill, about
the internal southern Communist military capability without reinforcement? If the
reinforcements, if the Tchepone Plan had been put into place, reinforcements effectively
cut off overland and let’s say something could be done about resupply by sea, what
would the southern Communist movement have been able to bring to the table in terms of
military capability?
WL: Almost nothing. They would have been weakened to the point of virtual
extinction if they hadn’t had that pipeline from the North. There wasn’t any local, any
significant local support of the Communists in the South. In the Delta they could have
acquired enough rice to sustain themselves because it was such a vast area. They did
control, at least tacitly, large parts of the rice growing areas.
LC: Historically there had been that.
WL: Well, they couldn’t have supported their military effort. There would have
been no spare parts, no ammunition coming down.
LC: So this would have been, to your mind, if implemented in 1965, this plan
would have put a chokehold on the southern Communist movement?
WL: Yes. Definitely it would have.
LC: Do you, thinking back now about this particular juncture, fault President
Johnson or can you see his point of view? I respect your input about Averell Harriman.
The president obviously also looking at broader international relations, can you see his
side or is it just not, it just doesn’t stand up?
WL: I fault, if there’s any fault to be given, the president as well as his civilian
advisors. I think he paid much too little attention to the advice that he could get from
General Wheeler and from the service chiefs. He didn’t meet with them very often, if at
all. It’s very rare that he even talked to anybody like General Johnson. Then I believe
that the secretary of defense was ill suited for the job, McNamara.
LC: Why do you say that? This is interesting.

WL: Well, he was a numbers guy. He didn’t understand military operations. He was a statistician and we counted everything. Had tables and graphs of about everything that happened. He thought that the electronic censors along the DMZ could stop the North Vietnamese. A lot of ideas that were really simply out of tune with reality.

LC: Were they too high tech or were they just high in the sky?

WL: They were very good for detectors and good signals. So you know what they’re coming down with but you have no way to stop them. Bombing them from the air made it difficult for them and it caused them some casualties. But it didn’t by any means stop them. It’s kind of like stomping on a trail of ants in the forest. Yeah, you can kill a whole bunch of ants but they’re not going to change their path. I mean it was just not the way to do it.

LC: What would you foresee, again if I can chase the Tchepone Plan a little further. What would you have foreseen in the way of battles that would have developed between the NVA and let’s say US divisions in southern Laos along Route 9?

WL: They probably would have tried to attack it. They probably would have tried to get around it. I don’t really know what they would have done but anytime that they came up against an entrenched United States division they would not break through because we would not have been in a valley like Dien Bien Phu. We would have been on high ground and overlooking it. We would have knocked down the forest in front of it and put mine fields out there.

LC: Controlled the passes.

WL: Yeah. We would have held. Now, in the long run, the other question is how long are you going to sit there and stop them from coming down?

LC: Sure, that is a question.

WL: Yeah. Of course after first getting their nose bloodied possibly in an attempt to get through they’d back off and regroup and probably try to continue an insurgent operation in the South. But without logistical support that wouldn’t have helped them. How long would they wait and how long would we have to sit on those hills in Laos? I don’t know.
LC: Could you ever have foreseen a scenario in which instead of after effectively blocking infiltration the time would have come to no longer sit there?

WL: Yeah. I think so. I think they were given enough time the South Vietnamese would have gotten it together, I think. The way they have now actually since we left and their economy would have grown. They would have been able to supply and train a more effective military force of their own. Who knows what would have happened. Perhaps the Communists in the South would have eventually seen that the South was moving so far ahead of them economically and financially that maybe they’d become more moderate as they have already. Partly because of the foreign influence in South Vietnam. That’s where all of the big changes are taking place right now.

LC: Ho Chi Minh City and Saigon.

WL: Yeah. I mean they had to create what they called a free economic zone or something like that in Saigon to attract foreign investment and so on. So who knows what would happen. I don’t know how long we’d have to sit on those hills in the South.

LC: Was that part of the planning?

WL: I don’t recall us even—

LC: What we now call exit strategy.

WL: Yeah. I don’t recall any attempt to design, well, to deal with the problem of once you get in there how do you get out and when. I don’t remember any part of that. It’s a very important consideration but—

LC: But of course you’re trying to solve a problem at the time you’re making these plans.

WL: That’s right. Dealing with a topical event and we’re not going to predict how we’re going to get out. Maybe that’s one of the drawbacks of that kind of planning. You have to think ahead.

LC: Jumping forward a little bit, and you’ve foreshadowed this a bit, Secretary of Defense McNamara did lend his name, I don’t know whether willingly or not, to the creation of a sort of no-man’s land at the DMZ in South Vietnam, an electronic no-man’s land basically.

WL: McNamara Line.
LC: McNamara Line. Yeah. Was that kind of a half a loaf approach to trying to solve part of the problem?

WL: Yeah. In my opinion, it had nothing to do with reality. You could put enough forces along that DMZ, you could block it indefinitely. But it would have no effect on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

LC: Because it was in Laos.

WL: Yeah. But most of the stuff was still coming down Laos. They weren’t moving much across the DMZ anyway, not at that time. Later on they did but at that time there was very little coming across there anyway.

LC: Bill, can I prevail on you for just a few more minutes to ask about General Palmer, who you’ve mentioned before? He was in operations—

WL: Yeah. He was at DCSOPS. Sometime during this period he was pulled out to lead the US intervention in Dominican Republic. Dom Rep they called it. When was that? Nineteen sixty-five, I think. The president or the sec def picked him to lead the US force into Dominican Republic. I don’t remember hardly anything about that except that’s when he left. He was replaced by Vernon P. Mock, M-o-c-k, as the DCSOPS. We were all very sorry to see Palmer go because he was such a good straight guy. He was easy to deal with, easy to brief, smart enough to pick up everything the first time around.

LC: What can you tell me, if anything, about his background?

WL: I don’t remember much about him. I believe he was infantry when he started. He was airborne. He was a little small man but very pleasant.

LC: A quick study.

WL: Yeah, and kind. He wasn’t given to fits of temper like a few generals are.

LC: What about Vernon Mock? When he stepped in did anything change over there?

WL: Vernon Mock came in pretty cold. He didn’t seem to know much about the events that we were dealing with. He wasn’t nearly as easy to deal with. I don’t like to say much about him.

LC: Okay. That’s fine.

WL: He’s okay. I had known him very briefly years before. He came in and took command of the Infantry Regiment in Germany, probably about 1953, shortly before I
left the regiment. The only thing I remember about him there was his first edict was that
all officers would carry swagger sticks, imitating what the British Army did. We all had
to go out and find so-called swagger sticks. This is something you were supposed to
walk around and beat your thigh with.

LC: Are you serious?
WL: Yeah. Right! I mean we’ve got pretty important things to do here in
Germany and one of them isn’t to walk around beating your leg with a stick. So he didn’t
make a very great first impression on the officers of the .

LC: Well, let me ask a little bit more about someone who probably made a better
impression and that’s General Westmoreland. Did you ever meet with him, Bill,
yourself? Were you ever attending a conference with him?

WL: I met him after I went to Vietnam and took over the G2 shop in the Infantry
Division.

LC: In a few years. Okay.

WL: I met him maybe half a dozen times when he’d come out and visit the
Division and I’d give briefings and so on. I remember once in one particular battlefield
that he came out. We had a really bad scene there in Vung Tau jungle and he came out
there. I talked to him briefly there, along with General DePuy. But I didn’t have a close
relationship with him.

LC: Right. What was your impression of him? So, you’re briefing him, he’s in
the room, he’s around. I mean what impression did you form of him as a commander, as
a leader? Did he have whatever that it factor is for leading troops?

WL: Well, he was an impressive figure. He was always genial. He listened well.
He didn’t get into arguments with anybody. He was rather taciturn. He didn’t say a lot.
He was easy to talk to. He was a good leader. That is, people would follow him because
he looked like he was a leader. Kind of like George Washington is supposed to look, you
know. He was rather stern but never rude.

LC: He looked like he knew what he was doing.

WL: He was a real gentleman. I know that he knew what he was doing. He knew
Vietnam. After all he’d been there how many years? Six years? I don’t know. Long
time!
LC: Yes, he was. I think he first went out in end of ’63 or early ’64.
WL: Yeah. He was there when I went there the first time. I think he replaced
General Harkins.
LC: That’s right. Yeah.
WL: If I remember.
LC: He was his deputy there for several months before that actually took place, I
guess.
WL: I wrote a speech for General Harkins the first couple of months in the office.
Why, we got a letter from General Harkins and he had retired in Texas somewhere and he
was going to give a speech to somebody and he wanted to talk about the Communist
threat in Indochina or in the Far East and I was detailed to write a speech for him. He
accepted it too. I remember describing the problems in Malaya and the importance of the
Strait of Malacca to international commerce there and if the Communists had won in
Malaya why we would have been in very serious trouble because—I don’t know. I said
it’s like a scimitar pointed at the—I don’t know. I used some alliteration like that. I’m
trying to recall now but—
LC: You went into deep literary background there for your reference, for your
metaphor.
WL: But I’d never met him. But he did write me a letter and thanked me for the
fine speech. It went over well or something like that.
LC: Let’s take a break there Bill.
WL: Yes. Well, I can’t recall any really details about the British operations except that they did concentrate on pacifying areas and expanding their control over areas and defeating the insurgents where they were. The only observation I would make is that the British were largely successful. They were doing things that we, the Americans, tried to replicate in Vietnam. The great distinction between the two operations was that the British could pretty well effectively isolate that battlefield. Malaya being the Malaysian Peninsula, that’s where they were fighting, being a long narrow peninsula was easy to isolate. There was no China border for the supplies to come across. There was no great port like the port of Haiphong through which the Soviets or any other communist country could bring in supplies. The big difference between Malaysia and Vietnam is that Malaysia was easy to isolate. Once the British were successful in defeating that insurgency it could not be easily reestablished or reinforced along the way. Decisively different than the situation we had in Vietnam where we had a long border with Laos and Cambodia through which the North Vietnamese could bring in reinforcements and supplies. Along the coastline there were trawlers that came down the coast and landed here and there along the South Vietnamese coastline. There were two railroad lines coming into North Vietnam that could not be interdicted effectively from China. Then
the Soviets and their surrogates, that is the East Germans and Czechs, sent supplies in by
sea. Those eventually found their way down through on the Ho Chi Minh Trail or on
trawlers into South Vietnam. That was a great distinction. There was no lack of
expertise or tactical competence on the part of the Americans and the South Vietnamese
who were fighting the insurgency. That could be done but we were also faced with major
regular formations of the North Vietnamese Army that came in and the British didn’t
have to contend with that. Once they got the insurgency under control they were
successful. I mean that’s my summary.

LC: Bill, did you talk with Sir Robert Thompson at some point?
WL: I’m trying to think now. I think I misspoke. I don’t think I did meet him.
There was another Australian that came in.

LC: Well who would that have been?
WL: Ah, pooh. He was as brigadier general. I can’t recall his name, I probably
will though. I had a meeting with, a couple of meetings, with him. He had a villa in
Saigon.

LC: He probably had some experience either in the Malaya operations or—
WL: Yes, he did. He was an advisor to MACV and to the Vietnamese, actually.
This was not during the war. This is after the ceasefire I met this fellow. Trying to get
my chronology straight here.

LC: Well, we’ll probably cross paths with him then when we get to that point,
’73, ’75, somewhere in there. Did you think that the ink spot approach that the British
used in Malaya had any utility in, say, the Delta or in II Corps or—?
WL: I think it was effective especially in around Saigon and in the Delta. It was
less successful, I would say, in Binh Dinh province, which was very, very difficult—
much of a VC stronghold and hard to manage because of the terrain, largely. Very
narrow coastline and coastal plain and then nothing but hills and mountains from there on
to the west.

LC: That had been a Viet Minh stronghold even back during the French period.
WL: Yes, that’s true.
LC: So, the population was not—the civilian population was not as amenable.
WL: That’s right. My driver had—Chinese driver in my later tour had come from Binh Dinh. His family had been in Hainan Island before the Chinese Communists took over in nineteen forty, what was it? Forty-seven or forty-nine?

LC: They didn’t get to Hainan until forty-nine, I think.

WL: Forty-nine. Then they went to North Vietnam and then the Communists took over in North Vietnam so they moved to Binh Dinh and they were in the grocery business. They had stores but they picked the wrong province to locate in. In 1954 they came down with the big switch, you know. They established their business in Binh Dinh and then the Communists ran them out of there and he wound up in Saigon. Then finally emigrated to the United States. Just couldn’t survive in a Communist society.

LC: Do you still have any contact with him?

WL: I haven’t for about five or six years. He called me from San Francisco about five years ago or so but I haven’t had any chance to see him.

LC: That’s interesting. What was the family name?

WL: His name was Lien. L-i-e-n. Of course he spoke Vietnamese as well as Chinese.

LC: How did he come to be your driver?

WL: Well, I inherited him from General Potts, who had been the last, well, not the last J2. But he had been the J2 for Abrams. Bill Potts. Probably in your records there somewhere. He managed the Vietnam monographs program and he hired me edit. In fact, he died about three months ago.

LC: Oh, he did?

WL: Yeah.

LC: I hadn’t heard that. Well, Bill, let me ask you another just general question about the time period that you were in Washington before you went out on a tour in Vietnam. You mentioned the overland supply routes and, of course, those were crucial for the Vietnamese insurgency in the South and also to the development of the North, independently and earlier, and you mentioned the railroad lines coming across the Chinese border. You said that those really couldn’t be interdicted. Did you mean in political terms it wasn’t possible?
WL: No, I don’t know whether they were ever targeted. I didn’t have access to
that kind of information. I don’t know whether our Air Force and Navy tried to stop
those rail lines. I think there was a political consideration that they didn’t want to bomb
rail lines very close to the border anyway. Which would have been the place to do it if
they wanted to do it. But you could bomb railroad lines and break them and they can be
repaired within twenty-four hours or so, so it’s not a good target anyway.

LC: It’s kind of fruitless.

WL: Yeah. It’s pointless. It’s kind of like the railroads in the United States
during the Civil War. They were broken up regularly but they were back in business
within a few hours anyway and it was the same thing up there. We never did effectively
stop the rail traffic in from North Vietnam or the sea traffic either.

LC: From China?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Yeah. How important did you think at the time that material coming in from
China actually was for North Vietnam?

WL: In my estimate, but again I don’t have any claim to detailed knowledge, I
think the Soviet support was more important than the Chinese support. We did recover
ammunition. I remember some artillery projectiles that we uncovered and captured. I
think they were for 105 mm that bore Chinese manufacturing markings. So I know there
was ammunition coming in from North Vietnam, I mean from China.

LC: That was manufactured in China?

WL: Yeah. Manufactured in China. How it came in I’m not sure whether it came
in on rail or came in by sea.

LC: But Soviet or Eastern block material were more sophisticated and therefore
more important?

WL: Well, the most important material from the strategic point of view, from
Russia or the Soviet Union, was probably the air defense equipment, the SAMs (surface-
to-air missile), and other anti-aircraft guns. A lot of their guns I know were made in
Czechoslovakia. The 40 mm up to probably a 100 mm cannons that they used. Then the
SAMs, and then they got the Strela missiles. Those came from Soviet block. Whether
they came from Poland or Czechoslovakia or Hungary or wherever I don’t know. But
there was material from all over the Soviet block. Of course the Soviets had to be the
engine that drove this.

LC: Sure. It wasn’t going to happen without them being at the center of it. Right.

Well, Bill, did you have much interaction or know—well, let’s just say interaction with
either the national security staff or State Department folks while you were at the
Pentagon?

WL: No. No. I dealt strictly with the military side. That was the most frustrating
thing about the whole experience. General DePuy later told me, reinforced my
conclusion, that what I was doing was largely wasting my time because policy and
strategy was being designed in the military side in the defense department by—what’d
they call this? I don’t remember the name of the office but it was assistant secretary of
defense for national security affairs or something like that they called it. That was the
office that was really designing policy and those were primarily civilians. Of course the
rest of it was being done over at the State Department and at the office at the White
House of the National Security Council staff. So it didn’t really matter much what the
chief of staff of the Army wanted or, for that matter, what the chairman of the Joint
Chiefs of Staff and the body of the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted. I wouldn’t say that their
recommendations were ignored but they certainly weren’t followed. It would have been
quite a different war if they had been. Political considerations overrode the strategic
considerations. That’s a rather strange way to put it, I think. But they just didn’t adopt a
strategic plan that had any real measure of credibility, in my view.

LC: In military terms it didn’t have credibility?

WL: In military terms. Yeah.

LC: Like, for example, their rejection of the Tchepone Plan that you talked about
last time.

WL: Yes. Right. Truth be told at the very end, they rejected any idea that we
ought to block Haiphong Harbor. You know, we had that one joint action I worked on. I
can’t recall what month it was, but it was to mine Haiphong Harbor. They eventually did
but I don’t remember when. That was much later after I left the Pentagon.

LC: I think President Nixon ordered it, didn’t he? In ’72 or something like that?

WL: Yes, he did. It was much later.
LC: I think it was part of that buildup while the negotiations were going on in 1972. What arguments were advanced by your office in favor of mining the harbor?

WL: Just that it was imperative to cut off the supply of material, war material essentially, coming into Haiphong. As I recall now a lot of their other economic support including food was coming in from the Soviet block also because they were not self-sustaining in their production of food or fuel either for that matter. If we had effectively cut off the support we would have diminished the amount of support that they could have sent down to the South. That was the whole point and we weren’t doing that.

LC: You know, mines are very indiscriminate in what craft they destroy. I suppose that there are different kinds of mines. Do you know much about this, Bill? Some that let three ships go by and then attack the fourth one, are there things like that?

WL: I don’t know. There probably were but I am no expert on mines in the sea. The point really was that we didn’t really want to destroy any ships but we wanted to make it, put a barrier there, that any intelligent master of a ship would not sail into a mine field. Figure, “Well, maybe I’m going to be the second one or the third one and I’ll get by.” Once the minefield is established, people don’t go in. They stop. They don’t wait for their ship to be blown up before they decide, “Yeah, I guess they were right.” They just don’t do that. The argument against it of course was in international law this could be considered a major violation of laws of the sea. You just don’t plant mines. We had no war going on. We could never say that we were at war with North Vietnam. We never actually said that from my recollection. If we had we would have said, “Yes we’re at war and we are justified in doing this.” But we didn’t want to say that.

LC: That would have changed a lot.

WL: It would have changed a lot of things. That’s right. We could have invited some Soviet actions in Europe that would have been even more serious than what we were facing in Vietnam.

LC: Or elsewhere. Cuba, for example, the Caribbean. One can think of a number of different places that they might have decided to take retaliatory action. So from that point of view can you appreciate why the mining option was never accepted?

WL: Oh yeah. Sure. I understand it.
LC: But still, from a military point of view, it allowed them to kind of get away
with murder. I wanted to ask if there was anything additional about your time at the
Pentagon that you wanted to kind of pitch into the record. Were there any protests
happening, late ’65, while you were there? Anybody sitting around on the steps of the
Pentagon?
WL: No, I don’t remember anything like that going on. There were other things
happening. Someone in the military staff, and it wasn’t in the Army side. It might have
been the Air Force. They suggested that we should use a biological agent against the rice
fields in North Vietnam. They called it Rice Blast, B-l-a-s-t. We sprayed this—I don’t
know whether it was a fungicide. I think it was. You sprayed this over the rice fields of
North Vietnam and it would destroy the rice product for at least the next generation. That
was of course—I never thought that was a great idea either. We were not at war. First,
we weren’t at war. Second point of it was we weren’t at war with the people of North
Vietnam. I think wiser heads decided, “Well, that’s a little extreme, we can’t do that.”
But it sounded kind of like a LeMay recipe. You know, bomb them into the Stone Age
sort of attitude.
LC: Right. These discussions, did they actually happen with you there or did you
kind of get it filtered through—?
WL: Somebody presented a paper. Again I don’t remember who it was. I can’t
tag the Air Force for it because I’m not sure. But I know it wasn’t the Army. The Army
staff didn’t come up with that idea. The Air Force also had a proposal to destroy the
dikes along the Red and Black Rivers. By doing that they would flood North Vietnam.
At least they’d flood the rice fields to the point that they were no longer useful. That also
was an idea that never got anywhere because, again, at least from the political standpoint
it wouldn’t make a great deal of sense to drown a whole bunch of North Vietnamese. So
that wasn’t pursued with any seriousness.
LC: Well, both of those are, they’re pretty devastating prospects, particularly the
biological warfare option.
WL: There was another thing, biological, recalls the discussions we had about
using CS, the tear agent. You know, CS and CN are both tear gas, in the vernacular. Not
gases actually, they’re particles. But in any case the MACV, Military Assistance
Command Vietnam, wanted to make more use of CS in operations against VC (Viet Cong) in tunnels, primarily in tunnels, and wanted to use it. I don’t know if they were using some of it and they wanted to expand the use. This comes back to me now, the president’s scientific advisor—I don’t know who he was but the president has a scientific advisor. He advised against the using CS in tunnels because it could have a very serious effect on small children and babies, which was probably true. Objected to our endorsing, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsing, MACV’s plan to make more use of it in those situations. We supported using it because we figured that once you began using it the Vietnamese would be pretty careful to keep their kids out of tunnels. Babies weren’t in the tunnels anyway.

LC: Right. Was it kind of in some ways a spurious argument because—?
WL: The only thing I can remember about it is that I was pretty much annoyed that the scientific advisor would get into this thing to start with. The dangers that he predicted, while real—that is if you sprayed this in the face of a ten month old baby, why, you could probably seriously affect it and might even kill it. But the fact was that we weren’t going to use it that way anyway and we endorsed MACV’s plan to make more use of it in their tunnel war.

LC: But it never happened?
WL: No. They didn’t stop it. I know that they didn’t stop it because we were using it in Vietnam when I went back there, when I went there in ’66.

LC: Okay. So it did get used?
WL: It did get approved, yes. They used it.

LC: For someone who doesn’t have any familiarity with the use of CS gas, I can’t imagine who that is, but could you just give a sense of—I’m sure you had to train with it earlier at some point in your career. Can you give a sense of what it would—?
WL: They used it when we were being trained in the use of the gas mask. This was kind of an annual event. They’d put you in a tent and close all the openings and then they’d throw a tear gas grenade in there and you would get your mask on as fast as you could. Hold your breath and get your mask on before you were affected seriously by the tear gas. Of course you were never that quick. You had some effect of it but it wasn’t—you wash your eyes out afterwards and then you weren’t permanently disfigured.
LC: Well, what does it actually do to you? Does it make your eyes burn?
WL: Oh yes. It makes your eyes burn, your nose burn. If you get enough of it it’ll affect your larynx, makes it hard to breath. You can breathe it’s not going to kill you. But coughing and trying to get your breath. It’s nasty stuff. The VC used it for that matter.
LC: Did they?
WL: Yeah. But they got it from us when we used it they’d recover in the battlefield. They could recover some of it and repackage it and use it against us from time to time.
LC: Did that happen when you were over there on occasion?
WL: Yes.
LC: Against what kind of US formation would they use it?
WL: Oh, out in the jungle.
LC: I was going to say because obviously the US forces weren’t typically in an enclosed area.
WL: No. In an open area, why, it’s not terribly effective. It dissipates, you know, the wind will blow it away. It’s most effective in a closed area and it was quite effective in the tunnel and in bunkers. That’s sort of a target. That’s where we were using them. Actually, we had a chemical warfare officer in our division who rigged it in fifty-five gallon drums of it with a detonating device inside that would blow the drum open. The idea was to put them in a CH-47 helicopter, flew over where they thought there was a VC base area out in the deep jungle, and kick these out the back door of the CH-47. They were to explode and cause the VC to have to abandon that particular base area. I don’t think it was ever effective. The first part of the problem was to find exactly where that VC base area is from a triple canopy jungle, almost impossible anyway. Some of them didn’t detonate when they hit and that gave the VC a good ready supply of CS. So, it was one of these good ideas that didn’t go anywhere. So that was the other thing that we had that controversy about CS. It was never effectively resolved. The only thing I know is that MACV continued to use it.
LC: That’s interesting. Bill, did any issue around the use of tactical nuclear weapons ever come up that you know of?
WL: No. No. I never heard it ever discussed. The other thing about my service that I can recall more than anything else is the tremendously long, long hours. Twelve-hour days were not unusual. Weekends weren’t unusual for me.

LC: Was there a situation room that was—?

WL: There was one but I never got to see it.

LC: Okay. So who would get in there? I mean you were, you know, pretty well placed in the chief of staff’s office. Who would get in there?

WL: I got in to see the chief of staff now and then. Most of the time when I saw him though it was in the DCSOPS briefing room. Which was just a large conference room with a long table. But I never got into any situation room with up to date on daily operations. I read all of the traffic, all of the messages, in from MACV so I could keep aware that way. But I never got into a formal briefing room like the Joint Chiefs had. I never got into a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I wasn’t at that echelon. That’s where the only person that the chiefs brought in with them to these meetings were their own directors of operation, chiefs of operation, like General Mock. General Palmer, when he was DCSOPS, he’d go in with the chief.

LC: So their immediate operational guys would be in there?

WL: Yeah. Rather closed meeting. There were maybe a couple of secretaries taking notes but that’s it. You know, this is before the days of computers. So when I had to write a paper, a comment on a paper or anything like that, I had to write it long hand and give it to a secretary to type. Fortunately we had an outstanding woman who did that. Her name was Joannie something or other. She would always give me priority because I was the only one in that office that had almost daily requirement to go up and brief the DCSOPS or the Army planner or General Johnson himself. I did a lot of running, actually not figuratively speaking either. I mean grab a paper and run up to the E-ring and get in to see the chief. I had to go through his aide usually. Lieutenant Colonel Wickham was the aide there. He didn’t like to see me very often because I was always disturbing the chief with some bad news but that was part of the game. Then we had only one Xerox machine to make copies with in the entire operation. When I think back about how primitive our support was—and it wasn’t because we weren’t being supported, it’s that things hadn’t been invented yet. The Xerox was still kind of in its
infancy more or less. They had an office called a JACO, Joint Actions Control Office, and they had to keep track of all of these joint actions that were flowing through here. I wasn’t the only one with a joint action, by a long shot. But it was quite an exercise to get things done. I can recall having to go in there on a Sunday and taking a paper over to General Johnson’s quarters at Fort Myer and showing him a paper on a Sunday afternoon. Things like that happened not too frequently, fortunately.

LC: But you physically had to drive it over there?
WL: Oh yeah.

LC: Did you have a special case or how were the papers protected as you were moving around?
WL: I put it in my pocket probably.

LC: Really?
WL: Yeah.

LC: Nothing that said secret papers in here, that kind of thing?
WL: Yeah. Well, a lot of it was secret and top secret. But it wasn’t code word stuff so I didn’t have to handle any of that stuff.

LC: But it is good to recall that this was pretty labor intensive stuff to even generate documents back then.

WL: Oh yeah! I remember one day we had one of these unusual snow falls in Washington and I started out for the Pentagon. Everything was closed. The streets were closed. I got about half way down through Rock Creek Park on the way to the Memorial Bridge and had to park because the road wasn’t ploughed. I walked from there over to the Pentagon. Took me about an hour.

LC: That’s a good long way.
WL: Yeah! I was in low quarter shoes. I didn’t have boots or anything. When I got there the only other person in the office was General Mock himself and he’d come in in a pick-up truck. The Army had sent a four-wheel drive truck for him. But things were so critical that that’s what we had to do, things like that. It was really a high-pressure job. I enjoyed it up to a point. But I enjoyed being at what I figured was the center of things. It wasn’t until later that I really came to the conclusion that it was a big waste of time anyway.
LC: You said that General DePuy had mentioned the same thing.
WL: General DePuy emphasized that to me once after I joined the Division. We were talking about what I was doing and he says, “The only important thing going on in the Army are number one, training and the other one fighting. The rest of it doesn’t really matter.”

LC: Did you kind of come around to that view?
WL: Yeah. Right. I figured he was right.

LC: Bill, let me take a break for a minute.
WL: Well, yes. I certainly was and that’s what I did.

LC: Bill, you mentioned that it was a pretty high pressure job and I wonder whether you were keen to actually get out to Vietnam. You’d been out on that brief trip and I wonder if you were looking forward to possibly getting out there yourself for a tour.

WL: Well, yes. I certainly was and that’s what I did.
LC: How did it come about? How did you find out about those orders?
WL: Well, I think it was in December of ’65 I’d been on the job for about a year and a half. In message traffic from Vietnam I learned that Lt. Col. George Eister had been killed in action. He was commanding the Battalion of the Infantry in the Brigade of the Division. I really wanted to get back to the Division. As you know I’d served about three and a half years with them before. So as soon as I’d found out he’d been killed and I think it was towards the end of December ’65, I went to see General Don Bennett. He was the brigadier general who was the so-called Army planner. He was my, not my immediate boss but I would have to get his approval to do anything. So I told him about it and I said, “I want to get back to the Division and maybe I can get command of that battalion that George Eister was commanding.” He said, “Well, I support you in your plan but before you can leave you’re going to have to find somebody else to take your job.” That was really hard. Nobody wanted it. I mean it was that tar baby, you know? It took a while. It wasn’t until sometime in late February that I found a stuckee that would take it that they approved, that General Bennett wanted. So it wasn’t until March that I was able to leave. Of course by that time, naturally, they had given that battalion to somebody else. They couldn’t leave it without a battalion commander for a couple of months. It might have been January when George Eister was killed but it was
about that time. So, I got to Vietnam. I figured that I would get a command of a battalion anyway, one way or the other, so that’s how I went to Vietnam.

LC: First, Bill, can you say who actually stepped into your shoes if someone wanted to follow that track? Who stepped into your shoes at DoD (Department of Defense)?

WL: I may think of it but I can’t right now.

LC: Okay. Do you recall the circumstances in which the lieutenant general lost his life? Do you remember?

WL: Lieutenant colonel.

LC: I’m sorry. Lieutenant colonel.

WL: Yes. They were operating in what they called the Long Nguyen Secret Zone, L-o-n-g N-g-u-y-e-n. That was a Viet Cong area, base area, but they called it a secret zone. They did operate in there. They had a few small base camps. Long Nguyen Secret Zone was just west of the base where the Brigade of the Division had established its base camp at Lai Khe, L-a-i K-h-e. Lai Khe, which is on Route 13, north of Ben Cat on the way to the Cambodian border actually.

LC: Sort of between Saigon and An Loc?

WL: Yes. Right. I guess roughly midway between Saigon and An Loc.

LC: So, sort of just west of there.

WL: West of there was, west and little bit south, was the Long Nguyen Secret Zone. It’s very dense jungle. Long Nguyen extended over to, oh, roughly to where you begin to run into the Michelin rubber plantation area there.

LC: So, is it hilly terrain with jungle or is it—?

WL: It’s jungle but it’s not very hilly. It’s relatively flat. A little bit rolling but mostly pretty flat. It’s between two rivers, the Saigon River on one side, on the west side, coming down then through Ben Suc in that area. On the other side—what is the name? I can’t remember the name of the stream there but anyway that’s where it is. It’s north of what we call the Iron Triangle. So anyway they were operating, the Battalion was operating in there against VC. I don’t recall the situation except that he was shot in the neck and he died there on the battlefield in the jungle. I guess it was a sniper.
LC: What was it about that particular cable? Was it because he was part of the
Big Red One? What was it that that instance kind of jumped out at you and said, “I need
to get out there?”
WL: That looked to me like an opportunity to take command of a battalion in the
Infantry Division. It was a pretty far-fetched idea looking back on it because battalion
commanders weren’t selected that way. They were selected at a higher echelon and
going over there to report in to General DePuy and expecting to get a battalion was a
pretty far-fetched idea. But it sounded good to me at the time. I really wasn’t awfully
anxious to get out of the Pentagon although I was getting pretty tired of the stress and the
hours and so on. I did want to see some combat in Vietnam although that wasn’t my
main reason.
LC: At this—go ahead, Bill.
WL: Yeah. That was what I wanted to do. I wanted to get over to Vietnam and to
get into action.
LC: At this point General DePuy was, in addition to being associated with the
was also, if I’m right, chief of operations for MACV. Is that right?
WL: He had been. He was a J3. Yeah, director of operations where they—
actually they called it the J3 of MACV. He was there when I went over on my trip in the
fall there of ’64. He was J3 MACV for General Westmoreland. By the time I got there
in March he had just within a week or so assumed command of the Division. He was
still a brigadier general. He hadn’t been promoted yet to major general.
LC: When did you actually arrive in Vietnam?
WL: It was in mid-March. I can’t recall the dates.
LC: Did you come into Tan Son Nhut?
WL: Yeah. Flew in to Tan Son Nhut and I didn’t get there—you know, most
officers, when they went to Vietnam, they got some kind of a charm course they called it.
They went to an orientation and so on. I didn’t go through any of that. I guess they
figured I knew enough about Vietnam from my work on the staff there that I didn’t have
to do that. So I just flew in to Tan Son Nhut and somebody met me there and I guess
obviously knew I was coming. Took me to the division main command post at Di An.
Now, Di An spelled D-i- without the bar on the D, A-n. Northerners pronounce it “zeon”
and southerners pronounce it “eon.” Anyway, it was just a little bit north of Saigon in Binh Duong Province. You know how to spell that one?

LC: Go ahead and spell that for our transcriptionist. It’ll help them.
WL: B-i-n-h D-u-o-n-g. Pronounce it Binh Yoong.

LC: Was this a district town, or—?
WL: Might have been a district town.
LC: Or nearby a district town.

WL: Yeah. It was on the southern edge of Binh Duong Province anyway and kind of a rice growing area. Actually there was not much growing around there at all. There was a lot of brush and a few little bits of woods. Not a lot of population. The Division had its base camp there its main camp was at Binh Duong. Also it had there the Brigade was at Binh Duong, there in Di An. The Brigade was up at Phuoc Vinh, P-h-u-o-c V, as in victor i-n-h, Phuoc Vinh. Which is up in War Zone D, the old French War Zone D on the Dong Nai River. The Brigade, as I’d said before, was at Lai Khe up on Route 13. That’s the way the division was situated when I reported in to General DePuy. First I saw the chief of staff, who was that now? Hold on just a minute I’m going to see who the chief of staff was. Oh, Bill Glasgow. G-l-a-s-g-o-w. Bill Glasgow. General DePuy still had the staff that he had inherited from General Seaman. General Seaman had had command of the division. In fact he brought the division over from Fort Riley. He had just been promoted or was about to be promoted to lieutenant general and he was commanding then II Field Forces at Long Binh. That’s where General Seaman had gone.

LC: So DePuy still had his staff members in place?
WL: Yes. He still had the staff that he inherited from General Seaman. So I reported in. I talked to Bill Glasgow; Colonel Glasgow was chief of staff, very fine guy. He was an engineer officer, incidentally, but anyway then—

LC: Was he a West Point guy?
WL: I don’t know if he was West Point or not. Kind of doubt it but he might have been though. DePuy wasn’t, you know. He was from North Dakota. I reported in to him and he said, “You’re my new G2.” That took me aback a lot. I said, “I didn’t come over here to be a G2. I came over here to command a battalion.” He says, “Well, listen carefully. You’re my new G2.” So, I said, “I don’t know anything about being a G2.”
He kind of passed that off and says, “Well, I’ll tell you what I want you to do.” Of course he had seen my record. He knew I had a little bit of intelligence in my background. Also he recalled my visit to him earlier so he knew that I had at least had some experience with what was going on in Vietnam, although I’d never been in action there. So I knew something about the order of battle. Then he gave me my initial guidance to be what he expected me to do and I wrote these things down. There were six points and I still have that with me, that little page from my notebook, if you’re interested in that.

LC: Yes, sir. Absolutely.

WL: What you expect a G2 to do? This is not at all like you see in the Army field and staff manuals about what a G2 is supposed to do.

LC: What did he tell you?

WL: He said, “First, you’re going to brief me everyday. You’re going to brief the staff everyday and you’re going to tell me this. You’re going to give me the facts about what’s going on. But I want more than the facts. I want your interpretation of what these facts mean. Second, I want to know the locations of all enemy forces that can have an effect on Division operations. I want to know where they are. I want to know their capabilities of all these enemy formations. To the best of your ability tell me what you think they intend to do next. What are they up to? That’s what I want you to tell me in these briefings everyday. Second, I said I want you to constant coordination with the staffs of the and the ARVN division.” Now, the Division was at—I’m trying to think now. I think they were in what they called Lam Son—Phu Loi. They were near Phu Loi, just north of us, is where the was. The Division was over in Long Khanh Province. Yeah. They were in Xuan Loc. Spelled X-u-a-n L-o-c. The Vietnamese pronounce it “soon loc.” Anyway, that’s where the Division—later, because of the number ten didn’t have a real happy connotation in Vietnamese mythology or superstitions, I guess, they changed it to the . Tenth became the sometime later. Any case, I always maintained constant liaison in coordination with those two South Vietnamese organizations. That was the second point. The third one I was to manage the B-52 strikes in support of the Division. By manage he meant to select the targets and to present the targets to the B-52 office at MACV headquarters, J3 office. This was kind of unusual. G2s do targeting but
usually all of this is only to the extent that they recommend the targets to the three, to the G3. They handle the targeting but I was to do that myself.

LC: You were to do the whole package it seems like?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Wow. Okay.

WL: That was number three. Number four was to do deception planning. Now, this again is usually a matter for the G3. But he told me I was to be responsible for all this defense, deception operations. All this means is to recommend and plan actions to deceive the enemy as to our intentions and our operations. That’s what that deception—and then later on when we talk about it, why, I can give you the foremost example of how we used that in a later operation. That’s deception planning. The fifth one was to build up the section, make it more effective. Now, I don’t know why he thought it wasn’t effective then but I know he didn’t like his G2 that I was replacing. That’s why I was the first change on the general staff was to replace his G2. That’s what I walked in to.

LC: Right. It sounds, Bill, correct me if I’m wrong, like he was also absorbing from others on the staff things that he wanted done his way, essentially. He’s just kind of trafficking that through you?

WL: Definitely. Yeah. He said, “Build up the section, the G2 section.” I can tell you more about the details of what a G2 section looked like, who was—what they did and so on. The sixth was to compete for resources. The Division was not only the smallest number division in the US Army it had to be first in everything. I mean this was the doctrine of the Division. We would be first in line for everything and this didn’t sit well with other divisions, obviously. But that was the attitude. I think this was something that started probably in—if it didn’t start in World War I it certainly got started in World War II in North Africa. So that was kind of the attitude of the Division, had to be first for everything.

LC: Now, by first for everything—?

WL: Resources for G2 meant if I needed more documents [translated—if] we got more documents than we could translate, [we needed more resources]. Of course we had a very, very small team that could do things like that. We only had two or three people who could interrogate prisoners of war. We had to rely on support from MACV. They
had a large intelligence organization. I could call them and say, “Hey, I need three guys here. We’ve got several prisoners and we need interrogators and we need them right now. Get them out of here.” MACV would respond. They’d send people out to help us. We got a large cache of documents captured in an operation, they had to be translated quickly. So I would get those resources. The B-52 was another resource we had to compete for and they expected me to go in there and get my request in first. Be first in line for any scarce resource we had to compete for. As an example, this wasn’t only for the G2, this is everybody had to do this. The G4, the logistics officer, was supposed to be down at the port of Saigon when the ships came in. If there was anything good on them, grab it for the Division. I mean this was the way they operated. Of course, in doing that sort of thing, if he carried it too far he’d actually destroyed the system that was in place. You’re supposed to let the system work. If you sidetrack it, if you go around in and make runs on these things, then the whole system is going to collapse.

LC: Somebody’s going to get ticked off.

WL: Yeah. Somebody in a higher echelon than we were were making the judgments of who was going to get priority because they had the responsibility for the entire theater. All we were were one division. But we still, in our doctrine in the Division, we were still going to be first.

LC: This was an ethos?

WL: Pardon?

LC: This was an ethos through the whole division?

WL: That’s right. Yeah.

LC: All staff officers knew this?

WL: Yeah. They were supposed to. Of course you had to do it with a good deal of, a little bit of finesse.

LC: A little diplomacy, a little give and take.

WL: One way or the other that’s the way you were supposed to get it done.

LC: That’s quite a list, that list of six things.

WL: Yeah. Interesting guidance. So, that was my start with it and of course I had to get introduced to the staff. A G2, as you probably know, works most closely with a G3, the chief of operations, and they had a good G3. What was his name? Can’t recall
his name, it’ll come back to me, but he was a good solid officer. But, again, DePuy had
decided to change him. Well, he was around for about a month after I took over. He was
still in the G3 office on the first operation that we went in to after I became the G2.

LC: The first major, you mean, field operation?

WL: The first major operation where we deployed to Phuoc Tuy Province.

LC: What was the name of that operation?

WL: The operation I believe was called Abilene and it started around the first part
of April. Another thing DePuy did, I should mention, is that it was my understanding
that the Division hardly ever deployed a forward command post during the time that
General Seaman was in command. General Seaman. Not that he didn’t visit the
battlefield. But it was rare, if ever, that he deployed the Division command post up
forward into a brigade operational area or into a battalion operating area. They just didn’t
do that. They operated from Di An and flew out to these areas where they were operating
everyday. DePuy decided to deploy what they call Danger Forward. Danger was the old
time honored designation for the Division and forward meant that for the Division
command post. Danger Forward was the command post that you would deploy to a
forward area. Very small compared to the main command post, Danger Rear. But the
G2, the G3, had the major part of it.

LC: So you would be at Forward?

WL: Yeah. Forward. G1, the personnel officer, he didn’t move anything
forward. So it was just an operational headquarters. The command post was operated by
the duty officers of the G3 and the G2.

LC: Would General DePuy move back and forth?

WL: No. He’d go forward with it.

LC: He stayed at the Forward?

WL: Yeah. He stayed with Forward and so did the assistant division
commanders. They went forward also, two brigadier generals.

LC: That’s a lot of brass in, you know, in a forward area with a reduced,

obviously, if you say reduced staff around them. Only some of their key players with

them.
WL: Yes. Right. We deployed up to this operation. It was against the main force VC elements who were operating in what they called Hat Dich. H-a-t D-i-c-h. Hat Dich Secret Zone, again, mostly in Phuoc Tuy Province south of Xuan Loc. We located in a rubber plantation called Courtenay, a French plantation. C-o-u-r-t-e-n-a-y, I believe is the spelling. Courtenay Plantation. Very nice area. Terre Rouge Company I think they called it, “Red earth.” Describing really what it looked like, very pretty area. Started operating against the main force VC down there. I didn’t know hardly anything about the order of battle at that time. I was just learning about what was going on there. This particular operation, according to General DePuy, he told me that he didn’t want to go there. He was directed to take the division down there by MACV. MACV decided that they should operate down there. We had with us, I think they were attached but I’m not sure, the Airborne Brigade was in there also. I believe they were attached to the Division for this operation although I can’t be sure. I know they were there. They might have been just in support.

LC: This is for Abilene?

WL: Yeah. Right.

LC: It didn’t start off very well, did it?

WL: It was real bad, very bad. The Battalion C Company was decimated there at Xa Cam My. X-a, let me think now. X-a C-a-m M-y, which is just a little hamlet. Hardly a location at all in the really dense jungle. They walked into a VC ambush in a base camp. I believe they had about forty KIA (killed in action), forty killed along with many, many wounded. It was very, very difficult getting them out of there. DePuy discovered that the method of operation that the battalion was using had the three rifle companies moving in rather parallel lines of march through the jungle. But they were beyond mutual supporting distance from each other. They were isolated from each other and they were also isolated from any effective artillery support. Couldn’t be seen, didn’t know where they were. It was a really debacle and it upset DePuy no end.

LC: How was the company reinforced? Do you remember?

WL: I don’t believe they were ever effectively reinforced. I know that they had to lower—they had to blow some jungle away somehow or other and bring—they had to lower chainsaws to them. I think there was a platoon of engineers from the Engineer
Battalion that moved in there to cut some trees down so they’d get a landing zone so they could bring the wounded out. I don’t remember much more about it.

LC: It sounds pretty bad.

WL: Yeah. It was bad and DePuy made some changes in operational procedures. No longer would they have companies by themselves in [enemy] areas. They would always be together. At least have most of a battalion together but they wouldn’t move up by themselves. They could do patrolling by themselves in small units but not the entire company.

LC: But you wouldn’t send a company out on its own to make contact or to—?

WL: They wouldn’t do that. Another thing about DePuy [with respect to operations]. This was the first time in some time, if ever, that they had deployed a forward command post. So the headquarters commandant of the division headquarters, and the company commander of headquarters and Headquarters Company Division, they didn’t have any experience in doing this in Vietnam and things didn’t go very well. They expected DePuy to eat his lunch and his dinner on a little folding table under a tree or something and be served on these Army mess kit plates dating from maybe from the War of 1812 or something. It just didn’t sit well with DePuy and he demanded immediate changes in all of that. He told the chief of staff to make sure that it got done and it did get done. So the next time we went to field it was entirely different.

LC: What did it look like after the change?

WL: After that, why, they had a very large mess tent. I’m talking about the general’s mess. That’s where I ate too. The G2, G3, we’d eat there along with the chief of staff. Anyway, there was a table, a nice long table, with table cloths. There was china. He actually employed, I don’t know how he paid for this, but he employed a Chinese cook from, I think he got him from Taiwan, a chef. I mean this fellow was an experience. It was first class meals.

LC: Do you think the general did this—let’s see, there are several possibilities why he might have done this. Did he do it out of vanity; did he do it to improve morale amongst his senior officers—?

WL: Well, it certainly wasn’t vanity. He wasn’t a vain person at all. He was very natural, normal North Dakota farmer type person.
LC: That would be my guess. Yeah.

WL: He decided that he wanted the Division to look like it had some class anywhere it was. This was for the Division. The Division, we weren’t going to the field and looking like gypsies. We were going to be first class all the way. That was amazing.

LC: No ragamuffins.

WL: No. Of course being the Division we were the magnet of all sorts of visitors. Hardly a day went by that we didn’t have somebody from the Congress or somebody from the State Department or a foreign visitor. Later on I’m going to tell you about we had the president of Germany. He was the president. Yeah. No, wait a minute! It was a German ambassador. We had a German ambassador for lunch and we had—General Westmoreland would come out and visit us two or three times. Ky, who was then co-president, I guess, of Vietnam—they had two people. Ky and somebody else were equal.

LC: Yeah. Not two but—

WL: Before Khanh, was it? I don’t remember.

LC: Yeah. It could have been still Khanh in 1966.

WL: Yeah. Anyway, he came out. So we had these visitors all the time and DePuy wanted it to look right and look like it was a first class outfit. He wasn’t always there at lunch. We had many, many lunches out with the battalions in the field. But when we were there it looked like it should look for a Division operation. That was his main point.

LC: Bill, it might be of interest if you know a little bit more about the general’s own sort of climb through the hierarchy. He had obviously served in World War II as you had. Do you know what his work had been then?

WL: He was in the Infantry Division in Europe and he described that to me as being a really poorly run division when he joined it. He joined it, I believe as a captain. By the time the war was over he was a lieutenant colonel commanding a battalion. He was one of the youngest infantry battalion commanders in Europe. He and a few other officers turned that division around after June or July of ’44. It became a very fine division afterwards but it had some real hard times. It had some very inefficient or—I
don’t know, inexperienced officers and they got into some very serious problems. I can’t recall any details. I hadn’t read much about the. I know that they saw some very heavy action in Europe.

LC: So he had some experience with kind of turning things around and—?
WL: Yeah. Also he had a very good understanding of what infantry combat was about and what happened and how to make it most effective. One of his main doctrines was flak trajectory firepower on an objective. We all believed in artillery, but he wanted us to be in a position to concentrate our flat trajectory fire. That is, machine guns, rifles, and cannons in direct fire against enemy strong points. This was something you learned in Europe that wasn’t easily translated to the Vietnam situation by any means. You just didn’t have that sort of stuff with you nor did you have targets that you could focus—

LC: Right. Exactly.
WL: Yeah. It was quite different. But he did, later on when he became commander of TRADOC (Training and Doctrine Command) he got ideas such as that solidified into Army doctrine. Probably still there.

LC: He became commander of TRADOC?
WL: Yeah.
LC: Which is?
WL: I think it was TRADOC. Yeah.
LC: Which is what, Bill?
WL: Training and Doctrine Command.
LC: Okay.
WL: Yeah. He also told me—thinking about his attitude towards combat, he told me later on that it was he when he was the J3 of MACV that determined that the Division when it was being deployed in 1965, mid 1965, to Vietnam, that it should leave its tank battalion behind. The Tank Battalion organic to the Division stayed at Fort Riley. He said, “You know Bill, that was one of the dumbest mistakes I made to leave my tank battalion behind.” From then on, you know, all of our operations where we needed tanks we had to borrow them from the Division.

LC: Could they never have been brought over?
WL: They never brought them over. No. We needed them on operations along Route 13. We did have some very good support from the tank battalion of the Division, which was close by. They were at Cu Chi. But an infantry division had only three companies of tanks and it was kind of good of the to give us one of those companies from time to time.

LC: What was his thinking in leaving the tank battalion?

WL: Oh, just look at the terrain of Vietnam. He had been there, of course, and he just figured we were fighting VC and they didn’t have any tanks. The doctrine of tank warfare is [tank versus] a tank. The reason you have it is to fight other tanks and we didn’t have any tanks to fight. So we didn’t really need them but we certainly could have—we did use them to good effect along Route 13 primarily.

LC: Was he aware of the location to which the would be deployed when he made that decision? In other words, did he—?

WL: Oh yes! I’m sure he did. But at that time the war was still primarily against the insurgents. You know, local outfits. Very few main force. In fact, the only really main force unit was the VC Division and it hadn’t come into full bloom by then either.

LC: This is the one that Operation Abilene had run into?

WL: Oh no. They weren’t at Abilene. That was a separate battalion. I don’t even recall now who that was down there. But it wasn’t out of the Division, I don’t believe. Could have been 274. I can’t recall. I think it was.

LC: Okay. But the VC Division—?

WL: The VC Division at that time I joined the division, joined the Division, had three regiments. The regiments were the , the , and the Infantry Regiments. Of course it had its organic artillery regiment and sapper outfit and quarter master. So they had a regular division formation. They rarely operated as a division. In fact they hardly ever did. These regiments operated independently of each other, generally, in Phuoc Long Province, Binh Long Province, Tay Ninh, and Binh Doung. That’s where they normally operated. The division command area was generally, let’s see, on the Cambodian border close to Loc Ninh, west of Loc Ninh, in what they called the Fishhook Area.

LC: Right. I’m looking at a map right now so I see where you’re talking about. Loc Ninh is, again, on Route 13 north of An Loc.
WL: Yeah. West of there you run to the Cambodian border. If you go down south along that border to the tip of kind of a looks like a peninsula sticking down there and it was around in that area. There’s a little place called Scroc Con Tran, S-c-r-o-c C-o-n T-r-a-n, t-r-a-n I think it is. (Editor’s note: Sroc Con Trang) Just a hamlet there. They were in that area most of the time. They moved a little bit but that’s where the VC Division was generally located. Vietnamese called it Worksite Nine. They didn’t call it a division but it was a division.

LC: So, in their own documents and—?

WL: Yes. They called it a worksite.

LC: Of course you had to, as a G2, understand as much as you could about that order of battle. This Worksite Nine was the, am I correct in thinking, really the only main force VC organization—?

WL: It was the only main force division. There were other main force battalions in our region but—

LC: Can you tell me something about those?

WL: Let’s see. In our area of operation we had, when I took over, about forty-nine main force battalions. That is, the VC Division had nine battalions. There were twenty-eight independent infantry battalions; there were five artillery battalions, one engineer battalion, and six local force battalions. All of this totaled up to forty-nine battalions. They estimated that the—that is, II Field Forces estimated there were about sixty-five thousand VC, Viet Cong, forces in Third Corps Zone. I guess you know about what a corps zone looked like.

LC: Well, yes, I do but if you might want to explain just briefly for—

WL: Okay. Vietnam, the South Vietnamese and we of course, MACV, divided South Vietnam into [four] corps tactical zones. That’s what they called them. They were also the same for military regions. A military region was coterminous with a corps tactical zone. The corps tactical zone being commanded by a Vietnamese Army lieutenant general who was also commander of the military region, which was more likely like the civil side of it. The First Corps Tactical Zone was from the demilitarized zone. That is the northern border of Quang Tri Province, Q-u-a-n-g T-r-i. They called it “cuong chi.” Anyway, and extended down to include Quang Ngai Province. There were
four provinces in Military Region One: Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, and Quang
Ngai. Then you got into Military Region Two or the Second Corps Tactical Zone. I
can’t recite all the provinces from memory. But it extended from the coast of Binh Dinh
over to the Laos border at Kontum. South of Kontum on the border was Pleiku, which
was on the Cambodian border. Down through, I can’t think of the names of the
provinces, but anyway go down through Ban Me Thuot. In other words it included what
they called the Central Highlands as well as the central coastal provinces from Binh Dinh
down through Phan Thiet on the coast. It was the largest—well, it wasn’t the largest
either. It was a very large [area].

LC: A huge zone all the way from the ocean all the way inland to the borders?
WL: All the way to the border. Yeah. To the Cambodian and Lao border.

Through Ban Me Thuot to Pleiku, Kontum…

WL: Central Highlands. So called strategic—the most strategic land in South
Vietnam. That’s what most strategists think anyway; probably is true. Then, south of the
MR2 or Corps Tactical, Second Tactical Zone, was Military Region Three or their Third
Corps Tactical Zone. Extended from the Cambodian border down through Saigon to the
coast through to where the Saigon and Dong Nai, Song Be Rivers empty into the South
China Sea there at Vung Tau. It included the two provinces on the border, or three
provinces on the border with Cambodia: Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuoc Long. Our
main area of operations, Binh Duong Province and include Saigon. But it’s where most
of the population that was—I guess maybe Fourth Corps might have had just as much
population but we had the big city. We had Saigon. That was in our area. Then the
entire Mekong Delta was Military Region Four or the Fourth Corps Tactical Zone.
Including all of the channels of the Mekong River coming out of Cambodia and all of the
Delta provinces, the rich rice growing provinces of South Vietnam. In fact, the richest
provinces of the entire country, when it comes to growing rice; down to the Ca Mau
Peninsula and so on. Those are the four corps tactical zones. In our corps tactical zone,
the Third, we estimated that II Field Forces—now I should mention what II Field Forces
was also, I suppose. That was an American command and it was tantamount to a corps
headquarters. In any other war they would have called it the Second Corps. But they
called it II Field Forces. I don’t know what the political reasons for that were but anyway
that was it. It controlled all operations in the Third Corps Tactical Zone. The Third
Corps Tactical Zone at that time we had the Division and the Division and a part of the
Division, I believe. Yeah, Division came in a little bit later but we had at least one
brigade of the Division. Then we had a separate brigade too. No, excuse me. I’ll have
to take that back. I think Division was operating in the Delta. It had the Light Infantry
Brigade. I think it was that one, came in a little bit later.

LC: In your area?

WL: In II Field Forces. That was an American command commanded by a
lieutenant general, reported directly to MACV and was responsible for all American
operations in the Third Corps Tactical Zone. Again I’m going back to the estimate of
sixty-five thousand enemy troops in our zone. That included about seventeen thousand
militia or local forces, about almost six thousand North Vietnamese Army and most of
those folks were already in the VC Division as replacements. In other words the VC
Division was North Vietnamese Army supported and manned by a lot of folks from
North Vietnam.

LC: Who had infiltrated down.

WL: Yeah. Had come down. There were about eight thousand so-called political
cadre. These were folks that were part of the COSVN, Central Office South Vietnamese.
(Central Office of South Vietnam). But they were not strictly military. They were
political and of those—well, there were about twenty-three thousand really direct combat
troops in that sixty-five thousand. So, it was a formidable force, pretty well scattered
around the area however.

LC: Now, were those numbers developed by MACV before you got there?

WL: Yes. Yeah, those were from MACV. Now, when you’re talking about the
order of battle by regimental numbers—the North Vietnamese Army, about somewhere
in the middle of, let’s see, about ’66, maybe in the middle of ’66, maybe a little bit later,
they sent down a Regiment from North Vietnam. That was a regular Army, North
Vietnamese Army. They also had in our area the Regiment. They had another regiment
called the Regiment, and those were all North Vietnamese units.

LC: All sent to Third Corps, III Corps?
WL: Yes. That was nine battalions. Three battalions in each of these regiments. The VC Division, as I mentioned before, we had the, and. There was an independent regiment, the. That might have been what we had down there in Abilene but I’m not sure. I can’t recall now. They also had the Regiment VC main force. They had another one called a Dong Thap 2 Regiment. D-o-n-g T-a-p I think is the word. (Editor’s note, Dong Thap 2 Regiment) That had three battalions. They had a Regiment that had about three and maybe four battalions. Then they had another one called the A and that had up to seven battalions. We weren’t too sure. Again that might have, that probably was operating down there in Phuoc Tuy also. Then they had the U-80 Artillery Regiment, five battalions of artillery. Now when they’re talking about artillery—they didn’t have hardly any cannons at this time they came in later. The earlier artillery regiments were mortars and rockets. They had an engineer or sapper regiment, the. Then there were some local force regiments or battalions. The most important of this in our area was called the Phu Loi, P-h-u L-o-i. The Phu Loi Battalion and I’ll tell you more about that one later.

LC: Okay.

WL: Because we got to be kind of personal with them. There were several other independent local force battalions. The Dong Nai Battalion, the, the 506. That was about all of them that I can remember now.

LC: It’s pretty formidable.

WL: Yeah. It was a pretty good force. So, that was that. I don’t know. You want me to go into the organization of a G2 section in those?

LC: Well, actually, I do Bill. If you feel like you can do that today that would be great.

WL: Okay. Let’s see. Of course I had an administrative section. Let’s see, I had a sergeant major. I had three clerk typists and three drivers, a file clerk—these were just in the administration section of it. There were twenty-seven people in my G2 section itself. Eleven officers and sixteen enlisted men. Had an operations officer that was a major. I had a targeting officer and targeting NCOs (non-commissioned officers), so on.

LC: Targeting for—?

WL: Targeting for to assist in the planning air strikes.
LC: Okay. For the B-52s particularly?

WL: I used them for the B-52. I had a G2 air. He was the air officer, and in fact he was killed later on. I’ll tell you about that later. Two observers and two NCOs. His job was aerial reconnaissance primarily. He would fly out in O-1 aircrafts over the whole of our area of operation and make air reconnaissance of the area. Had a plans officer, he was a major. His job was to plan for future operations. I used them to very great effect. I can tell you about that later also. In other words, I had twenty-seven people, including myself.

LC: Now, were most of those positions filled when you arrived?

WL: Yes, yes.

LC: Were they operating on the sort of one year rotations so you had constantly to—?

WL: It was a one year rotation, all of them. They were coming and going quite often. Most of these ones that I had inherited went over with the Division so their time was getting short. By the summer of ’66 most of them were leaving, unless they extended. Once in a while you’d find an officer who wanted to stay, or an enlisted man. They want to stay for another few months or if not extend the entire tour. But it was hard to do.

LC: To get them to do it or it was hard logistically within an Army system to get them to approve it?

WL: That’s right. They had other things to do. They wanted to send to schools. Some of them were ready for their advanced course or Command and General Staff College and they had to leave.

LC: Right. So, just as a general rule, how disruptive was it for you trying to maintain the staff to have people rotating out and time different schedules?

WL: It wasn’t too hard. They sent me some really good replacements. They were all pretty quick studies and there was enough overlap not to make it really a serious problem.

LC: Did the officers report then directly to you? Were you their CO essentially?

WL: Yes.
LC: Okay. So you had to write fitness reports and do all that kind of stuff as well?

WL: Yes, I did. I think, as I remember, the ops officer wrote the efficient reports for everybody that worked in the operations center. He was the fellow that manned the operation center for me and he had operations officers. In fact he had three of them, I think. They manned the command post twenty-four hours a day and he wrote their efficiency reports. I’m pretty sure I wrote the air officers report, although I had a kind of a second in command. I had a deputy and he wrote quite a few of the reports. I had to endorse them.

LC: Who was that? Do you remember?

WL: Probably got his name here somewhere.

LC: Would all these guys, all twenty-seven of them, have been up at the Danger Forward with you when you were there?

WL: No. Some of them, the plans—I left plans back. Kept the operations officers up, kept my G2 air up. I guess the plans and a couple of the clerks had to stay back but otherwise kept them up. I had a Major Kourakos. He was my deputy.

LC: How do you spell that Bill?

WL: K-o-u-r-a-k-o-s.

LC: Kourakos.

WL: I think he was my principal deputy. Some others came in later that I can’t remember. [Captain Denismay] was the G2 air. He was the one that was killed.

LC: I’ll ask you about him at another time. His job was aerial reconnaissance?

WL: Yes.

LC: Okay. So he was actually a flyer?

WL: Yes. He was an aviator. He was a rated pilot. In fact, he was an instructor pilot.

LC: Okay. This group of men that were functioning to assist you. Obviously you had to relay some sense of the priorities that the general had given you, those six priorities, to them.

WL: Also, I should tell you that I had the Division—in fact, all divisions had a military intelligence detachment in direct support. In fact, they reported to me too. An
MI detachment, I had ninety-eight men in that one. There were sixteen officers, there were three warrant officers, and seventy-nine enlisted men in that outfit. They were in counter intelligence; the four officers were counter intelligence. Seven were in interrogation of prisoner of war section. Two of them were imagery interpreters over with the—well, they called it the ASTA platoon. What did that stand for? Aerial Surveillance and Target Acquisition. Yeah. A-S-T-A platoon. I’ll tell you more about that later. They actually belonged to the aviation battalion but they reported to me also. General Hollingsworth claimed that I had more men in my command than an infantry battalion had. He counted them up one day and it was over five hundred or something like that.

LC: The other officers in the military intelligence detachment?

WL: Yeah. ASTA platoon, one order of battle officer, and two in their headquarters. The warrant officers were in counterintelligence and imagery interpretation. Imagery, what we’re talking about, is mostly photography.

LC: Aerial photography?

WL: Aerial photography. Yeah. Order of battle. That is, these were analysts, order of battle analysts, trying to—I guess you’re familiar with what they meant by order of battle.

LC: Right. It’s essentially what you’ve laid out for us, the distribution of enemy forces.

WL: What it is: enemy locations, strength, designations, personnel. That is, if you could find out the names and biographies of their commanders. Anything about an enemy unit and its location and intentions and so on. That’s all called order of battle and that’s what the analyst did. They tried to keep you apprised of what the enemy situation was in great detail. General DePuy is a great admirer of order of battle. He was always interested in order or battle. I can go more into that later, how that played out in the battlefield. I had to search through bodies and so on to pick out the envelopes that had order of battle designations on them and stuff like that. But that’s more of it, but that’s order of battle. It’s very important in combat intelligence.

LC: All right. Well, let’s take a break there, Bill.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 8 of 22
October 10, 2005

LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech continuing the oral history interview with Colonel LeGro. Today is the tenth of October 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and the colonel is again speaking to me by phone from Virginia. Thank you again Bill for your time. Last time, Bill, we had begun to discuss your in-country experience in Vietnam with the Division as G2 for the division. One of the things that you mentioned was the military intelligence detachment. Can you tell me a little bit more about its structure and how its personnel related to you as the head of G2?

WL: Yeah. It was what you call kind of a diverse organization. It had, as I mentioned before, ninety-eight officers and men in it. There were sixteen officers and three warrant officers and seventy-nine enlisted men. Among the officers four of them were in counterintelligence, seven were in the IPW section. That meant interrogation of prisoners of war. Two were in the imagery interpretation. That means photo, largely photo interpretation. They were assigned over at the ASTA platoon at the aviation battalion, Aviation Battalion. ASTA standing for Airborne Surveillance and Target Acquisition. A-S-T-A, Airborne—what did I say before?

LC: Surveillance and Target.

WL: Surveillance. Yeah. Surveillance and Target Acquisition. One was the order of battle officer and two were in the detachment headquarters, administrative. That meant the commander, who was a captain and his executive officer, they were the headquarters. In the warrant officer there was one in counter intelligence, one at the ASTA platoon over at the Division Aviation Battalion, and one was order of battle.

LC: Bill, you gave us some very detailed information on order of battle information that was developed. Would much of that have come from this group, much of that kind of detailed data?

WL: From history?

LC: Yes.
WL: Yes. Well, a lot of it was developed at MACV headquarters to start with. Military Assistance Command headquarters had a joint intelligence operation with the South Vietnamese Army and they worked together. I can’t recall the name of that. It’ll probably come back to me. But they had a rather large organization that collected, analyzed, interpreted and kept records on order of battle going way back to the beginning of our involvement in Vietnam. So they published regularly data on order of battle and kept up with it. Then our job was to keep feeding information to them when we discovered that we were in contact or with an enemy unit and could identify it. Of course that information went into our daily reporting and it was all collated with other information that this military intelligence unit of MACV put together. They kept the order of battle records for the entire theater.

LC: Was that CDEC?

WL: Excuse me?

LC: Was that CDEC that you’re thinking about, the Combined Documents Exploitation Center?

WL: That was a Combined Documents Exploitation Center but that’s not the organization I’m referring to. This one I’m talking about used information developed by CDEC and by other intelligence collecting and interpretation organizations and put it all together. Documents were an important part of it but it was only one part.

LC: Only one part, okay.

WL: Other major source of order of battle information was airborne radio direction finding. ARDF, they called it. This was used to locate enemy—well, we talk about it in terms of enemy units but what we were really finding were enemy radio transmitters. Generally speaking they were located with their units. Sometimes they were offset by a few meters or so. But generally if you picked up the radio signals of an enemy unit and could identify that unit, why, you knew pretty well where the unit was. That was airborne radio direction finding. The other part of it of course was interpreting the signal and identifying from their call sign that they used or other characteristics of their radio transmissions who they were. These enemy units came up, generally speaking, on a regular schedule. Once our analysts could determine what that schedule was they could listen for them and when they came up with a particular style of
transmission and with particular call signs they could identify the unit. That was another
important part of order of battle information.

LC: Again that would be developed at MACV?
WL: MACV would do that. Yes. They had the Army’s what they called RRU,
radio research units. That’s what they called them but that’s what they did.

LC: That’s who’s performed this function?
WL: Perform the function. There was one of their units at Tan Son Nhut Airbase
and they flew—when I was there they were flying what the Army at that time called the
L20 airplane. It was a De Havilland Beaver, single engine, piston engine aircraft that had
a receiver. In the back end of it, I mean in the cargo department, a compartment with an
analyst there with his headphones and he’d listen; with the pilot and co-pilot flying the
airplane. When the man in the back picked up a signal they would point the aircraft
towards that signal, they had antennas on the wingtips. They would get a bearing on
where that transmission was coming from. The next [thing] was to fly as fast as they
could, which wasn’t very fast in that old airplane, to another part of the sky and take
another bearing. If they could they wanted to get three bearings and where those three
bearings intersected was the approximate location of where that transmitter was. The
other job of the man in the back was to identify who that was and they got to be very
good at that. They could say, “Well, I’m listening now to the Regiment of the VC
Division. By intersection we have determined that it is at XT472921,” or whatever. So
there we found where the headquarters of the Regiment was. They would report that to
us directly. They would report it to our headquarters, Division headquarters. I’d get it
immediately. They used a code name for who it was and I could never tell anybody
outside of General DePuy and the other generals and the G3 who we were really talking
about when we said, for example, the VC Division we called Dwight, D-w-i-g-h-t.
“Dwight is at so and so.” “Where’d you get the information?” Well, we’d say, “Well, it
was a special agent report.” That’s what we had to call that.

LC: That was the cover for this?
WL: It was a cover for airborne radio direction flying in the air and the
intelligence that was derived from it. They called it a SAR, special agent report. Most
intelligence and experienced officers knew what you were talking about. But it was
classified so we couldn’t’ tell everybody. Only people that really needed to know what you were talking about. In any case, that was another important source of order of battle information. The other source of course was prisoners of war. The unit would capture one or two and they’d be interrogated by our IPW section. They usually would divulge who they were and where they—we knew where we picked them up, obviously. To identify what unit they were from why, again, that was another part of the puzzle we were working with. The other thing was that General DePuy was awfully interested in order of battle. I’ll tell you some more incidents later. But one of the things that he expected me to do on a battlefield was go and pick through the bodies of the killed and find any letters or notes that they might have on their bodies that would identify them. I kept a little notebook in my pocket in which I had recorded the known what we called letter box numbers. Each of the Vietnamese units, the Viet Cong and NVA units had a letter box number like our zip code more or less. Once you picked up one of those and knew who you were fighting at the time you could correlate that letter box number with that particular unit. So, that’s how we identified almost all of the units that we were in contact with because I or somebody else in the action would pick through the bodies and find a letter, a little note that identified that unit. Some of them were kind of bloody but usually were decipherable and you could tell who we were fighting.

LC: So you’re immediate interest was in getting order of battle information from, if you could, from a letter or something that they might be carrying?

WL: Yes. Usually we knew anyway. We had a pretty good idea who we were fighting. But that would confirm without doubt that we knew. For example, we knew the was in the area. We had been in contact with them before in that particular area and our airborne radio direction finding had identified them in that area. Then when I picked through a body and found a letter where the letter box number correlated with, why, that would confirm that, yeah, you’re right, that’s who it is. Usually you could identify the battalion that you were fighting. Of course, each regiment had three battalions.

LC: What would be the ultimate fate of, say, a letter like that?

WL: Well, I’d turn it in to the Document Exploitation folks and they would— usually these letters had nothing of interest in them except the identification. They were
a letter from home or a letter from the wife or the mother or something. So they had no particular intelligence value except for the letter box number.

LC: Would you just, you know, collect them over a certain amount of time and send them to MACV?

WL: It didn’t happen awfully frequently. I imagine over the year I was there I probably had six or seven of them. I just turned them in because I didn’t get to all the battlefields in time to pick up letters.

LC: So someone else would have done that already?

WL: This intelligence detachment, the MI detachment, they didn’t at all stay at the headquarters. I had them assigned out to the brigades, particularly the counter intelligence and the IPW. Those two sections were all—except I kept a few at division headquarters and a couple at Division Forward. But the rest were assigned out to the three brigades. Let’s see. The Brigade was up at Phuoc Vinh. The Brigade was at Lai Khe. The Brigade was at division headquarters area, wherever that was. It was at Di An most of the time. I had a small detachment at Phu Loi where our division artillery was, division artillery headquarters. Then of course as I mentioned before the ASTA platoon was with the division aviation battalion and that’s where the photo interpretation folks were. The order of battle and one imagery interpretation section, part of that was at division headquarters. So they were kind of scattered around.

LC: Bill, let me go back if I can and just ask an additional question about radio direction finding. This is an interesting area and you’ve explained how the surveillance planes effectively would operate. Was there enough radio traffic on the Communist side that was regular enough or identifiable enough to actually merit the investment that was made in this area of intelligence gathering?

WL: Oh certainly!

LC: Was there?

WL: Oh, it was, in my opinion—and this opinion was reinforced on my second tour in Vietnam. That was the single most important source of information on enemy order of battle and where they were. Yeah. It was vital. The reason being that when you collected documents or picked up prisoners and got to the interrogation of them and then tried to interpret what you had, that information was stale by the time it was passed on to
the people that needed it for planning operations. It’d be two or three weeks old perhaps.
With the radio intelligence, communication intelligence, you had real time information
and you could act on it immediately. The one drawback to it was that the operators, the
G3 types, and the commanders believed that the information was so accurate and so good
that as soon as they got it they were inclined to want to put an air strike on that particular
target. I had a continuous program to try to educate them that that particular target might
be an antenna several hundred or thousand meters from where the unit actually was and
we don’t know in which direction that unit was actually located. Because the enemy,
they realized what we were doing, that we were listening. They tried to keep their
transmissions short so we couldn’t get a good fix on them. But nevertheless it was
excellent information but I tried to keep telling them that it wasn’t really targetable.
What we wanted to do was try to develop a trend, a pattern, to know which way they
were going, if they were moving. Then we tracked them. We could track them over a
period of two or three days where you’d pick them up on one day and the next day they’d
be in a different location and you knew that they moved that way and they were
continuing to move. If they were moving in one particular direction you could rather
predict where they were going to be in the next twenty-four hours, that sort of thing.

LC: Was there also any concern that if you launched, say, an artillery attack at the
time or just after they had been transmitting that they would obviously know that you had
a fix on them?
WL: Oh yeah. Sure. That was another consideration, although as I say they knew
pretty well what we were doing. They were doing the same thing to us, although it was
hard for me to convince our commanders that the Vietnamese, that the enemy, was that
sophisticated. But we did uncover some of their communications intelligence units and
we knew that they were listening. But generally speaking theirs was entirely a tactical
effort. They were listening to our voice radio primarily. In fact that’s about all we used
anyway.

LC: Open voice.
WL: They were listening to our transmissions between our division headquarters
and our brigades and brigades to battalions.

LC: Was that all just open and in the clear?
WL: Yeah. Because our concept, our idea was that when we were talking on the radio we were already in contact or just about in contact and they knew it anyway. So it didn’t matter all that much. But this was not good anyway. We talked too much on the radio and we used the same call signs for the entire year. I was criticized quite frequently by MACV for not changing our call signs. We were supposed to change them about every ninety days or so. But General DePuy would never change them. He didn’t want to.

LC: Why did he want to?

WL: Oh, it was kind of a—I don’t know really. He liked the idea that he was 7-7 and I was 7-4 and the G3 was 7-6 and so on. He liked talking to Dobol, which was the Infantry. He just didn’t want to change. It was kind of a traditional thing. He believed that the enemy, even if they were listening, they couldn’t do much with that information anyway. I had to agree with him partially, which was generally true. But I still believe that we should follow what the rules were. We were just flouting the rules I should say.

LC: Did the general think essentially that the Vietnamese did not have the capacity to actually utilize the information?

WL: That was the general idea, yeah. That they could get it if they wanted it but there nothing they could do about it.

LC: You mentioned that your unit came across some of the Vietnamese communications intelligence units. Can you tell me anything about those, about those incidents or where that happened?

WL: I know exactly where it was. It was in what they called the Long Nguyen Secret Zone just north of the Iron Triangle and west of Lai Khe. A very dense rain forest area. We ran into them during our operation against—well, we operated against Ben Suc, the Ben Suc complex. I can’t remember the date of that now but it’s right close to the Saigon River.

LC: There was some kind of radio?

WL: Yeah. They were in an underground bunker. Rather deep tunnel when we finally uncovered the thing. We collected all of the information. We had collected some equipment, receivers, notebooks, a lot of documents; turned them all over to MACV. I don’t really remember now what they did with them. Of course we weren’t uncovering
state of the art equipment. But we were at least confirming that they were interested in
radio intelligence and that they had a capability to use it.

LC: Did you actually see the equipment? Do you know how old it was?
WL: No. I didn’t see it.
LC: Okay. I wondered if it was Japanese or if it was American or who knows.
WL: I didn’t see it but the chances were most likely it was Chinese.
LC: Okay. So something that probably would have been brought down the trail?
WL: Yeah. Or down the railroad into Hanoi and then trucked on down the trail
from there, yeah.

LC: Bill, the importance of the radio information is something you said that you
found confirmed on your second tour as well. Can you just highlight a little bit of what
you meant by that and then maybe we can come back to it?

WL: Yeah. First, let me again describe what it was like in the first tour. Because
I wanted to learn more about it so I went down to Tan Son Nhut, introduced myself, and
asked to go on a flight with them to see what it was like, how they did it. So they said,
“Sure.” So, they let me sit in the copilot’s seat and the pilot, a captain, real bright guy,
and the operator in the back, we took off from Tan Son Nhut. I can’t recall now what he
was looking for but we were flying over Tay Ninh, mostly over Tay Ninh Province.
What would happen was that the guy in the back would say, “I’ve got a signal.” So the
pilot would begin turning the plane from one direction or another. The man in the back
would say, “You’ve got it dead on,” or some words to that effect. The pilot had the one-
to-fifty thousand map on his lap of the area. He would look down and then he would
know just about where he was over the terrain, he’d been keeping track of that anyway.
He’d make a spot on the map. He was flying the airplane with his feet at that time
Usually if I weren’t there the copilot was doing this map stuff, but he had to do fly the
airplane and mark the map at the same time. It was pretty clever. He’d get this bearing,
he had a straight edge, and he looked at, of course, at his compass. He knew which
direction he was flying. He’d draw a line in that direction on the map. Then he would
turn the plane and we’d fly, oh, six or seven kilometers in another direction and take
another bearing. The man in the back saying, “Fella is still up,” if the transmitter is still
working. He’d take another bearing, make another line on the map, and then fly again as
fast as they could, probably about 120 knots at the most and take another bearing. All of
this took some time. Part of the time, why, the transmitter would quit transmitting before
he had a chance to make his three intersecting lines.

LC: Was it of any utility to have fewer than the three triangulated lines?
WL: It wasn’t too good. They had what they called a circular error of probability.
That if they got three intersecting lines they could say that transmitter is within, this is an
example, within five hundred meters of where the lines intersect is where that transmitter
is. If you only had two that error of probability might be a thousand or two thousand
meters. I can’t recall precisely what it was but that was the difference. You could still
tell generally where it was but the more intersecting lines you had the better. It would
reduce the error. That was what they were doing. The fellow in the back was also not
only picking up a signal but he was listening, he was recording what was being said, and
he was also attempting to identify the unit. Then while we were up there I remember he
did identify at least two units. They might have been administrative units. The North
Vietnamese Army had different nets for different purposes. They had an administrative
net, they had a personnel net, they had an intelligence net, and they had an operations net.
So they listened to these different networks and could identify who they were talking
with or listening to. They also could tell what the schedules were. They knew what
frequency to turn on their receiver at any particular time of the day and what the
likelihood they were going to pick up a transmission from that particular frequency.
Might be eleven hundred hours every day, why, the administrative net would come on
and report something to Hanoi. That was the way it worked and I thought it was terrific.
I remember the captain rather than having me have to go back to Tan Son Nhut, why, he
landed me at—we were at Danger Forward. The forward command post was at Lai Khe
there. He landed me at the Lai Khe airstrip and we established a relationship where he
would, in fact the unit, not only this captain. But they would ask me everyday, “Who are
you interested in? Who do you want us to listen to today?” So when they did that and
they picked up something they would land at Lai Khe, come over and see me and say,
“Here’s what we picked up.” Before they’d fly back to Tan Son Nhut.

LC: So you’d get sort of hot off the press as it were?
WL: Yeah. Right.
LC: Wow. While it still had tactical or presumably some tactical value.

WL: Yeah. It was really great. They were extremely valuable. We had our own
cradio direction finding ground units too, part of the MI detachment. These I assigned to
each of the brigades. They were transmitters or rather receivers mounted on jeeps and
their mission was to sweep the terrain from the ground and try to pick up enemy
transmissions. They weren’t nearly as effective as the airborne. Of course they couldn’t
get triangulation. They could get direction but since there was only one of them they
couldn’t get triangulation. Now, when I went back to Vietnam the next time—oh, I
should mention this too before we go on to that. The Army RRU wasn’t the only outfit
doing this. The Air Force had high level capabilities. They were listening to Hanoi and
they were flying jet airplanes. They were picking up a lot of other intelligence that they
could pick up units coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and so on. All of this is part of
the picture. It was very much more sophisticated than what I described. Later on the
Army moved up a couple of notches and got a twin engine turbo prop aircraft. Seems to
me it was a C-19 but I can’t remember for sure. They call r being reconnaissance. This
was a much faster airplane. It had much better equipment. They didn’t have to point the
aircraft to get the signal. They had antennas on the aircraft and they could just turn the
antennas rather than turn the airplane around to get a signal. They had more room in the
back for better equipment and two or three operators, so they improved over time.

LC: You mentioned Bill that these signal reception grabs were also being
recorded?

WL: Yes. Yeah. They put them on tape and then they’d analyze them when they
got back to their unit if they looked like they were useful. Now when I went back in ’72
and when we started DAO (Defense Attaché Office) in ’73, the Air Force was still flying
their missions over the North. But then with the ceasefire they had to back off and they
weren’t allowed to fly over Vietnam. They couldn’t fly over Laos because of the laws
and so on. So their take, their intelligence take, was diminished somewhat. We had
some other installations in the highlands on the ground we turned over to the South
Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese had their own radio research unit under General
Nhon, N-h-o-n. They called it the J7 and General Nhon was a very smart on intelligence
and dedicated officer. He was a brigadier general and he ran this unit for the South
Vietnamese. They were equipped with C-47 airplanes. Are you familiar with that? The old Douglas DC-3?

LC: Sure.

WL: That was their most sophisticated aircraft that they had. I talked to General Nhon, but he came to me I believe, first. He said, “Our equipment is in bad shape, we need more parts,” and so on. Of course our budget had been slashed. This was an Air Force, US Air Force supported organization. I guess all of the aircraft in the South Vietnamese structure were operated by the South Vietnamese Air Force, not the Army, including the helicopters. In any case the budget having been slashed so severely, they couldn’t get parts for their aircraft, particularly the intelligence parts. So, General Nhon invited me to go aboard one of the flights that they had to pick up information, and this was probably in ’74. It was probably in early ’74, can’t recall for sure. So I went down to his headquarters there at Tan Son Nhut and I got aboard a C-47. It had stations inside the airplane. There were about, probably about eight operators situated in little cubicles in the aircraft who were there to pick up transmissions. Of course they had a pilot and a copilot and a flight engineer. We took off. DC-3s, the military version of a C-47, is an extremely noisy airplane. They don’t have the insulation that a civilian model would have. Besides that they took the door off the side, off the left side, of the airplane because their navigation system wasn’t working. They couldn’t tell where they were. I believe they had an inertial navigation system that was supposed to be on their plane to tell where they were with regards to the terrain. But that was broken and they couldn’t afford to get it fixed. So they had an enlisted man who had a lanyard tied around his ankle, to stanchion inside the airplane so he wouldn’t fall out. He was leaning [lying, looking down through the] open door at the ground. He had a headset and a microphone on and he was to tell the pilot exactly where they were with regard to the terrain. Again, one-to-fifty thousand map beside him.

LC: That’s a little scary.

WL: Yeah. Of course the wind’s blowing through there and it was noisy and terrible. But that was the way they were telling where they were when the operators picked up the signal. He would shout into his microphone the coordinates of where they were at the time they picked up the signals and then they tried to do their triangulation...
that way. Oh boy, this is pretty miserable. They had to fly fairly low. They were probably around a thousand, maybe two thousand, feet above the terrain which was not really safe because by this time the North Vietnamese had moved down some anti-aircraft. In fact if they wanted to they could hit them with a fifty-caliber machine gun at that altitude so that wasn’t really good either.

LC: Not ideal.
WL: No!
LC: But this probably made the point for you that he was trying to make.
WL: To compound [it, what] made it more a morale buster was the fact that the US Army had just deactivated an RR (radio/relay) unit in Thailand. They had some—I can’t remember the exact number, but I think there was about twenty of these good—again, I’m guessing now but I think it was a C-19. It was like a twin engine Beech with turbo prop engines. They had them at an airfield in Thailand and they were available for transfer under the military assistance program. So I asked for them and the response from the Air Force was that, “They’re not in your budget. You have to pay \to get them and we don’t have the money in the Vietnamese Air Force budget to pay for them.” So I went to the ambassador, Ambassador Martin. I told him what the situation was. Of course I had to get permission from General Smith to do this but he didn’t care, it was okay with him. I drafted a letter for the ambassador to send to the State Department. I outlined the situation and how miserable the situation was as far as the Vietnamese Air Force was with this particular mission and asked for these airplanes. The response was, “We can’t do anything about it. The Congress has already cut your budget down to the bone and we can’t intervene,” or words to that effect. “There’s nothing we can do.” These airplanes were then transferred to the Republic of Korea. We thought naturally that this was a pretty sorry way to do business. Korea, although they may have needed these aircraft, they were not at war and we were. We should have had them but we didn’t get them. Then with the Air Force, the US Air Force mission with their particular collectors over the North being restricted and they cut back the number of flights also about that time. So we became pretty vulnerable to North Vietnamese Army movements and not knowing where they were. We would lose a division or regiment from time to time and not have a clue as to where they had moved to because of our reduced resources.
That particular resource, as I pointed out, was our single most important source. We weren’t getting prisoners of war from North Vietnamese divisions in Laos or in North Vietnam, obviously.

LC: Were there Navy flights that you knew about?

WL: No. I don’t think the Navy had any at all. It was an Air Force mission.

LC: Wow. Let me go back, Bill, and ask you more about 1966.

WL: Well, and another element that I didn’t mention that I had responsibility for was a weather detachment. They were part of the MI operation, military intelligence. They had two officers and eighteen men. They were out at the brigades. They were reporting on weather—and what else did I have there? Oh, I should mention the ASTA platoon. I didn’t mention that. Oh, I mentioned it but what it was—these were OV-1 airplanes. That airplane was a twin engine turbo prop, a very hot airplane. It even had ejection seats and—did I mention these before?

LC: No.

WL: There were three versions of this particular aircraft. One was what might have been called a slick. It had cameras, regular cameras, on it. Nothing was hanging on the airplane. The cameras were internal. The second was the side looking airborne radar. This had a large antenna attached to, I think, under the right wing of the aircraft. It was really designed to pick up tanks in a European theater of operations, movement of tanks. It was a radar that would pick up movement on the ground. We all were agreed that it wasn’t of great use in Vietnam because there were not large columns of tanks moving anywhere in Vietnam. The third one was the infrared, the IR, forward looking infrared, and that would pick up hot spots on the terrain. Primarily what it would pick up was shell craters that filled with water and would retain their heat at night. So they would pick up as bright spots on the film. Of course this was of no interest at all. It could be confused and was often confused by analysts with, “Well, maybe the VC are there cooking rice.” I put very low value on anything that the FLIR picked up because you could not distinguish between just an ordinary event. The VC didn’t cook rice above ground anyway. They were smart enough to usually cook it underground. But that’s the organization and they were—let’s see, there were five officers and twenty-four enlisted men, I think. Four of them were pilots and then there were technical operators. They had
a van with really sophisticated equipment. It was a very good unit, excellent people, but
of not great value to us in the Division. I never told them that but I knew that they
would rarely pick up anything of real interest that we could use.

LC: Would this material then have gone, these photographic images or radar
images, gone to the image interpretation group?

WL: Yes, yes. It was their job to look at the imagery and interpret it for us and
tell us what it meant. As I say most of the time it didn’t mean anything.

LC: So then, for example, the regular cameras, with that technology, you couldn’t
pick up anything at night?

WL: No. In the daytime you picked up an awful lot of jungle but you couldn’t
pick up things, people, rarely. As I say, these systems were not designed for jungle
warfare against small units that, you know, not the big trains of artillery and trucks and
things like that. They were good for Europe. Except in Europe they wouldn’t have
survived very long because they were kind of vulnerable to ground fire. I flew in one—
again I wanted to have an orientation flight so I went down there. The battalion
commander, Hal Kebaugh, he was happy to let me fly in one of his—we went in one of
the, I think it was a SLAR bird that I flew in.

LC: That’s the side looking airborne radar?

WL: Yeah, the side looking airborne radar. We flew over to, I wanted to go over
to Bo Tuc, which is a road junction in northern Tay Ninh Province where I knew there
was a lot of enemy activity. I just wanted to take a good look at it. We went down low
and we were probably about seven hundred feet and fooled around there. I noticed quite
a bit of activity. We came back and landed at—I forget what the base was now. But I
think we were in Tay Ninh at the Tay Ninh Airbase, Airfield. Later on I got a call from
Hal Kebaugh. He said, “Hey, I don’t want you flying in any of my OV-1s anymore over
any territory. We got a big hole in the SLAR. It’s going to cost a lot to get it fixed.”
They had taken a shot at it. We didn’t even know it and it hit the SLAR. I don’t know
what kind of a round. Maybe an AK-47 or something that hit it and caused some
damage. So he grounded me from any future flights in the OV-1s.

LC: At what altitude were you flying?

WL: About seven hundred feet. Just real low over the terrain.
LC: But going fast, right?
WL: Well yeah, going fast. This thing will go probably about 250 knots. I don’t know how fast we were flying then but it was just a lucky shot.
LC: You seem to be the source of the bad luck I guess.
WL: That’s right.
LC: Bill, in addition—these are all really extremely interesting pieces of the intelligence picture. I wonder if there were any other elements that you can tell us about. For example, were you getting any information from acoustic devices that might have been seated along certain paths or did that come later?
WL: That came later and as far as I know that was only done in Laos and on the northern, around the DMZ. There was another incident that took place that I think you’d be interested in in counterintelligence field. In fact, to skip ahead a little bit, when I came home out of the Division I was invited—no, this was a different event. They invited me to the Army Intelligence School at Fort Holabird to give a talk about intelligence in the division level. But this was something different. When I left the counterintelligence section of the MI detachment gave me a plaque. They had it made in Saigon somewhere. It was a big board and it says, “To Lt. Col. William LeGro, AC of S G2.” Then it says, “The man who revolutionized the role of counterintelligence support of the combat infantrymen and taught Holabird what intelligence is all about. Without whose effort the little feller in the fox hole would have been blind.” There’s an awful lot of hyperbole in that one. But let me tell you the source of it, what happened. When I got there I got a briefing from the, this was very early on. I got a briefing from the commander of the MI Detachment, very nice and bright guy. He told me what his section was and what they did. I said, “Well, about this counterintelligence section, what do they do?” “Well, they inspect the safes and be sure that all classified documents are under control and signed for. The logs where classified documents are kept correctly and they don’t lose anything.” “Well, do they have any positive collection capability or mission?” He said, “Well, they’re not supposed to do that. We’re not supposed to do that at the division level. We don’t go out and in other words, recruit agents and try to penetrate enemy units. That’s not our job.” I said, “All right, interesting. But I’d like you to look into that and see if maybe there was something you could do.” He didn’t like the idea at all.
and he didn’t do anything about it. So I visited the little CI unit I had at Phu Loi. That was north of Di An. As I mentioned before this detachment was also co-located with our division headquarters, our division artillery headquarters, and also our aviation battalion was there. So I went up to see them and I asked them what they were doing. They said, “We’re not doing much of anything, not much to do around here.” I said, “Well, why don’t you try to go out in the field a little bit and see what you can find out about the Phu Loi battalion?” I mentioned Phu Loi before. Now, at Phu Loi, the area was just north of the area I was talking about, and their battalion—that was a main force VC battalion. It was a good battalion. It was experienced. It had a long history. What happened later on, the [counterintelligence] detachment commander came to see me and he told me that he had made contact with the executive officer of Phu Loi battalion. I thought, “Well, that’s pretty interesting.” I said, “What’s the context of it?” He says, “We haven’t developed it yet but I’ll let you know.” He came back a week or so later and he said that the executive officer wants to defect and bring some of the troops with him. “They’re tired of fighting.” I said, “Well keep working on it.” or words to that effect. The next thing that happened, the division had an officer commanding the security around that headquarters. He was a very energetic, very brave, and a man with a lot of initiative. His name was Bobby Schweitzer. Later became a lieutenant general. Bobby Schweitzer was a major then and somehow he got wind of something was going on. He had authority over all of the security around that headquarters base. He didn’t real have the authority to delve into this particular operation but he did anyway. Well, the CI chief came to see me and said that Major Schweitzer was interfering and, “He’s interrogated us and he’s found out what we’re doing. We’re afraid that the information it’ll get out and the operation will be blown.” In fact that’s what happened. It got out of the—people who didn’t need to know found out and I don’t know who blew it. But I suspected that if Schweitzer hadn’t got involved in it it might have worked. I don’t know. Maybe it was all smoke and mirrors anyway but I think it had potential. In any case that’s the reason why the CI detachment thought I was great because I’d given them something to do besides checking the safes and combinations and stuff like that. Anyway, that was that one.

LC: Did you learn anymore about how contact had been made with this fellow or where he was from or anything like that?
WL: I don’t remember now that he also probably did it, but I think that was real.
I really think it had potential.

LC: Were there any other instances of defections of officers that you remember?
WL: Well, I wouldn’t call them defections but we did capture people from time to
time. I remember this must have been in the middle of the year. We had a contact in Tay
Ninh province with the NVA regiment. They had come down the trail and they were
assigned to the VC division and we had a major contact with them in Tay Ninh. In that
event we captured a company commander from 101 with several of his men—ambushed
them. I believe it was Jack Whittid’s battalion that did that and they brought him in to
me—well, to our IPW team—interrogated him and this man, he was a lieutenant. He was
a senior lieutenant and company commander. He was very upset with the leadership of
the VC Division and everybody else concerned because he felt that they led him in to a
trap. That they should have known that the American battalion was waiting for them
there and they marched happily down the trail and got smashed, captured. So I organized
a scout platoon made up of NVA and VC soldiers and I had it operating out of division
headquarters. Had about, probably about twenty men in it. Assigned it over to a brigade
that was in contact and they could use them to help them identify problem areas. If we’re
going to move somewhere these fellows had been there before. The North Vietnamese
and VC knew the terrain, they knew the enemy locations, and so on and they could help
them avoid disasters by being along with them. That worked out pretty well. It was all
offline. It wasn’t, probably wasn’t legal, but we did it anyway.

LC: How would you have cobbled together those guys? These would have been
captured guys or Chieu Hoi or—?

WL: Most of them were captured. Chieu Hoi, they had to be turned over to the
South Vietnamese.

LC: Yeah. They had an entirely separate fate.

WL: Separate. These people we picked up on the battlefield and they were
disenchanted with their life.

LC: How, Bill, could you be sure that they were playing straight with you about
their disenchantment? I mean what tests could you make?
WL: I guess you can never be sure. They had to be watched. You didn’t give
them a pass and let them go into Saigon or anything like that. You kept them under
control, under guard.

LC: So they would be traveling as a platoon but with—?
WL: With Americans along, and they weren’t armed.
LC: Okay. You made sure they didn’t have any weapons. Would you have a
special group of American personnel essentially escorting them or guarding them?
WL: Yeah. As I remember now, I turned them over to the Squadron of the Cav.
What we called the Quarterhorse. Because I had a special relation with the because I
was also charged by General DePuy to give missions to the long range reconnaissance
patrols and they belonged to the of the. So since they were reconnaissance and they
were probably among the sharpest soldiers in the division and they had an excellent
commander, I could trust them with that mission.

LC: Who was the commander of the at that point?
WL: Commander, let’s see. I can’t—
LC: That’s okay.
WL: I just saw him about a year ago. But my memory fails me—
LC: Actually, your memory is great Bill. I’m sorry I keep doing that to you. The
LRRPs (long-range reconnaissance patrols) themselves—
WL: Now, the LRRPs as they say belong to the of the. It was again an offline
unit. It was not authorized by a table of organization and equipment, the TO&E. It
wasn’t a TO&E unit but the men came from the—wait a minute. Let’s see. They had
three ground troops in the/: A, B, and C Troop. They had armored personnel carriers.
Then they had D Troop, which was D Troop Air. D Troop Air had seven slicks, oh wait,
Huey, HU-1, aircraft. They had four gun ships in the D Troop Air,/. That was an
authorized unit. Then they had an airborne rifle platoon which was supposed to fly in
those seven slicks and I guess that was essentially the makeup of D Troop. We organized
the long-range reconnaissance patrol, General DePuy authorized this, in D troop. These
were all volunteers and many of them came from the rifle battalions of the division.
Most of them, if not all, were Ranger qualified soldiers and they—I don’t know. There
must have been about—I’m trying to think of how many soldiers in there, probably about
twenty or thirty assigned to the long-range reconnaissance patrol. They operated in five man teams. Their commander, interestingly enough, was a chemical corps officer. He was a young captain. One of the brightest guys I’ve known in the Army, always full of ideas. Chemical corps, of course, is one of the combat arms but it’s so small that you never think of it as that. Any case, he was a Ranger qualified airborne soldier. He went on some of the missions himself and he trained these folks. They operated generally in two teams. Team number one would be in one slick. That was the command and control. Let me see, team one in one slick and team two in the other slick. I guess they put two men in one and three men in the other. They didn’t want everybody vulnerable in the same aircraft. They operated in five man teams, in other words. They would land and immediately leave the landing zone, hide out for a while, and then they’d go off on their mission. I gave them their missions. They were overseen by a couple of gunships. In case it got in trouble right away they could be extracted by the slicks that brought them in. If they got in real trouble sometimes the airborne rifle platoon would move in and try to rescue them. They were really top notch folks and I assigned missions for them. Some of them worked out fine, some of them didn’t. I went on one mission with them just to see what it was like and it was pretty scary.

LC: Can you tell me about that mission Bill?
WL: Well, yeah. That mission, it was a small mission. It wasn’t really very important. They wouldn’t trust me on something that was going to get them in big trouble because I wasn’t trained to do that. Besides that I was pretty old to be messing around like that. It was at the end of our battle on Minh Thanh Road, which I’ll describe much later. But I had put in a B-52 strike at a place called Sroc Con Trang up in the area of they call The Fishhook of Tay Ninh Province right on the border with Binh Long Province and Cambodia. Put in a strike actually trying to hit the VC Division headquarters which we were pretty sure was up in that area. It was a pretty heavy strike. I went in with a LRRP to do what they call bomb damage assessment. To try to find out if we hit anything important. So we landed in that area among the craters, tremendous craters. These five hundred pounders they drop out of the B-52s put in these immense deep craters. It’s pretty hard to move around in there.

LC: How soon after the strike would you have gone in?
WL: Oh, this was probably, maybe four or five hours. I don’t know. By the time we got organized and got up there we flew out of—we were at Quan Loi then. We operated out of Quan Loi against the Minh Thanh Road. That was near An Loc. We flew up and landed in one of the craters or next to one of the craters. It was hard to land there because of all of the debris. The trees broken down and there were very few areas where you could sit a helicopter. We milled around there on the ground there looking for signs of bunkers, casualties, any signs of which had been life before. Didn’t find any. We were only there about maybe thirty minutes at the most walking around and the team chief said, “We’re not going to find anything here.” Besides that it was really kind of spooky. They didn’t like it. I had to defer to their judgment of what was a prudent thing to do at the time. They had done this before and I guess they had kind of a sixth sense of whether things were going to get real nasty if they stayed much longer, so I agreed. If they wanted to leave I’d go with them. So we called in the pick up and got out of there.

LC: Did you know what the vibe they were getting was based on? Was it because you didn’t find anything?

WL: Well, I guess so. That and the fact that they had been in this particular area before and got in real serious trouble and they didn’t want to stay there anymore. I’d put a MIKE (Phonetic M) force into an area not very far from there, I think it was Bo Tuc. As soon as they got on the ground they got in serious trouble with a couple of battalions. They were really annoyed with me later. The commander came and asked me why I put them in that area. I said, “Well, because I knew the enemy was there. That’s what I told you in the first place.” They didn’t want to take many more missions from me because I usually put them in where they were going to find some action. I thought that was really the point in the whole exercise but—

LC: Well, I mean, wasn’t it? I mean the strategy—

WL: Except that I could see their point too. Maybe I should tell them to, you know, about two or three kilometers away and walk into it. But I didn’t have that precise of information anyway. I didn’t know exactly. I just know when I put them in I knew they were going to find something there eventually. I didn’t know how immediate it was going to be. They went in there with that knowledge.
LC: I mean the basic strategy at this point was search and destroy, wasn’t it? I mean—

WL: That was what we were doing. We wanted to make contact with main units and we wanted to find them before they found us. I had another bad experience with the LRRPs by Minh Thanh. This was after our battle on Minh Thanh Road where we lost one member. Sergeant Nunez was killed there. I put him in there near Minh Thanh and within minutes after they landed they were surrounded by elements of probably a VC company or NVA company and had to fight their way out. They had to leave Sergeant Nunez’s body behind. But four of them got out, and we went back later and got Nunez’s body. We got it the next day. Went in there with a rifle company and pulled it out. But by that time the VC were gone. But they did establish exactly where I thought they were going to find the VC unit. I just thought that they would be able to develop the situation without getting in serious trouble and we could have exploited the information with a larger unit. Nunez, did I tell you about him before?

LC: No, I don’t think so.

WL: Well, after that happened General DePuy got a letter from Sergeant Nunez’s widow. In her letter she [said] that she had two little boys. I think they were four or five years old. She said that Sergeant Nunez was so proud to be in the Division and beyond that to be in the long-range reconnaissance patrol. She was very proud of him and so was the whole family. This letter was pretty moving to General DePuy. Well, to all of us. It wasn’t a complaint. It was just saying that she was grateful for having been married to him and he was such a great guy. Well, DePuy at that point he said, “We’re going to establish a scholarship fund for Division soldiers who get killed and whose sons should go to college,” or something like that. A scholarship fund for children made half-orphaned by their father’s death in the Division. So we did that and we called it the Nunez Fund. That was the beginning of it. It developed into a very large enterprise. It was able to get matching funds from the McCormick Foundation in Chicago. When it started, as I say, it was for only the sons. I told DePuy at the time, “Why are you limiting it to sons? What’s a matter with the daughters?” He said, “No, we’re just going to make it to sons.” The kind of the attitude in the Division [we didn’t want females] within fifty
miles of us if we could help it. But it did change later on and now it’s for all of them.

It’s still going on.

LC: It continues.

WL: Yeah. At night, sometimes frequently in the general’s mess we played liar’s dice. It was our favorite game. If you won all of your winnings went to the Nunez Fund. Of course if you lost all your losses went to the winner who gave all the money to the Nunez Fund. It was just a funny game. You could lose but you couldn’t win except the Nunez Fund was the winner.

LC: What is liar’s dice, Bill?

WL: Boy, it’s been so long since I’ve played. What you did, you shook the dice and kept it under a cup and you could see what you had but you couldn’t see what anybody else had and you’d bet on what you had. You might have something, you know, pretty stupid like fives or something. But you’d bluff.

LC: You’d fake them out.

WL: Yeah. You bluff about what you had and put money on the table.

LC: So, like poker.

WL: Yeah. It was just entirely bluff and most of us played. The person who wouldn’t play ever was Al Haig. He was too busy at night and so he didn’t play.

LC: What was he busy doing?

WL: Well, he was a G3 for a while and so I can tell you more about him later.

LC: Okay. Sure. I’ll ask you about him. He’s an interesting guy.

WL: While I was a G2 I worked with four different G3s. They didn’t stay very long. That was an assignment to put on your record to be the G3 of the Division and once you got that on your record, well, you were going places. So that’s really what it was used for.

LC: A resume builder?

WL: Yeah. Right. When I came into the division George Freeman was the G3 that was inherited and DePuy wanted his own man in there. George was a good officer. One thing against him, according to DePuy, was that George didn’t like to fly in helicopters. Well, this was kind of a drawback. In Vietnam the only way to get around was in helicopters. But George liked to stay in headquarters and do the G3 thing from
there. That’s according to DePuy. I don’t know. I don’t mean to criticize George at all for that. He was a good officer. He was followed by Sam Walker. Sam Walker was a very good officer too. He came out of the or, I don’t remember which brigade. But he was an assistant or he was the S3 of a brigade. I believe that’s what his job was, and briefly a battalion commander I believe. Then DePuy brought him in to be the G3. Sam was the son of a general. There was a Walker killed in—I believe he was killed in Korea as a general officer. I can’t remember now for sure, believe that was it. In fact a tank was named after him. I believe the Walker Bulldog tank was named after this particular general. But anyway Sam was G3 for about three months. He later became a four star general. Then he was followed by, I think he was followed by Haig. Haig, of course, went on to greater things. Then Haig was followed by Paul Gorman who later became CINCSOUTH (Commander-in-Chief, United States Southern Command) and a four star general. He was a very fine G3, Paul was. So, there were four of them that I had deal with during my tour as a G2.

LC: That’s a lot of chopping and changing. Actually, I will ask you about them. If you don’t mind I’ll delay that just slightly because I want to ask a little bit more about the LRRPs. Bill, you said that you were the one who essentially assigned them the missions that they would go on. Would you be designing these missions or would it be handed to you and then you had to assign it on?

WL: No, it would originate with me. I would tell them where I wanted it to go. They would figure out their routes and the composition of the unit and so on. There were traditionally five people. But I would develop my ideas based upon what I thought were areas that we ought to look at and be involved in. You know where the division should go next and try to develop where they were.

LC: Can you describe the ways in which the LRRPs had a particular role to play in the information gathering scheme that you’ve been outlining? We’ve got, you know, the high-tech end and so on covered very well but of course this is ground intelligence. This is actually on the ground guys moving forward trying to, essentially I suppose, locate concentrations of forces. Is that what they were trying to do?

WL: Yes. That was their mission. I wouldn’t go out blindly and pick an area out in the middle of the jungle and say, “Go in here and see if they’re there.” It would be
based upon other intelligence. I would find, why, we’d get some information that a
particular base area was here or there and I’d discuss this with the LRRP commander.
“Here’s the situation. We have information to this effect that the VC unit—” Now,
usually I’d have a designation, the Regiment or something or, “The Phu Loi battalion as
we understand it has been moved from here to there. I’d like you to check out this trail
and see if you can find whether or not they moved on that recently, if that trail has been
used. See if we can locate them.” That was the idea. Most of the time they’d come up
empty. There wouldn’t be anything but occasionally they’d find some very good timely
information.

LC: How would that be communicated back to you? After their extraction?
WL: Yeah. After they extracted. They couldn’t communicate while they’re on
the ground.

LC: Right. No radios, no nothing.
WL: Well, they had a radio, yeah. But they couldn’t transmit it except in
extremes. If they were just about—if they need an extraction of course they have to call
in and say, “Get us out of here.” But they wouldn’t transmit their intelligence
information on the radio. They’d have to get back and they kept me informed. That is,
the LRRP headquarters would keep me informed. Part of the time I’d be over to their
headquarters while they were out listening to their transmissions too.

LC: How many teams did you have at your disposal then?
WL: How many teams?
LC: Um-hm.
WL: In the LRRPs?
LC: Yeah.

WL: Well, there were probably about four. That would’ve been about twenty
men. We wouldn’t have more than one out at a time. We wouldn’t use them—we’d only
put out one at a time because you didn’t want to be stuck with two of them you had to
extract at the same time. We weren’t that big.

LC: They have a reputation, as you know, of being kind of, you know, guys who
walked on the wild side and were kind of outside the mainstream. Was that right? Was
that accurate?
WL: Right. Most of them were run by special ops, the SOG, Special Operations Group. What am I searching for? Special Forces. The Special Forces in Vietnam, the Special Forces, ran almost all of the LRRPs. Divisions, like ours, we had a very small capability. But the Special Forces ran them all the time and they ran them real deep, very deep. We just stayed in our division area. It was quite a bit of difference between the two capabilities.

LC: Okay. Your guys would be staying, for example, would be staying inside South Vietnam?

WL: Oh sure. Yeah.

LC: Let’s take a break there for a minute.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 9 of 22
October 11, 2005

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University and I’m continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the eleventh of October 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Bill is speaking by phone from Virginia. Bill we were going to talk about some of the operational matters with which you were concerned in 1966 with the Division.

WL: As I believe I said at the first operation I went on with the Division was the one down at Phuoc Tuy Province, south of Xuan Loc, and we had a very bad experience there. This is Operation Abilene. General DePuy told me that he didn’t want to go there anyway but that it was a MACV directed operation. He had just assumed command of the division. I believe he hadn’t quite been promoted to major general yet. He was still a brigadier. We were in the Courtenay Plantation with our headquarters and one of the companies—I gave you the designation before but I don’t have it in my notes right now. One of the companies in one battalion was walking through the jungle along an apparently very small track and were ambushed by a Viet Cong battalion. They lost, as I remember now, more than thirty killed in action and a large number wounded. The problem that General DePuy saw in that operation was that there were three companies, three rifle companies, in that battalion that were proceeding through the jungle separated by a thousand meters or so from each other. They were not anywhere near in mutual supporting distance of each other. The artillery, which was necessary to support them, was probably within range but could not find out where they were. The canopy was a triple canopy jungle and it was impossible to see from the air where anybody was. When they popped smoke to identify their positions, too often that smoke would just dissipate under the canopy and you might or might not see it from the air. If you did it didn’t precisely mark where the forward elements of the unit were anyway. So this was a bad situation and General DePuy directed immediately after that that’s not the way he wanted the battalions to move through dense jungle. The companies would have to be within supporting distance of each other. Most of the time I believe they moved in column.
LC: In columns.

WL: Yeah. Rather than companies on line like the way they were moving in that particular operation. That was the main tactical change that he made. Then he developed what they called the cloverleaf and I can’t say that he was the author of that tactic but they adopted it anyway. I believe he was. They would halt every once in a while, I don’t know how often, it depended upon the situation, obviously. They would send out a platoon to make a loop around—oh I don’t know how far they went out, maybe two or three hundred meters and then come back in to the main column on both flanks and forward. So you had what appeared, if you did it schematically, was a clover. A cloverleaf with three circles in the three directions: one on the left, one on the right, and one forward. Then they would come back. That was a kind of a reconnaissance that he required them to make as they were moving through the jungle. So to try to avoid getting the entire company trapped in an ambush. It was possible and quite frequent that these battalions would walk right into a Viet Cong base camp which had bunkers, machine gun positions, covered trenches, tunnels, and so on. They’d get in the middle of something like that and it was very difficult for them to even determine where the fire was coming from. The lead elements would get trapped and take significant casualties, call for help. If they were doing this cloverleaf operation the chances of getting more than a squad in that kind of a situation were not very high. Then you could develop some tactics and some maneuver to go in and extricate whatever units you had trapped in that. That was really the fall out of that particular operation.

LC: He was able to sort of bring this new tactical approach online quickly?

WL: Oh yes, very quickly. General DePuy and his assistant division commanders were with the troops everyday. They didn’t stay back in the command post and read after action reports and so on. They went to the field everyday, all three of them. General Hollingsworth, one of the ADCs (assistant division commander), the other one at that time—I don’t know. They changed quite frequently. Bernie Rogers came in. Mel Zais, Z-a-i-s, was one of them. Jack Dean. All three brigadier generals. Hollingsworth stayed there the whole time and these others rotated into that job. Bernie Rogers, of course, Bernard Rogers eventually became chief of NATO. Mel Zais went back to the Pentagon and Jack Dean also went back. He later became director intelligence of DIA (Defense
Intelligence Agency) as a lieutenant general. He made four stars too, I believe. In any
case, all of them were very good general officers and they made it a practice to visit every
battalion in that division that was possible to see everyday. One of them would be out
there and particularly if the battalion was in contact or had been recently in contact they
would visit them. I made it a practice to fly with them everyday also. I’d pick one of
them, whoever had space on his command and control helicopter, Huey, I just hop aboard
and go with them. Because then I could get out to the field too and talk to the battalion
commander and to his S2 and get a hands-on feel of what was going on and what they
were up against and so on. In many of those cases I was able to find VC casualties that
they had killed and, as I mentioned before, help them identify who they were fighting,
that sort of thing. I flew more I suppose with General Hollingsworth than anybody. I
was with General DePuy maybe once or twice a week, Hollingsworth the rest of the time.
Or again—I even have a picture of myself with General Zais and his helicopter.

LC: Who took the pictures? Do you remember?
WL: Oh, somebody in the back of the helicopter.
LC: Oh okay. Not an official person.
WL: No.
LC: Did you ever take people from MACV out on these flights? Do you
remember?
WL: Did I take what?
LC: Anybody from MACV, would they be flying up to visit with you and—?
WL: Oh no. We had visitors from MACV but very few of them went out to the
field with us. They visited us at the command post.
LC: That was about as close as they were going to get?
WL: Yeah. They probably didn’t have the facility to get out. It was hard for
them to get out from the headquarters. Another thing that was an impediment to me—not
a great one but one I had to consider all the time—was that I had a pretty high security
clearance and MACV didn’t want me out there in the field. That is, the intelligence folks
didn’t the people that gave me the clearance. They wanted me to stay in but I didn’t do
that. I went out.
LC: For somebody who wouldn’t understand why could you go ahead and explain why they wouldn’t you to?

WL: Well, because if I had been captured I had a lot of information that would have been of interest to the enemy. That was the main thing. I had a special intelligence clearance and it was higher than top secret. Well, we’re talking about compartmented intelligence. Not that it’s a higher classification but it’s a special classification. In other words I had more information about, primarily about, signal intelligence than most people did. The people with that clearance were not supposed to be in a position where they had close contact with the enemy and who could potentially be captured. I didn’t carry any documents with me, obviously. But interrogation was what they were worried about.

LC: Had you had any E&E (evasion and escape) training before you went out to Vietnam? I can’t remember now.

WL: No. No, I didn’t get any special training before I went to Vietnam. I didn’t get any language training, I didn’t get any of the—they called it charm school. I didn’t go to any of those. I went right directly from the Army staff into the Division.

LC: That’s kind of what I recalled. Did you think that it might have been a good idea I mean either in this tour or as you reflected later?

WL: I don’t know. I had enough experience in World War II in the jungles and I had studied Vietnam. I had been on the Army staff on the Vietnam problem. I had made that one reconnaissance, I call it, tour of Vietnam I mentioned before there in ’64. Visited with General DePuy actually when he was J3 and traveled around Vietnam. I got some very good briefings from General DePuy’s staff. So I wasn’t really green, as green as most of the people were. A lot of these, you know, people came from Europe and had never even been in the Far East before. They came from European assignments and they’d never been in a jungle before and I had been through that.

LC: Yes, sir. When you would fly out to battalion headquarters or, you know, camps that were moving around, did you find that that exercise was useful to you as you then went back and had to make plans for the whole division?

WL: Oh sure. It was vital for me to talk to the people that were in contact and get a sense of really what it looked like and what it smelled like and so on. You can’t get a
good appreciation of what a battle is like from simply looking at a map and looking at symbols on a map and so on. You have to talk to them.

LC: Would you have a chance, did you have a chance at any point to have walked through what was clearly either a VC base camp or base village?

WL: Oh yeah.

LC: Can you describe, if you remember, one occasion or a kind of composite of occasions when this happened?

WL: Let me think of a—there are several. Let me think about that.

LC: Sure. Absolutely. While you’re going through your mental files there, Bill, what can you tell me about General Hollingsworth as a leader and someone who certainly played an important role as the war went on?

WL: Well, Hollingsworth was a big man. Not fat by any means. Big heavy muscled fellow. About my height but probably weighed fifty pounds more than I did. He’d been a lineman on the football team. He was Texas A&M and he was a tanker. That is, he was armor branch and had worked his way up more or less through the ranks. He got his ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) commission out of Texas A&M. He was a very gruff fellow and used a lot of four letter words constantly. He had a great affinity for the private soldier. When we went out together it was almost invariably we’d walk—we’d have to land somewhere behind where the battalion was operating and then walk through the jungle with a guide, with somebody from the battalion. Usually the battalion commander would come out and meet us at the landing zone and we’d walk toward the forward areas of the battalion. He’d put his arm around soldiers. Black, white, he didn’t care who they were, give them a hug and ask them how they were doing. “Get any letters from home,” and, “How’s the food?” All things like that. He was very personable that way. He was a lot tougher with the officers. He was very particular that they dug in well. If they were in a static position, that they dug in and never quit improving their positions. Putting overhead cover on their holes, very particular about that. He was interested in whether they were having any difficulty getting rations. Did they have enough ammunition? “How are the hand grenades? You got enough of those?” You know all of these kinds of questions. If anything was seemed to be short or
not up to snuff that came up at the briefings at night. Some of them were a little bit off
the wall but—

LC: Like?

WL: I remember one incident—kind of a footnote to this. We were out to one
area one day and the battalion commander said that they had difficulty getting Dust-off.
Now, you know Dust-off was the aerial medical evacuation. From a medical battalion—
didn’t have a helicopter. I guess it was a MACV, must have been a MACV service, I’m
sure it was. But anyway they were marked with a Red Cross and they were very, very
responsive to requests for medical evacuation from casualties. They never hesitated, they
came in. But this battalion commander complained that that day he’d had a few
casualties and he called Dust-off and he couldn’t get anybody to answer the radio. Now,
I don’t know what his problem was. It might have been that he was using the wrong
frequency. But we couldn’t pin that down and Hollingsworth didn’t attempt to look into
it anymore. We got back to the command post and every night, our forward command
post. Every night around, oh, it was around 1700 or 1800, why, we’d have a nightly
briefing. I always had to brief and the G3 had to brief. After that was over
Hollingsworth stood up, he was up in the front row. This is in a tent. He stood up and he
looked around and says, “Is the doc here?” You know, the doc he was talking about the
division surgeon, Jim Dalton, Lieutenant Colonel Dalton, very good doctor. But anyway
he said, “Hey doc, I was out at,” wherever he was today, “and that battalion couldn’t
bring up the Dust-off. He had casualties. What’s a matter?” Now, the problem with that
question was he was asking the wrong person. The division surgeon has no direct
responsibility for Dust-off. That’s a responsibility that would generally have been by the
G4 to look into it but anyway he asked Jim Dalton. Now, the division surgeon had never
operated the radio, he didn’t know how to do that. So Dalton said, “I don’t know
anything about that.” He said, “Well, it’s your business to know about it.” He yelled at
somebody, “Bring me a radio.” They had the PRC-10 I think for—and they brought in
the radio and put it in the aisle between the chairs and turned it on. The general’s aide, he
knew the frequency for Dust-off. So he went over and he dialed it to the appropriate
frequency and then General Hollingsworth says, “Now doc, call Dust-off.” Colonel
Dalton went over and picked up the mic and said, “Dust-off this is—” and then he gave
his call sign. Immediately, within less than a second the answer came, “This is Dust-off. Where’s your casualty?” It was a very dramatic because it worked so perfectly, just the way it was supposed to work. That was the end of that particular complaint. There was something else wrong and whatever it was had been fixed or the battalion wasn’t doing it right. Dust-off was responsive and Dalton came out of that looking like no problem at all. Another time he’d found out that somebody said they didn’t have batteries for their radios and so he jumped on the signal officer, the division signal battalion. He says, “How come they don’t have batteries?” Again that wasn’t the signal battalion’s responsibility. That was a G4 responsibility; that’s supply. But anyway that’s the sort of thing that happened. So everybody in the staff had to be on their toes to be able to respond to some of these questions. He used to get on me once in a while but I gave it right back to him.

LC: Well, can you remember an instance like that?

WL: Oh, he’d say—as usual he’d look at the audience. He liked to play for the audience. He says, “As usual the G2 is flat of his ass and he didn’t know that some other battalion was about to come into so and so province,” and so on. You know, it was kind of a game. We were pretty close, Jim Hollingsworth and I were, and we got along fine. I was with him all the time and he respected me. He just liked to rag me and get my [case] but I would tell him what was going on. We used to have discussions, you might call them arguments, about what was going to happen next. He’d get up to the map and he’d point to this and that and he says, “What about the 272? Where are they?” I’d have to get up and I say, “Well, here’s where they are.” He says, “I don’t believe it. I think they’re over here.” We’d go through that every once in a while. DePuy would do that once in a while but not as much as Hollingsworth.

LC: Was this mode that he would be in kind of by design to make sure that everybody was on target and keeping up?

WL: I think so. Yeah, yeah. It kept people on their toes. Another thing that was a component of this. By the time we gave these briefings, they’d all had a couple of drinks. In fact, I always had to have one too.

LC: Now Bill, you’re not a drinker, right? I mean—

WL: Oh, I’m not an alcoholic.
LC: But you weren’t—some guys would be doing this probably every night and
I’m thinking you weren’t one of them.
WL: No, no. I had to watch it because I had to be on my toes.
LC: Yes, sir. But, you know, as you say there might have been a couple of drinks
down the barrel by then.
WL: Yeah. So it was kind of interesting. It got to be that everybody that was in
the vicinity of the command post wanted to come to these briefings because they were so
interesting and there was so much this kind of banter going on with the generals. These
low-level staff officers and visitors from the battalions—the battalion commanders, they
liked to come in too and watch the G2 and the G3 get ragged. It was fun.
LC: Of course you guys were also about serious business and it certainly did
matter where the 272 actually was. You know, obviously it mattered for the American
guys in the field. Did you have up there any allied forces yet? This is 1966.
WL: You mean like Koreans or Australians?
LC: Right. Aside from ARVN did you have any?
WL: No. As I remember, in that Phuoc Tuy operation there was an Italian, excuse
me, an Australian brigade down there. But I don’t recall any joint operations with them.
No, we didn’t.
LC: Okay. They didn’t have a staff officer assigned to your division?
WL: No. We didn’t have a liaison from them.
LC: Okay. What about ARVN liaison?
WL: We had one but he wasn’t there all the time. I made frequent visits myself
over to the ARVN Division. General Thuan was commanding, and over to the what was
then the Division in Xuan Loc. I would visit them as often as I could, maybe once a
month at least. General Dau at the Division. Those are the two that I had most contact
with. They were in my area.
LC: What would those trips consist of and what impressions did you form?
WL: Oh, I would just get a helicopter and I’d fly over there and go in and visit
with the G2. Very often, why, he would take me in to talk to the division commander,
kind of a courtesy call sort of thing. But most of my contact was with the G2 of those
two divisions. Just exchange information, get their ideas on what was going on.
LC: How useful were those exchanges to you?

WL: They were very useful. Mainly because they established an atmosphere of trust so that we could depend upon them to share with us what they knew. Of course we had to reciprocate. I had to be careful because I was dealing with the intelligence information that they didn’t have and I had to be careful about that because they were not cleared for all of our information.

LC: What, if you can say Bill, what were the parameters within which you could exchange information? Then kind of what were the sorts of things, if you can say, that you weren’t authorized to tell them?

WL: Well, I wasn’t authorized to give them any intelligence that came through the communications system, communications intelligence. I did but I disguised it. I was walking a fine line. I would only do it when I figured it was really important for them to know. I just wouldn’t tell them where I got it. They were smart enough to know where I got it anyway. But we had to do that. I had to do that later in my second tour too, my dealings with the J2 of the Joint General Staff.

LC: You had to basically make those decisions based on—?

WL: I made those decisions myself.

LC: Based on your sense of the tactical situation that their troops were in and—?

WL: That and how sensitive this information and whether or not it was feasible for us to have gotten this information from a different source. Visual reconnaissance or form a document or something like that.

LC: You mentioned the visual reconnaissance and it comes back to the fact that you had image interpreters under you. Then earlier this morning you mentioned that popping smoke under the triple canopy could be sort of useless or fruitless because you couldn’t actually see. How important was aerial photography to your work, I mean as a component within this whole realm of other intelligence sources that you’ve described earlier?

WL: They had almost no value at all.

LC: Really?
WL: Yeah, because the Viet Cong in our area. First Corps was very different. They had a lot of open terrain but we didn’t. We had very little open terrain and what we did have the VC didn’t go into it and allow us to take the pictures.

LC: They kind of had that figured out.

WL: Yeah. They were always under cover. Now, strategically there was probably some very good aerial photography taken in Cambodia and in Laos. But that wasn’t of any immediate importance to us. That was not in our area of interest. In other words, I don’t want to create impression there wasn’t any very good use of aerial photography but it wasn’t in our area. Later on when I went back and we used what they called the Buffalo Hunter, the drones take pictures. We had some excellent information or intelligence information out of aerial photography but that was entirely different. We were interested in looking at convoys that were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We were interested in looking at the sections of the pipeline that were coming down generally along the trace of Route 14. We were interested in the photos they took of the SAM sites that were moved in around Khe Sanh. But, you see, we’re talking about a different situation. In our area, Tay Ninh Province, Binh Duong, Binh Long, Phuoc Long, you didn’t get pictures of VC units, not in those days. You would have if you had the capability in 1974 and ’75, yeah. But not then.

LC: Did you have much of a bead on where supplies and presumably also manpower fillers were coming across the Cambodian border within your area there? Did you have a sense of where those crossing points were?

WL: I can’t recall having much information about that. We knew where there were some crossing points. One was at Lo Go in Tay Ninh Province and that became important in the operation that we launched in to Tay Ninh Province after we got out of Abilene, after we got out of the Phuoc Tuy Province operation. What happened then was that General DePuy asked me, “Where should we go next?” He said, “I didn’t like that operation in Phuoc Tuy.” Nobody did. “Where should we go?” I said, “We should go to Tay Ninh.” He said, “Okay.” But it was a little complicated because the Division, US Division, was at Cu Chi right on the edge of Tay Ninh Province. Generally speaking MACV expected the to do most of the operations in Tay Ninh. However that wasn’t really too feasible because they were really tied up in trying to pacify their own little area
there, Hau Nghia Province. So Tay Ninh was kind of an open opportunity for us. As we
started to plan an operation in Tay Ninh I went by the book. I told my intelligence
section—incidentally I never did—I told you all about the organization of the MI
detachment. But I didn’t mention that I also had my own intelligence section. You
know, they belonged to me. They were part of the division headquarters and
Headquarters Company. I don’t think I mentioned that.

LC: Well, not in the same detail as we went through the MI detachment last time.
WL: In any case, I did have an intelligence staff.
LC: You can tell us anything you can about their organization. I think you
mentioned that you had—
WL: Let me see. I have a note on precisely what I had there. Well, I’ll get back
to it. But in any case I did have a staff and—let’s see, oh, here it is. I had actually eleven
officers and sixteen enlisted men in the G2 section of Headquarters Division. There
were, let’s see, two or three majors. I had an administrative section, which included my
sergeant major, my deputy, and a couple of others, and then I had an operations section –
that was five officers. One was the operations officer. Had a target officer and three
what we called operations officers, tactical operations center officers. See, we had to
man the division operations center twenty-four hours a day. The G3 did the same thing.
We had the G2 operations officer and he had the G3 operations officer. Then I had the
G2 air section: three officers and two observers, NCOs. Then I had a plans office, two
officers. I had a major there and a captain and an NCO. Now, I told my plans officer
that I wanted him to draw up an intelligence estimate of Tay Ninh Province, northern Tay
Ninh Province. I specified northern Tay Ninh Province. I said, “I want you to follow the
field manual, the staff officer’s field manual, and do this right by the book. I want to
know the enemy situation, the topography, the climate, the ephemeras, everything and
order of battle, routes of advance, the road network, soil conditions by season, and so
on.” He did. He gave me a very excellent product. Now, I can’t say that this was of
great use to us because we’re going to go there anyway but it was a good exercise for
them. I did it more as a training tool. I wanted to be sure that these fellows knew how to
analyze things and take everything into consideration that we’re supposed to be
considering when they came up with an intelligence estimate. It was a good, good
product. We made this intelligence estimate and I signed off on it and I gave it to
General DePuy and he liked it and he thought it was great work. He said, “That’s where
we’ll go.” Now, my main interest in Tay Ninh then was from the reports from MACV.
MACV J2 said that COSVN was located in northeast Tay Ninh Province. Now,
COSVN—you probably know this already—but Central Office South Vietnam. It was
the headquarters that the North Vietnamese established to control the military operations
in Nam Bo, in southern Vietnam.

LC: The idea was that this COSVN complex was located somewhere in Tay Ninh
Province?
WL: Yes. Up in northeast Tay Ninh Province.
LC: Did they have a location?
WL: Well, they had a general location. It was difficult to pin it down. All of this
was based upon communications intercepts and they’d pick up these antennas and they
knew generally. It was up, I would say, northeast of Katum, K-a-t-u-m. That was the
general area that they said it was located. The assumption was, probably based on pretty
good intelligence, they moved quite a bit. They had permanent areas that they prepared
with bunkers, below ground facilities or facilities that were partly at least below ground,
very carefully camouflaged. It was virtually impossible to find them from the air, you
couldn’t see them. But they knew they were there because of the radios. Once in a while
you run across, later on we ran across some wire, telephone wire, cables, that went in that
direction and so on. So we knew generally where they were. The idea was if we moved
into Tay Ninh at least we would make contact with some main force units whose
responsibility it was to protect, to screen that headquarters area and keep intruders out.
So that was the idea behind the operation. I can’t recall if we had a name for it. We
must’ve though. They always did. But this would’ve been in April, perhaps, of ’66. In
any case we started off generally following the trace of the Vam Co Dong. The river that
comes down out of Cambodia and is the boundary between Cambodia and Tay Ninh
Province, beginning, oh, northwest of Tay Ninh City. It becomes the border between the
Vietnam and Cambodia. The Vam Co Dong River. Generally we followed that trace.
Now, there wasn’t a lot of contact. It was kind of a disappointment to me and to
everybody that we didn’t have any real heavy contact. We ran into screening forces
along the river. We received some artillery fire and rocket fire from the other side, from Cambodia. Our terms of engagement denied us the capability to respond to that fire. We couldn’t fire into Cambodia. That was the rule. Then General DePuy did anyway. He had them fire into Cambodia but he told the artillery, “Be careful. I want airbursts. I don’t want any craters in Cambodia. Use your time fire or VT (variable time (proximity) fuse),” whatever they wanted to use. But so long as they had the burst in the air and not on the ground so avoid making craters. So we did respond to them that way.

LC: Was that at all frustrating for you, Bill?

WL: Well, yeah. It was frustrating to everyone. We all recognized, as any intelligent person would, that this was one war, one theater. This international boundary was from a tactical point meaningless and should have been ignored. But we were still operating under the fiction, I would say, that Cambodia wasn’t involved in this and therefore we couldn’t fire into it. There were probably some valid political considerations that impelled this attitude. But they didn’t make a great deal of sense to the infantry, naturally. When you’re getting shot at you want to return the fire.

LC: Right. So the general ordered the return of fire but in a particular way?

WL: Yes. He wanted to avoid leaving evidence behind that we had fired into Cambodia. To do that he just told them to fire time fire and airbursts, which are pretty very effective anyway. You don’t have to hit the ground with the projectile to cause casualties. In fact, generally speaking, if your aim is good and you got it calculated correctly, if you fire a round to burst over the heads of the infantry you can do more damage than you can with a surface burst. Anyway, that’s what he did. We moved on up with one or I think probably we used two brigades. I think we left one brigade back in Di An. But we used two brigades up in that operation. As I say, it didn’t net us very much. It was a good exercise for the unit. We did get a few casualties out of it. Our casualties were pretty light. That’s the operation in which I lost the G2 air. I think I gave you the wrong name of the man that was killed. It wasn’t Darling. It was Capt. Dennis May. He was killed in that operation.

LC: Under what circumstances?

WL: Well, he was my G2 air. He was an Army aviator to start with and—well he was a very senior Army aviator. He was an instructor pilot, and every once in a while
he'd go to the airfield. Incidentally, I should mention that we moved the division forward. The division forward command post we located it in Tay Ninh, just west of Tay Ninh City, in an orchard. We had the command post set up there. Captain May would go over to the airfield at Tay Ninh where there was an Army aviation company with O1s. They called it the O1 bird dog. It was a light single engine, rather antique airplane. I guess it was a Cessna. It doesn’t matter. But it was a two place airplane. The pilot in the front and the observer right behind him. Most of these airplanes had dual controls. That is, you could fly it from the backseat as well as from the front seat. The ones I flew in—every once in a while I would also fly over Tay Ninh in those little airplanes. They usually took the stick out of the backseat so it wouldn’t get in your way and you could avoid interfering with what the pilot was trying to do.

LC: Right. Doing something that you shouldn’t.

WL: Right. I flew two or three times over Tay Ninh in those O1s. I didn’t like them very much because every hour or so you’d have to land and put in more oil. These are old airplanes and they weren’t in very good shape.

LC: They would just burn the oil like that?

WL: Yeah. It would just burn oil, yeah. Then the red lights would go on and the pilot would say, “Hey we got to go back.” We’d go back and land. Well, that wasn’t a real confidence builder. I changed to flying in helicopters as much as I could. But Dennis May, he made reconnaissance for me and he’d come back and his reports were always useful. You’d see a little VC activity, not that you could take a picture of, but every once in a while you’d see something. Or if you got shot at, why, you would know that there was somebody there that you were being an annoyance to. But one day Dennis was flying in the backseat of one of these O1s and he had a young warrant officer, Army aviator, brand new to the theater with not much experience. They were flying over Tay Ninh Province. Now, to give you a sense of the terrain, as I mentioned you’ve got some dense jungle but interspersed in the jungle were small clearings of grass. They were in the rainy season. That is from around June to October they were wet. Sometimes you could actually see the water but they were bogs, essentially. In the dry season where we were at that time—the rainy season hadn’t started—they were relatively dry and they were used for helicopter landing zones. That is, if we wanted to go out in the center of
Tay Ninh Province we’d usually select one of those things, one of those little patches of
grass, and land there. They varied in size. Maybe a thousand meters long would have
been one of the larger ones and maybe five or six hundred meters wide. Dennis was
flying over in this airplane and the engine quit. I mentioned they weren’t in really good
shape. He keyed his mic so that we could hear him in the command post. He reported
back to the command post that the engine had quit and they were going to go down
somewhere up in Tay Ninh. He gave his the location by map coordinates and told us
exactly where he was. But he said, “We’re going to have make a dead stick landing and
we’re going to try to land in one of these openings.” He had an ability to control the
airplane from the backseat, I believe. I think he had a stick back there. But he left his
mic open when he was talking to the pilot up front and he was telling him how to do that,
to get down the flaps or whatever. Giving him instructions on how to make this landing.
Well, in the event they didn’t quite make it. They came in a little too high and didn’t hit
the ground before they came to the other end of the opening and crashed into the trees.
They were both killed. We sent a couple of helicopters in there and got their bodies out.
But that’s how he got killed in that situation. It was pretty sad.

LC: That is sad.
WL: Yeah. He was a really good officer and an excellent pilot. I really think that
if he had been in the front seat and in control of the airplane he probably could have
brought it in. So that happened there. Another thing that was interesting—as I say, I
kind of gave up on the O1s particularly after that.

LC: I bet.
WL: I didn’t want to go up in them anymore. I had two advantages. One, the
commander of the Aviation Battalion was Lt. Col. Hal Kebaugh. I think I had been at
Command and General Staff College with him. But anyway I had known him before
somewhere and we were pretty good friends. So when I wanted a helicopter I could go to
him and get it. Sometimes I would even fly with him. This was before I had really
solidified my credentials with Hollingsworth and the rest of them so I could hitch rides
with them whenever I wanted to. But one day I went down over to the Cav Battalion
and got an H-13 helicopter. Now, the H-13 was a piston engine, two place helicopter
with a big bubble on the nose and a cantilever tail boom. It came first on scene in Korea.
So it was kind of an old aircraft but it was good enough for me. They weren’t undependable but they were a little bit shaky. In any case, I wanted to—the operation in Tay Ninh was kind of winding down. There wasn’t much going on. So I wanted to fly over by the Michelin Plantation. I was interested in what was going on on the other side of the Saigon River. The Saigon River divides Tay Ninh Province on the eastern edge from Binh Duong and Binh Long Province. I flew over the Saigon River and I noticed there was a little Special Forces camp at the plantation called Minh Thanh, M-i-n-h T-h-a-n-h. This was one of these little outposts that the Special Forces had in and around the jungle there. I landed there just to talk to these guys and see what they were up against, what they had going on in their area, and it was kind of a fortuitous situation. They said that they had a patrol out and the patrol was trapped in a bend of the river. This is kind of a, I guess they call it an oxbow. But anyway the Saigon River winds through the jungle out of Cambodia and down into past Saigon. But here it’s a rather narrow stream, probably fifty feet. Some places only about fifty feet wide and in the dense jungle sometimes you can’t even see it from the air because of the jungle overhanging it. Any case, this little patrol, about three or four of their Cambodian mercenaries and two or three sergeants from the Special Forces camp were in this little loop of the river and the VC had come in and cut off their escape. They couldn’t get across the river and they couldn’t go back because the VC had them in kind of a little box there. They were in real trouble. They showed me on the map where it was and I said, “Well, I’ll call General DePuy and see if he can give you some help.” So we tried to get him on the radio but it wouldn’t reach. So I got into the H-13 and we got some altitude and from there when I got up in the air I could call division headquarters. I asked for 7-7 and luckily he was in the command post, 7-7 was his call sign. I told him, “This is 7-4. I got a problem over here at Minh Thanh. We need some gunships and a couple of slicks to extract a patrol that’s trapped.” He said, “Right-o. We’ll be right over.” They did. They responded very quickly and brought in the guns. The Special Forces guys directed them in because they knew exactly where they were. One of our helicopters got shot down in the event but no casualties. They’d made a crash landing and got out. But destroyed the VC that were moving in to annihilate this patrol. Picked up the patrol and got them back to Minh Thanh. From there on we kind of adopted the little base camp, the little Special Forces
camp there. Hollingsworth would visit them every once in a while and ask them if what
they needed. They needed more grenades, they needed this or that, and it was kind of
fun. We made a good group of friends there in that little camp.

LC: Can you tell me anymore about that action and the extraction? Did all of the
Americans and the mercenaries get out?

WL: Oh yes. Yeah.

LC: All of them did?

WL: Picked them all up.

LC: That’s amazing.

WL: They had, as I recall, they had a couple casualties but they weren’t dead. We
got them out.

LC: The difference was the gunships I would think. The gunships were laying
down fire on the VC positions.

WL: Oh yeah. Gunships were important to keep the VC out of the area and away
from the landing zone while they came in with the slicks. The slick was an unarmed
helicopter. Actually, unarmed is not quite right. They each had door guns but they didn’t
have the guns in the—

LC: Not mounted guns.

WL: Yeah. Not mounted guns. But anyway they got them all out, which was
pretty neat.

LC: Yeah. Very neat!

WL: Yeah. It paid off later because Minh Thanh became—I got to be very much
interested in Minh Thanh and the area around there and that’ll come up later when I talk
about it. But while we were still in—let’s see, we moved from—this might not be right
in sequence chronologically—but it seems to me they moved from Tay Ninh over to Tri
Tam. Tri Tam is spelled T-r-i T-a-m and that’s the village right on the edge of the
Michelin Plantation. Michelin is an immense rubber plantation on the bank of the Saigon
River there. It stretches from the Saigon River over into the Long Nguyen Secret Zone
and almost over to Lai Khe. It’s a huge plantation. It was a very important VC base area.
They were still there, here and there, in the outer reaches of the plantation all the time. In
fact, they probably never left. The ARVN Regiment had had a terrific fight there a couple years before and were virtually decimated in the Minh Thanh plantation.

LC: The Michelin Plantation.

WL: Yeah, in the Michelin.

LC: Why, to your mind, had the VC been so successful in establishing themselves there?

WL: Well, it’s so hard to—it’s such a big area. There’s plenty of places to dig in. They had operatives in all of the little hamlets. There are a lot of little hamlets in the plantation where the rubber workers live. There might be ten or fifteen of them spread out throughout the plantation. They had agents, VC agents, in virtually every one of these villages, excellent intelligence network. They knew who was coming and going; road watchers, and so on. It was just a very well established base area. It was connected, as I say, to the Long Nguyen Secret Zone. You go out on the east side of the Michelin Plantation you run into the dense forest of the Long Nguyen. If you go south from there you’re into, you’re getting down close to the Iron Triangle and Ben Suc, a VC village there on the bank of the Saigon River. They had an established area in War Zone C that was hard to root out and they never did completely wipe it out, I’m sure, until the very end. In any case, we moved over to—it’s also known by some people as Dau Tieng. D-a-u with a soft D, T-i-e-n-g, which is actually the district, the name of the district. But the name of the little town was Tri Tam, and there was a pretty good airstrip there. An airstrip that would take at least a C-7 and maybe—I don’t think it would take a C-130, it might. But it was a pretty good airfield.

LC: Now, did the division CP move there?

WL: The division CP moved there. We moved into the plantation houses. We didn’t have to live in our tents there. We took over a couple of buildings there. These were large stucco, two story stucco buildings with very thick walls, shutters for windows. They didn’t have any glass but that didn’t matter, and tiled roofs. It felt very much a Somerset Maugham looking sort of place with palm trees and of course surrounded by the rubber trees.

LC: Sort of colonial paradise in a way.
WL: Yeah. Anyway, we set up there. I’ll tell you one anecdote for that too, to
give you a kind of a flavor for DePuy and what he was like. I mentioned that he had
upgraded his mess with a Chinese chef and so on and moved him in there. He had white
linen tablecloths for luncheons. We were visited all the time, not only while we were
there, but every place that Division command post was. It was a magnet for visitors.
We had Henry Kissinger. We had all kinds of folks that came over to see what was going
on in the Big Red One. One particular day at noon we had a visit from the German to
Vietnam. He came out.

LC: This is when you were at—?

WL: At Dau Tieng out on the edge of the Michelin. At Tri Tam in these
plantation houses we had our—the dining room was on the second floor of this building
and we sat down for lunch. Another thing that I should mention. General DePuy always
brought the band forward. Anytime he could he brought the division band up to the
forward command post. When we were in this particular location the band played a noon
concert everyday. Whether we were in the command post or not they’d march through
the plantation with all these little Vietnamese kids running behind them having a great
time.

LC: That’s an amazing visual.

WL: Yeah. It was a good band and I knew the bandleader. I talked to him. I
probably told you I can’t call myself a musician but I did play the tuba after I retired and
I love band music. I love all music. So I used to talk to him once in a while when I could
and General DePuy knew that. He knew that I was acquainted with [the band leader]. Of
course he knew the bandleader too. In any case, we were eating lunch with the
ambassador and DePuy said, “Bill, go down and see if the band can play a German
march.” I said, “Okay. Yes, sir.” I went down there and I went up to the bandleader. I
said, “You fellows know a German march?” Warrant officer, I can’t remember his name,
he said, “Sure we can play a German march.” So he gave the orders to the band and they
flipped through their little booklets and I went back up to lunch and here they struck up
“Alte Kameraden.” Which is probably the most famous of all the German marches and
the one most loved by German soldiers. In fact, if you play that with a lot of old German
veterans around you’ll find a lot of teary eyes, for that matter.
LC: Right. A lot of good things might come out of the woodwork too.

WL: It has a particularly beautiful trio in it and it is really nice march. So he played that and predictably the German ambassador, who was obviously an old soldier himself, tears came to his eyes, rolled down his cheeks. So it made a great hit. I don’t know how we could cash in on our association with the German ambassador but anyway it pleased everybody there, especially General DePuy.

LC: It seems like this was one of the things that one came across when one had lunch with the Big Red One, I guess, and probably partly by the general’s design.

WL: Yeah. DePuy, I wouldn’t say, was well-schooled in music. But his favorite tune was the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and he had that played every once in a while, which got kind of tiresome but he liked it. It was great. Another thing that happened with regard to Tay Ninh and the association around that area, which became important later. I took a flight with Hal Kebaugh who was, as I mentioned before, the aviation battalion commander. I told him, “I want to fly up and down the Saigon River, the trace of the river, and see what’s going on there.” Because I knew that there was traffic across the river but I didn’t know exactly where their crossing points were. They were moving, the VC and NVA, were moving to and from Tay Ninh and Binh Duong and Binh Long Province. They had base areas on both sides of the river and I knew there was traffic. I wanted to find out where it was. So we flew down the river and as luck would have it we saw a sampan. They call them sampans. I don’t think that’s proper. Really it’s more like a canoe, a dug out canoe—beaching with two VC in it. I figured they were VC because that wasn’t a commercial area by any means. There were no villages around there. These two guys landed their boat on the left side, that is, the Tay Ninh side of the river. Pulled it into the jungle and they were moving pretty fast. We put some fire into them with the door guns and probably wrecked the boat. But I don’t think we hit these guys because they were running into the jungle. As we were flying around there I noticed what looked like a well-traveled road going in from very close to where they beached their canoe into the jungle. I told Hal, “You know, that’s pretty interesting. There might be something right in there.” You know, it didn’t take a genius to figure that one out. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” So we landed and I got in touch with the forward air controller that we had attached to the division. I can’t remember his name.
They called him the Red Baron. He had red hair and he was a good—you know the forward air controllers that were assigned to the infantry, to divisions, in Vietnam were all fighter pilots. But they when they were assigned to us they were flying these O1 birddogs, but they were fighter pilots because they knew their lingo and they knew how to bring in air strikes. That’s why they were fighter pilots. But anyway, I went over to see the fellow in the command post and I asked him if he would take me up because I wanted to put some artillery fire into this particular area. I knew that he could also adjust artillery. I could do it too; I knew how to adjust artillery. But I wanted somebody that had some—I just didn’t want to take an average Army aviator who wouldn’t know how to do that. I rode in the backseat of his aircraft. Now, we had our eight inch—in division artillery we had one battalion. The Field Artillery Battalion was, I guess it was the Battalion Artillery, was our medium general support battalion. It had one battery of eight inch Howitzers. That is, towed eight inch. I guess they were—I remember four or six guns, doesn’t matter, in that battery. We had them located just across the Saigon River from Tri Tam in a part of the plantation in Tay Ninh Province. They were well within their range of this target area that I wanted to hit. So I figured, “Well, if I could bring in some eight inch Howitzer rounds into that area there I could break up enough jungle so we could see what was in there.” The main point was to get rid of some of that canopy so we could see what was in there. So we went up. I told the Red Baron what I wanted to do and we called in to DIVARTY (division artillery) and they alerted the battalion or rather the battery. I gave them the coordinates, the map coordinates, of where we wanted to hit. Then we gained a little altitude so they were going to send in a registration round, one round in—I don’t remember now but it wasn’t right on target and we gave them the correction and, you know, drop two hundred and whatever. They fired another round and that was right on. So we asked for a fire for effect. I don’t remember now how many rounds. Probably maybe twelve rounds, something like that, for effect. The system was they would say, “On the way,” when they fired. In fact we could hear them anyway but they would say, “On the way wait.” Time in flight might have been twenty seconds or so. But the Red Baron, he seemed to be a little bit impatient. So as soon as they said, “On the way,” he dove down towards the target. I yelled at him. I said, “Wait! They said wait!” I didn’t want to pick up an eight inch round in the back of
the airplane. Going down, that was really exciting, because we were really low when
they started bursting in the trees and the fragments were going all over the place. He
pulled altitude then, got out of there, but it was very nerve wrecking. But anyway they
did break up the forest around the—I mean they probably had to fire another fire for
effect. Lo and behold there was a great [storage] area there. There were row after row of
tarps covering [supplies]. There must have been a thousand pounds, a thousand tons, of
rice in there under cover. This was a rice supply point for the VC. We followed it up
with a battalion. I don’t remember which battalion. Hathaway, I think, or Jack Conn. It
might have been Jack Conn’s battalion we put in into that area. It was a real big
logistical problem. What do you do with a thousand tons of rice or whatever it was?

LC: Yeah, what do you do? Set in on fire? I mean what do you do?

WL: Yeah, well we—there was a way to make it so you couldn’t eat it. You put
some kind of a chemical on it that would mess it up. But the scientific advisors didn’t
want—the humanitarians didn’t want us to do that.

LC: Was there actually a discussion about that?

WL: Yeah. There was a discussion about it but MACV—and I can’t recall. I hate
to be inaccurate about this but I know that there was a great deal of opposition to doing
that.

LC: Oh yeah, you mean at a higher level and not with regard—?

WL: Higher level in the division, way beyond us.

LC: Not about this particular operation, right?

WL: Well, there was a general resistance for doing that and it seemed like it was
perhaps a violation of the laws of war or something. I don’t know what.

LC: Yeah, you mentioned that earlier that it was certainly a

WL: They didn’t like that so we wanted to burn it and rice doesn’t burn all that
well. When it’s in these huge stacks I guess if you could spread it all out on the ground
and put diesel fuel on it then maybe you could do it.

LC: So was it in burlap bags or how was it, or was it just piled up all around?

WL: Bags, big stacks of bags. We moved some of it down the Saigon River in
barges to, you know, for use by the population. We burned some of it. There were also
stacks of corrugated roofing, iron roofing, and there was a lot of other supplies in there. I
went in there with—I went with that battalion and we ran into some heavy action there. Once we started penetrating that area we ran into a VC battalion, at least a battalion, and had a pretty heavy firefight in there. Took some casualties. I was with the battalion commander during that operation. DePuy would let me go if I wanted to when they were in an action. It was kind of like old times with fragments flying around. Jack was adjusting 105 in front of him—

LC: 105 Howitzer guns?

WL: Yeah. 105 Howitzers with direct support artillery, division artillery, and he was getting it real close. We were getting a lot of fragments into the little command group there, which made me awful nervous. I didn’t like them. I never did like incoming artillery. But anyway—

LC: I remember a story that you told earlier about—

WL: Yeah. That’s right. I was pretty badly wounded in World War II with incoming. Those always kind of makes me nervous. But anyway we did develop that area.

LC: Now, this sounds like it actually developed into a serious contact.

WL: Yes it did. Although we were not in a position to really exploit the whole thing. We didn’t have the capabilities to follow it up.

LC: What would that have taken?

WL: Well, it probably would have taken a redirection of our entire effort and was maybe two or three more, two or three brigades to move in there to finally flush the whole thing out. We never did it. We had the light infantry—later on this area was always hot. Later on—was it the ? It was a separate infantry brigade that moved into Tay Ninh after we moved out and maybe a few months later. You probably know which it was, or , something like that. I remember its patch looked like a fuse.

LC: I think, if I’m not totally incorrect, I think it was the and that was in what was called Operation Attleboro.

WL: Okay. It was Attleboro. They were in operational control, part of that operation under the Division. Anyway, they moved in there later that same general area where we were operating. Got into a terrific fight and took pretty heavy casualties. I went in there with General Hollingsworth that time to try to help and to get a handle on
what was going on so the Division could move in some support. I had to find out. I went in with him and I happened to fall into a—I fell into a covered foxhole and really hurt myself. I hurt my back. Fell about six feet or so.

LC: So you’re just walking along and then—?

WL: Running. I was running with General Hollingsworth into where the command post of the battalion that was in contact was. The command group of that battalion of the. They had two or three battalions in there. They had at least two. A major of one of the battalions was one of the survivors and he was commanding the entire operation, which offended most of the people in the Division that the brigade commander wasn’t there. He was still back in Tay Ninh at his command post and he had two battalions in really serious contact and he wasn’t even there. This resulted, as I remember, in his relief of command upon the recommendation of General DePuy and Hollingsworth. This guy should have been there helping to control and support the operation but he wasn’t. So that’s why Hollingsworth went in there while I was just tagging along.

LC: You fell into the spider hole or whatever it was.

WL: I fell into this hole. Yeah. Actually it was probably a fighting position but there were no punji stakes or anything at the bottom. It was just covered and I broke through it.

LC: Down you went.

WL: Down I went.

LC: How badly did you hurt your back?

WL: Well, I think that’s what gave me a herniated disc that came back to plague me from then on.

LC: I could well believe it. But when something like that happens did you just kind of crawl up out of the hole and—?

WL: Crawled out and continued on.

LC: You were still ambulatory then?

WL: Hey, I didn’t break any legs or any bones or anything. I just had a very severe pain in my back but it went away after a couple of days.

LC: Then comes and goes.
WL: Yeah. Came again when I went back to Vietnam in ’72. It came back with a vengeance. Well, we’ll get into that much later. Anyway, I guess the bottom line of the whole thing that that was a hot area right there and remained that way for a long time. Incidentally right now that area is under water. I don’t know—have you been to Vietnam? Have you been over to Vietnam?

LC: Actually not in this part. No. Not down here, no.

WL: Yeah. The Communists built a dam right there at Tri Tam. They dammed the Saigon River. They built what I would call a dike from there clear over to near Nui Ba Den Mountain and there’s an immense lake there now covering that entire area.

LC: Is that right?

WL: Yeah. It’s pretty interesting.

LC: So they flooded that whole—?

WL: Flooded the whole thing and they’re growing sugar. They cut down a lot of the forest. They have sugar plantations there and they expanded the rubber plantation. But that, I think they call it Tung Tieng, Tung Tieng Lake or something like that (Editor’s note: Dau Tieng Lake). Very pretty. I went there a couple years ago, drove around it. Drove around the outside of it.

LC: So the lake comes right up now to the edge of the plantation?

WL: Right up to Tri Tam. As I say, almost all the way to the Nui Ba Den Mountain.

LC: That’s funny. That’s strange. It must be strange to go back there and see these changes. Bill later on maybe we can talk about some of your return trips and observations that you made like this one are very interesting.

WL: Another thing that happened there at Dau Tieng, we were, as I say, we were in the plantation houses. Our command post was on the lower floor of one of these big concrete buildings, stucco buildings. My operations officer was named Bill Mann, M-a-n-n. Real fine major. He was a good soldier. One night there was an attempt to penetrate the perimeter of one of the battalions. I think it was Jack Whitted’s battalion. I can’t remember which one it was but Jack Whitted was the battalion commander. Anyway a mortar round hit right on the front porch of our building and the fragments came zipping through the command post. Fortunately there was only one man hit and
that was Bill Mann and he was hit in the thumb and in the head. He was scratching his
head when—he had his helmet off and he was scratching his head and this little fragment
hit his thumb and his scalp. It cut his scalp a little bit, didn’t break into his skull or
anything. But it was kind of a nasty gash there and his thumb was bleeding.
Hollingsworth came in a little bit later after Bill was bandaged up and so on and says,
“What happened?” Mann says, “Well, General, I was scratching my head and this
fragment came in and hit me in the thumb and in the head.” Hollingsworth says, “Good
thing you weren’t scratching your balls.” But that was Hollingsworth. Then he pinned a
Purple Heart on Bill Mann. We found out later that that wasn’t an enemy mortar round
that hit our front porch. That was one of the Jack Whitted’s mortars. Made it even
funnier!

LC: Bill, you mentioned that the Division did not actually sweep in to the area
where you had made this contact and found the depot and had met resistance.

WL: We just made a, I would say, a very shallow penetration. VC withdrew after
the contact with Jack Conn’s battalion and we didn’t follow it up. It would’ve been—
these sorts of operations never turn out very well when you start trying to pursue a
withdrawing VC battalion through a dense jungle. You’re more likely to run into serious
problems yourself than you are to do him serious damage.

LC: In terms of, for example, an ambush?

WL: Yeah. Because they know where they’re going, they know where their base
areas are, they can put mines on the trail, they can ambush the trail. They can virtually
fade away into the jungle and the chances of making a major contact without getting very
bloodied yourself are not good. So you want to try to fix them where you can see them
and control them and not try to pursue them through the jungle. It’s just not a good
tactic.

LC: Was there anything that could have been done, for example, with more air
support or with more airmobile troops to have sealed—?

WL: Probably not.

LC: To have sealed off their egress?

WL: No, because the jungle there is so continuous, so dense. They could just
disappear into one of their base camps unless you had some really good intelligence on
where that was you’d be making match sticks out of the jungle without any real result. So I can’t fault them for not trying to maintain the pursuit. They killed quite a few of them in that contact. I think they had about six or seven casualties in the battalion and maybe more for that matter. We developed the fact that this was a very sensitive area and that’s about all I can say about it.

LC: Now, why did, for example, the Division not stay in that area and, as you say, several months later I think this terrain, this particular zone, was given over to primarily the?

WL: Mainly because the was given a responsibility for Tay Ninh. That was it, and we moved back into our main area of operations. It became Route 13, Thunder Road, Highway 13 that runs from Saigon up across the Cambodian border above Loc Ninh. That became our major focus for our operations from then on largely because that’s where we could expect to make contact with the VC Division and its main force regiments. That was our main target. I told DePuy that that was—if you want to make an impact on the main force in our zone there was the VC Division. He made great emphasis to locating those regiments. That’s what I gave to the RRU too. I told them, “I want you to tell us everyday where the regiments are of the VC Division.” They did that the best they could and they did a real good job of it. As I told you before I made some good contacts with that outfit. What was that? It was the—I knew the name of that unit.

LC: The RRU (radio research unit) group?

WL: RRU, who they were. I’m looking through my notes here to see if I can find that. But anyway, as I said, the aviators MACV unit, they would often come in and land at Lai Khe when we had our command post in Lai Khe. In fact, when we left Tay Ninh we went back to Di An for a couple of weeks. Then we moved up into light and put the division command post at Lai Khe, and that’s where we started from again.

LC: Do you have a sense of when that move up to Lai Khe took place? Later in the summer?

WL: Yes, later in the summer.

LC: Okay.

WL: In fact the continuity was a little bit shaky. It might have been that we moved from Tri Tam over to An Loc at that time. I’m trying to think. I can’t recall.
LC: An Loc being the provincial capital of Binh Long?
WL: Yeah. An Loc was the capital of, I guess, Binh Long Province.
LC: Right. Exactly. You were up there for a little while?
WL: Yes. Well, when we moved into An Loc our headquarters commandant reconnoitered the area for the division command post. He put it right beside a quarry that had been turned into a garbage dump on the west side of An Loc. It was a really, really rotten choice for a command post. The mosquitoes were in clouds because this quarry was partly filled with water and garbage. The odor was terrible! Mosquitoes were thick and DePuy was incensed about the whole thing. “What in the world are we doing here? There’s got to be a better place around An Loc than this!” I’m pretty sure that he relieved the headquarters commandant over that. But I’m not too sure of that. But they selected another command post for us at a place called Quan Loi. Quan Loi comes up—you’ve probably heard of that a lot because the ACR, Armored Cavalry used Quan Loi a couple years later as their command post right there on Route 13. But Quan Loi was a plantation in the hills northeast of An Loc, maybe only about seven or eight kilometers from An Loc up in the hills. They had a nice airstrip. It had a swimming pool. It was a French plantation, Quan Loi. They had a little orchard and we moved in there into the orchard, set up our tents there, and that was a very good command post.

LC: You mentioned the swimming pool. Was that French era?
WL: Yeah. That was French, and we stayed away from it. French weren’t too hospitable anyway.

LC: Yes, as you mentioned there was still French persons there.
WL: Yeah. So that’s where we put our command post. I’m trying to think—when did they bring that one now? I think we were there when we started the operation on Minh Thanh Road but I think I’m skipping ahead.

LC: Yeah. I think actually the battle of Minh Thanh Road might be a little bit later.
WL: The Minh Thanh Road was in July from the ninth of July, I think. I can look it up.
LC: Bill, let me just, if you don’t mind, just read a section. This is from Shelby Stanton’s *Rise and Fall of an American Army*. See if this sounds familiar to you. He’s
speaking about the Infantry Division in 1966, actually in early May. He says, “A Viet Cong lieutenant was killed southeast of Loc Ninh and a search of his positions turned up a plan to attack both a town and its Special Forces camp. As a result the Infantry Division spent a month fruitlessly sweeping an area in Operation El Paso I. General DePuy was looking for battle. So he decided to strike deeper into Viet Cong dominated territory. In early June he pushed the Infantry Division into War Zone C and that operation was called El Paso II.” Does that sound familiar to you?

WL: No it doesn’t.
LC: Is that right?
WL: Yeah.
LC: That’s interesting.
WL: What is he talking about?
LC: That’s very interesting! That doesn’t sound at all right to you?
WL: No, no.
LC: Well, that’s very interesting because I tend to believe you.
WL: As I remember now, if I try and get my chronology right, we did—before we went to Quan Loi I think we went to Tay Ninh first. We were at Tay Ninh twice, at least twice. I think we moved from Tri Tam back to Di An. The Brigade moved back into Lai Khe. First Brigade moved back into Phuoc Vinh. Second Brigade, if it had been up there, I can’t recall now. Probably battalions at least of the Brigade had moved up from Phu Loi and they were back in Phu Loi. So we were back where we were. Then DePuy said we’re going to move up Route 13. This might be what Stanton was talking about. We moved—and I don’t know about this VC lieutenant was killed up. I don’t know.
LC: That’s interesting. I mean if you didn’t—
WL: I’m saying it was wrong but I don’t remember that.
LC: Gosh, if you don’t remember it then it’s probably not important enough to be in the standard work, if you know what I mean.
WL: It would not have been the cause for the deployment of the Division.
LC: That’s what I’m thinking. That’s kind of why I read it to you because it sounded a little bit off to me.
WL: There’d have to be a lot more evidence than that. I can tell you why we went into Minh Thanh when we get around to that a little bit later. But we started moving up, making reconnaissance in force up Route 13.

LC: Now, just to clarify, Route 13 runs from Saigon up through Lai Khe and then all the way up to An Loc and beyond and into Cambodia.

WL: Yeah. In fact, it’s an international road. It runs all the way to Luang Prabang in Laos. Route 13 goes past Loc Ninh, across the Cambodian border to the Mekong River. Then up along the Mekong through Vientiane, Laos, and continues on to the royal capital of Laos at Luang Prabang. That’s how long Route 13 is. But that’s beside the point. As far as we’re interested in it it’s as far as Loc Ninh. But I’ve often had an urge to get in a jeep and drive from Saigon to Luang Prabang but I know I’d get killed on the way. There’s plenty of bandits still operating up in that area, but one of these days. In any case, we started up Route 13 and the first action we had was at the I guess they call it the Tau O Bridge. A squadron, I can’t remember which one it was, of the / Cav was ambushed there. The Tau O Bridge is north of Bau Bang, which is in turn north of Lai Khe and south of Chon Thanh. It’s where the old railroad bridge, bed—you know, at one time there was a narrow gauge railroad ran from Saigon all the way up to Loc Ninh. That railroad embankment is still visible. It was then. It’s a little bit more obscured now. I looked at it again a couple years ago and it’s a little bit hard to find. But it’s more like a berm that runs all the way from Saigon up to Loc Ninh. It was to serve the rubber plantation. The rails had been removed from it long time ago. Once in a while you’ll see maybe one or two rails but most of the times you didn’t see any. You could see little railroad stations along that railroad from Bau Bang, Lai Khe, Bau Bang, Chon Thanh, all the way up. These little square box stucco buildings out in nowhere along this railroad embankment. Anyway, where this railroad crossed Highway 13 was close to a place called the Tau O Bridge. It actually paralleled, the embankment parallels, Route 13 all the way up. Where that railroad embankment crosses, the VC ambushed the Cav squadron. The Cav gave a very good account of themselves and fought its way out of it. They took some casualty and lost a couple of tracks there—

LC: By tracks you mean APCs (armored personnel carriers)?
WL: APCs. Yeah. They did a good job of it. That was the first of several, well, about three or four battles—well engagements. You can’t call it a battle I guess. But you can call it a really heavy firefight up along Route 13.

LC: At that location?

WL: Yeah. Tau O, there was one there and then there was another one north of An Loc, which was even a heavier contact. But that kind of set the stage for what we were doing. We knew that—and the units that were involved in this, in these attacks, were the VC Division units. We had contact with the Regiment, with the and the in those areas. At that time we also put a battalion up in Loc Ninh and they had a contact around this time out—and this may be something that author was talking about—out in the area west of Loc Ninh. They had a heavy contact in the—this is rather sparse forest out there. Some of it’s deciduous. The jungle isn’t quite as dense and they had quite a heavy engagement out there in that flat area.

LC: Do you know which battalion it was?

WL: I don’t remember now which battalion it was. I can look it up. Hold on a minute. It’s called Ho Krignou and that was two July 1966.

LC: It was called what? Can you spell it?

WL: It’s apparently a little Montagnard village there or Cambodian village called Ho, H-o, and then K-r-i-g-n-o-u. But it was stated on my little map here as the second of July. That was very close to the Cambodian border just southwest of Loc Ninh. We also had a major battle in the Loc Ninh Plantation on the eleventh of June, again with an element of the—I’m almost sure it was the VC Division, eleventh of June in the plantation. The other battle on Route 13 was called Srok Dong, S-r-o-k D-o-n-g, on the thirtieth of June. So there was no trouble getting a fight up along that road during that summer. The Ap Tau O Bridge was the eighth of June ‘66. That was the one south of—I guess it was north of Chon Thanh. I told you it was south but it was north of Chon Thanh.

LC: To be fair to Mr. Stanton who wrote the book that I cited earlier, he does talk about the battle of Srok Dong.

WL: He does, yeah.

LC: Yeah. That’s one that you’re describing as being along—
WL: That was right on Route 13 between An Loc and Loc Ninh. We killed
probably two or three hundred VC there. The battle area smelled badly. You could be at
seven hundred feet and you could smell it for days afterwards, the rotting bodies along
the road.

LC: Did you have an opportunity to send your guys, your own G2 attachment, in
there to see if you could get any intel matter off of the—?

WL: No. I didn’t send anybody in there and I didn’t get in on the ground there
myself either for that matter.

LC: Why did you not send anybody in? It was too hot?

WL: I never sent anybody. That was up to the brigade battalions to collect that
information. If I happened to be able to get in there I would have but I don’t know what
was going on. I probably had some other things to worry—I didn’t get in there. One
interesting part of that particular operation as I remember, we used, let’s see. That was
the thirtieth of June. That’s where we had the armed CH-47. They called it guns-a-go-
go. CH-47 Chinook helicopter with .50 caliber machine guns in mounts in the bow of the
aircraft and several guns on the sides and so on. They used it as a gun ship. It took some
heavy fire there and didn’t prove to be a useful way to use a CH-47 if the VC had a good,
even rudimentary anti-aircraft capability and they did because they had the .51 caliber
machine guns. This thing was pretty badly damaged there.

LC: How good was their, essentially their take on an airborne target? I mean they
had pretty good weapons but what about their gunmanship?

WL: They were good. They were good at it.

LC: Did this CH-47 survive?

WL: It survived there. It crashed later on the Minh Thanh Road and I can tell you
about Minh Thanh. That was on the ninth of July. I think I told you that before. July is
when we fought on Minh Thanh Road. It crashed there. It was shot down and it crashed
and when the battle was over it had to be—I don’t know how they get it out. I know they
couldn’t fly it out. It was really shot down. It landed awfully hard. General
Hollingsworth and I landed next to it to try to help them but they didn’t need our help.

By the time we got there, why, they had taken care of themselves. I don’t think they had
any serious casualties on it. But that was the end of the experiment when it crashed on
the Minh Thanh Road.

LC: Well, Bill—go ahead.

WL: I told you before that I established some pretty good contacts there at the
Special Forces camp, which was on the edge of the Minh Thanh Plantation. Minh Thanh
Plantation was a square shaped. It was about, oh, ten kilometers on its side. It wasn’t
nearly as large as the Michelin but it wasn’t very far from the Michelin either. It was
between An Loc and the Michelin Plantation. The Special Forces camp had a little
airstrip next to it and this little fort that they operated out of. Well, the Special Forces
patrolled in and around the Minh Thanh Plantation, which had a VC, a local VC, unit in it
for sure somewhere in it. They patrolled there frequently. The commander gave me a
call one day and he said, “We captured a soldier from the Regiment on the edge of the
Minh Thanh Plantation.” He said that his regiment was moving into and along Minh
Thanh Road. That’s about all they could tell us about it. At the same time I was getting
reports out of the RRU that the Regiment was moving from Tay Ninh Province—they
tracked it day after day as a general steady movement across the Saigon River from Tay
Ninh into Binh Long Province and north of the Michelin Plantation. This information
was pretty interesting where I could get a prisoner of war and a RRU information that
coincided; that collaborated one with the other. So I told General DePuy about it. I said,
“Look, it’s a possibility here that if we make it lucrative enough we could get the
Regiment in a trap.” Now, we had been working on the airstrip, lengthening the airstrip
at the Minh Thanh Plantation because we wanted a C-130 capable strip there. So we had
a team from the Engineer Battalion, our organic engineer battalion, working on the
airstrip. So, here was the plan. It was a deception. DePuy and I talked about it and we
decided that we would tell the ARVN regional, the regional headquarters there at An Loc,
that we were going to send a troop of the / Cav in and pick up the engineer equipment
and escort the engineer soldiers and their equipment out of Minh Thanh back to An Loc.
We were going to do that and we told them when. Because I told DePuy, “There’s no
doubt that when we tell the province chief that we’re going to do that that there’ll be a
VC agent that is going to pick up this information one way or the other. They’re going to
get that information to the VC Division.” I’m pretty confident that that’s what happened
because the moved in and put two battalions along that road, the Minh Thanh Road, on the north side of the road. Of course I didn’t know which side of the road they were going to go on. But they dug in there. All three battalions of the Regiment dug in the jungle on the edge of the Minh Thanh Road with the obvious purpose of ambushing the unit that we were going to send down the Minh Thanh Road to pick up the engineer equipment. That’s what happened. In the meanwhile, DePuy said, “Well, let’s not tip our hand here. We could put a B-52 strike in there if we wanted to. But let’s make them think that we’re going to commit the rest of the division to an operation up at Sroc Con Trang, which was up in the Fishhook area north of there. So I went into Saigon and I gave the target blocks to the B-52 guys in Tan Son Nhut. I said, “Here’s what we want you to hit.” I gave them the date, and so they were going to put a sortie—and I told you about before when I made that bomb damage assessment with the long range reconnaissance patrol, that’s what that was about. That’s where that strike was going to be. So with all of this set the G3 gave the orders to the brigades. We moved in I guess about five infantry battalions into positions where they could move pretty fast into the area north of the Minh Thanh Road and south of the Minh Thanh Road, both sides. We positioned the artillery to fire on the north side of the road and we didn’t register because we didn’t want to tip our hands on that either. We didn’t register the artillery but we had most of the division artillery within range of that area. We planned air strikes on the south side of the road. The purpose of this division was that when you’re putting in air strikes, if you didn’t have the artillery in a different area you usually had to shut off the artillery while the air strikes went in otherwise the pilots would be in danger of getting hit by the trajectories of the artillery. So we decided we’d put, DePuy decided he’d put the artillery on the north side, the air strikes on the south side, you wouldn’t have to shut off the artillery to bring the air strikes in. So they had it all set and they attached one company of infantry to ride with the C troop of the / Cav in their tracks. They figured that when they were hit the infantry could dismount and fight on foot there and do it. In the event—I think this was the last time they tried that because what happens was is that when they become under fire the infantry is at kind of a huge disadvantage. To try to dismount under fire and form any sort of a tactical plan to fight is pretty hard. So we took more casualties inside the tracks, the infantry, than we would have if we just had the
gunners on the tracks. But anyway that’s what they did. That was the plan. We started
down the road. I was with Hollingsworth flying over the area.

LC: Bill, how sure were you that the VC had committed their forces along the road?
WL: I was virtually certain.
LC: Because of RRU information?
WL: Because of the RRU and this prisoner. He said that he was going down there
to dig holes and he happened to get—I don’t know why he got separated, but anyway
maybe he was a scout or something. I don’t recall all that detail. But I was virtually
certain that they were going to be there, and they were. I was with Hollingsworth and we
watched the VC bring a recoilless, a 75 mm recoilless rifle out into the edge of the road
and fire the first round into the front of the A Cav, the first track vehicle. Went right
through the front end and out the back, and blew one of the sergeants in half as it went
through. From thereon, boy, there was just ferocious amount of fire. Our artillery
responded immediately, put a real curtain of fire down on the north side of the road. The
air strikes came in on the south side. Hollingsworth and I, we were hovering and trying
to stay out of the way. The guns-a-go-go came in there and got shot down. It was really
a ferocious few minutes of fire. As soon as we could we landed, Hollingsworth and I on
the road near the CH-47. The VC launched a counter attack. Hollingsworth and I
jumped into a ditch beside the road and this was one of the craziest things that happened
to me. I pulled out my pistol—that’s the only thing I had. I didn’t have a rifle and
Hollingsworth had a .45 Magnum pistol or something. He had a huge revolver. I pulled
the slide back on my pistol and it came off. I don’t know if you know much about a .45
caliber Army pistol but that’s not supposed to happen. I’m lazy enough that I let my
driver do the maintenance on my pistol and clean it every night when I get back in
because it was usually dusty. He had not assembled it correctly. They have what they
call a dismount lug on it and he hadn’t fastened that. When you pull the slide back all it’s
supposed to do is snap forward again and bring a round into the chamber but the whole
slide came off and the spring fell out. Hollingsworth looked over at me and he says,
“Just as I expected. A G2 flat on his ass again.” Something like that. So I got up out of
the ditch and I picked up an M14 rifle from one of the casualties from the / . It had the
stock was partly shot away but it was still operative so I took that to defend myself more
than anything else.

LC: Did you jump back into the ditch?

WL: Yeah. I went back with Hollingsworth into the ditch and I said, “I got a rifle
at least and all you’ve got is your pistol.” Anyway, we sat there for a while and things
kind of quieted down. There were rounds going overhead but it was hard to tell whether
they were ours or theirs because we had infantry battalions in there too. So you wouldn’t
have wanted to shoot into the jungle because you wouldn’t have any clue as to what you
were going to hit if you hit anything at all. We got back in the helicopter and we got a
message that one of the battalion commanders, Rufe Lazell, had been hit in the elbow,
pretty serious wound. Not life threatening but put him out of action. So Hollingsworth
had us go around behind where the battalion was and found a clearing to land and he said,
“I’m going to go up and see Rufe and see that somebody’s taking command of this
battalion.” He said, “You stay back here and guard this helicopter.” By this time I had
my pistol put back together again and I dropped that rifle because I didn’t want to carry it
around. So here I was in this clearing. The battle was still going on. There was quite a
bit of firing going on. We couldn’t see anything. Of course the door gunners, they were
at least more capable than I was defending that helicopter with two machine guns.

LC: Who else was with you? Just the two of them?

WL: Just me and the general’s aide. I think the general’s aide went with him. So
it was just the aircrew and me, that was it. Of course they had the crew chief was on one
gun and then they had a gunner on the other and a pilot and co-pilot and that was that. So
I stood out there in front of the helicopter out of range of those two M-60s [machine
guns]. I didn’t want to be anywhere close to them, and waited for him to come back.
Eventually he came back because the battalion exec or somebody had taken command of
the battalion and they evacuated Rufe Lazell. Who incidentally came back later after
he—

LC: Did he?

WL: Yeah. I’m pretty sure he was evacuated all the way to the United States and
got his arm patched up but it was never the same. It was always kind of crooked. But he
came back and took command of the battalion again. Good soldier. But anyway, the
name suited him too, he was red haired. Rufus was his name. Probably named him that when they saw him.

LC: That’s right, they got one look at him.

WL: But anyway, what else was I saying? Then essentially the battle was over, and then we landed back there on the road and I started going through the bodies. They were very close to the road, most of them. Some of them were in-depth. I looked through two or three bodies. I found letter box numbers that matched at least two of the battalions of the Regiment. We were pretty confident that they had the there. Then we decided, “Well, where did they go?” The survivors of that regiment withdrew towards the Saigon River. I decided, “Well, if I can find them we could at least put some air strikes on them.” So I found a—somebody brought me a prisoner from one of the battalions and I put him in the helicopter. How’d I get that helicopter? It might have been one of the / Cav’s helicopters. Probably was because I’m sure Hollingsworth wasn’t with me then. I think I got aboard one of the ships from the D Troop. Put this Viet Cong soldier in it and with an interpreter—I don’t know where I got the interpreter either. I can’t remember that. But got in there and we told him that we wanted him to tell us where their regiment was going, what their plan was for withdrawal. He agreed to do that. He was really shaken up and very much annoyed with the fact that was going to trap the Americans but instead the Americans trapped the. He thought the leadership was pretty sorry in this outfit so he agreed to tell us. But the problem was that as soon as we got airborne with him and started flying around he got sick to his stomach. He’d never been in an aircraft before and he got motion sickness and puked all over the aircraft and annoyed the crew chief to no end so we had to give up on that. We couldn’t develop much from his help. So anyway, I guess we continued to fire artillery and I told them—I didn’t really need to tell them. Most everybody had the same idea that they were going to go try to get back to where they came from. It was impossible for them to go any other direction because we had the whole rest of the terrain pretty well blocked. So there was no doubt that they were headed back for the Saigon River and back for Tay Ninh province if they could get there. So we put more artillery fire on it as they went back. I think we probably killed three hundred. The body count was at least that high. We stacked up the bodies and dug trenches and buried them there. The area smelled pretty
bad. A couple days later DePuy brought the division band in and had them—and the Cav
and a couple of battalions and held a parade down Minh Thanh Road with the band
playing. They marched a couple of kilometers down the road as a kind of a ceremony in
honor of those who had died there. The / C Troop lost I think about thirty-five killed in
action. It was a high price but we more than made up for it in the VC killed in action. If
you want to make an equation out of it, which is kind of morbid, not very useful. But
anyway that was the Minh Thanh Road Battle.

LC: Did you think that that approach, which of course dominated a lot of the
assessments of the war, the body count thing really wasn’t all that useful?

WL: No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t very useful because there seemed to be an endless
supply of replacements anyway. You could keep on the war of attrition against an enemy
like that and that location probably would never have achieved its results because our will
was not the same as theirs. We gave up and they wouldn’t. So I guess that’s one way to
look at it. It was never too useful. The body counts weren’t very accurate anyway.
Some of them were grossly inflated. There was one incident, one bad contact, with Paul
Gorman’s battalion. The / or the / I don’t remember which one it was. They had a battle
in War Zone D and I went out there with Hollingsworth to look at that. Actually it was
an ambush. They were ambushed, a company of that battalion. They claimed that they
killed fifty or sixty VC. They had quite a few casualties. I saw some of them. I got there
early with Hollingsworth very shortly after the action ended. There were still several
killed and wounded of the on the field that were still being cared for.

LC: So you were there right away?

WL: Yeah. We were there almost immediately after it and I asked one of the
officers there, “Where are the VC?” “They’re all in the jungle back there.” “Well,
where’d the action take?” “Well, right here.” “Well, where are the VC?” “Well, they’re
back there. There’s about fifty or sixty of them in there.” I said, “Well, can you show
me?” He said, “No, we can’t go back in there again,” something like that. I doubted very
much their count because usually if they had a count like that at least they could show
you some of them. But they couldn’t show me any. Back at the command post that
evening for the briefing I gave my regular intelligence briefing and then the G3 briefer—
Al Haig was the G3 then. He never gave the briefings himself. He always passed it off
to a captain. He had some very fine officers. This fellow gave a good briefing of this battle with . When he came to the body count and he said that fifty or sixty body count. I shouldn’t have done this but I stood up and I said, “You know, I know that’s the count that you got from them. But I was out there and I tried to find a dead VC and I couldn’t find any. I didn’t see any. They couldn’t show me any. I really have great doubts about that body count.” I said, “It’s important to us in intelligence to get an accurate count because we like to keep some sort of an idea of the capabilities of the enemy units that we’re fighting. We like to know whether they’ve got a battalion of two hundred men or a battalion of six hundred men. When you have body counts that are not accurate we can’t keep a very good tally of what’s out there.” Haig took real exception to that. He said, “Are you doubting the integrity of my briefers?” I said, “No, not at all. I know that they’re reporting what they’ve been told but I think it’s inaccurate.” Then DePuy got into it. Then he told me that I was being petulant or some word like that, you know. “You’re making invidious comparisons.” He liked to use words like that. I said, “Okay, but I still insist that the body counts that we’re getting from the field are not always accurate and I like to question them if I see reason to do so.” Something like that and I sat down. But that was one incident where I challenged it. As I say, it wasn’t really too smart of me to do that. I could have left it until much later and talked to Haig about it and not bring it up in the middle of the briefing.


LC: In front of other people.

WL: Yeah. I was kind of ticked off about it actually. I figured that it was about time someone challenged them on it because it wasn’t the only incident. Not that I could prove anything. One of these things that you can’t disprove because, you know, I mean you can’t prove a negative.

LC: Right. But you were trying to press for accuracy.

WL: Yeah. I figured it was important. I probably attached more importance to it than it deserved, for that matter. The reason behind the whole thing was no unit wanted to say that they lost that particular firefight. If you’ve got sixteen casualties and you can’t find any damage done to the enemy, that’s not really good for your morale. You think that you failed, and they don’t like that. I wouldn’t like that either if I was the battalion commander. I wouldn’t like to say that, “Yeah I lost fifteen soldiers and I didn’t
kill any enemy.” That’s not too good. But that’s the foundation for all of the inflated
body counts that you got from many unites. Our unit wasn’t the only one that did that.

LC: No. I mean as you say it was kind of almost structural. You almost had to report—

WL: If that’s the measure that the commanders are going to use for determining
the efficiency and tactical competency of the unit and its commanders well then that’s
what you’re going to do. You’re going to give them that measure. It’s a pretty sorry
measure. I mean every unit is going to get ambushed from time to time, particularly in
that particular environment. I don’t think there was an infantry unit, Marines or Army,
that fought in Vietnam that didn’t run into something like that now and then. Just came
with the territory.

LC: As you were thinking about it as G2, was there another measure since clearly
it wasn’t going to be territory held?

WL: There was no other good statistical measure for combat efficiency. That was
something that, of course, McNamara insisted upon. His insistence on counting things
that affected all headquarters from his headquarters on down. MACV wanted a body
count; the division wanted a body count. Everybody wanted a body count because that’s
how they were measuring whether we were winning or losing, which was of course
fallacious. That didn’t measure success or failure. It just measured how practically, a
really rough estimate of how many VC or NVA you were killing. I wanted to know what
was the combat efficiency of the enemy units. If people were inflating the body count,
why, we would find that we were killing the two or three times in a space of a year and I
knew that wasn’t true. So it was an order of battle thing for me. They wanted to inflate
their counts, okay, but I’d rather have an accurate count so I could tell, have some idea,
of the combat effectiveness of a particular enemy unit. World War II or World War I
where you had terrain objectives and where you could physically envelope enemy units
and capture entire regiments, entire divisions, then you had a real measure of success
because you knew how far you were advancing into the enemy’s territory. If you
marched across France you measured your success by the number of miles or kilometers
you went everyday and by the number of enemy units that you actually decimated or
surrounded and captured or whatever.
LC: Took them off the order of battle, essentially.

WL: Right! Or if you were assigned to terrain objective, you know, capture a particular village crossroads, you captured the crossroads and you held it, you were successful. That was the measure of success. In Vietnam we didn’t have terrain objectives, largely.

LC: Could there have been?

WL: There couldn’t have been. Not in Tay Ninh Province, not in any of the places.

LC: Is it because of the terrain essentially or because of the type of warfare—?

WL: The kind of warfare the enemy was pursuing. They didn’t care whether they had a particular piece of the terrain objective unless there was a political motive behind it.

LC: In other words they wouldn’t fight to defend a particular location so you couldn’t move them out of there. They would just leave it and come back later.

WL: Yeah. Later on in the war when they fought and captured Song Be they say “Whoa, this is really important because Song Be is the province capital of Phuoc Long Province.” Or when they captured Loc Ninh, “Well, that’s great. Well, we got an important American base and we’re going to take An Loc from there and we’re going to hold it.” But it’s not like taking Achen in Germany. I mean the whole thing is entirely different. The VC, the NVA, didn’t have those kinds of objectives. Now, we could have had a terrain objective I guess if you go out into the middle of the jungle up there in northeast Tay Ninh Province and capture the COSVN headquarters. I guess you could call that a terrain objective. But what they would do would move to an alternate headquarters they no doubt had on the other side of the border. They didn’t care. That wasn’t a transportation hub. It didn’t have three railroads running through it and a couple of transcontinental highways and a steel mill. You know, we’re talking about an entirely different order of things.

LC: Bill, when you were there as G2, I mean how much of this was clear to you at that time?

WL: It was all pretty clear to me.

LC: It was all clear?
WL: Oh yeah. Yeah. I’m not saying I didn’t learn a lot. Those particular ideas were pretty obvious to me and I wasn’t alone. I mean DePuy knew more about battles in Vietnam than I ever would know. He knew more about VC order of battle than I would know because he had been there for, what? Two or three years as J3.

LC: Down at MACV.

WL: Down at MACV. So I couldn’t tell him anything. He could tell me. We could discuss it and it would reinforce our mutual understanding of what was going on. He would call me into his tent at night after the briefings on occasion and we’d chat for an hour or so in his little, you know, little tiny tent like I had. We’d sit there and talk about things. I remember one time that sticks in my mind he said—it’s while Haig was G3. He said, “Bill, you got to watch Al because this guy’s going places.” I said, “What do you mean?” “He’s not going to stop at the Infantry Division. He’s going to go well beyond that.” I think that’s when he told me that Al had a pretty important patron and that was Henry Kissinger, you know. I didn’t know that but he did.

LC: But at this time Henry Kissinger was—?

WL: Oh, what was he? He was National Security Council? Was he?

LC: Not 1966.

WL: I don’t know what he was doing then.

LC: I think he was a Harvard professor. But he had been to Saigon I think on a couple of different occasions. I mean he certainly wasn’t out of the loop, that’s for sure.

WL: He was probably what you would call a consultant somewhere in the White House, maybe in the National Security Council. I don’t know. But that was already apparently evident.

LC: It was already on the cards, in a way.

WL: Yeah.

LC: When you would go and talk to the general just on your own, maybe in one of these evening chats that you two would have, was the tone that the Division could actually make a difference and could make progress or was there some—?

WL: Well, I don’t think we ever discussed that sort of thing. We were, of course, focused on doing what we were supposed to be doing. That is the main, I guess put it in generalities. We were to go out and destroy the main force while the ARVN units were
to provide security around Saigon. We didn’t have a responsibility for keeping the VC
out of Saigon. We had a responsibility to go out and finding them and destroying them. I
don’t remember ever discussing, “Well, if we can destroy the Regiment today they’ll
reconstitute it tomorrow.” That didn’t come into our considerations.

LC: But you were aware of the flow of men, obviously, coming in?
WL: Yeah. I didn’t have a good handle on at that time on the infiltration. I don’t
know if he did or not but I don’t remember talking about it.

LC: Is that right? Okay. Wow.
WL: We both knew that we would be much better off if we could strike right into
Cambodia, into the Cambodian base areas up around Snuol, those places. If we could do
that we could really put the VC Division in terrible straits. We could strike as much as
we wanted against the VC, all they had to do was pull across the border and they would
be safe. We knew that, but we didn’t let it bother us too much. We just did what we
were supposed to be doing.

LC: Did what you could with—especially when you had a main, when you
actually did have these large engagements.
WL: Yeah. We punished the Division very seriously, all three regiments.
LC: It absolutely sounds like it. Every time that you came into contact with them
they took the worst of it.
WL: Yeah, by and large. Of course, then they reinforced the VC with the
Regiment down as I mentioned I think yesterday. They sent the Regiment NVA, North
Vietnamese Army, down the trail and they joined the VC Division for these actions that
followed later.

LC: Well, let’s take a break there Bill.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the thirty-first of October 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech here in the Special Collections Building and the colonel is speaking by telephone from Virginia. First of all, good morning, Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Thank you again for your time. Last time that we convened we discussed the battle of the Minh Thanh Road, both your participation in it, your observations of what happened during the battle and afterwards. Some of the losses stand on both sides. I wonder Bill if you can take us on in your tour from that point. Were you still with the division headquarters?

WL: Oh yes, yes. In my entire tour with the Infantry Division from I guess it was March ’66 to March ’67 was as the G2.

LC: Right. And so your location would have been primarily with wherever the division headquarters was located?

WL: Wherever the Division Forward was. We had two headquarters. We had Division Main or sometime we called it Division Rear and we had Division Forward, which is called Danger Forward in our terminology. I was always with wherever Danger Forward was. Minh Thanh Road Battle, as I recall, our headquarters at that time was at Quan Loi, which is about three or four kilometers northeast from An Loc. Then after the Minh Thanh Road Battle, as I recall now, we moved south to Lai Khe and established Division Forward there. That was generally where it was then at that time.

LC: What was the purpose of moving down to Lai Khe? Was it to control the valley that was nearby, the river valley?

WL: Well, it was a more central location to the division activities. That was why we moved. We moved Danger Forward to be close to where the major action was. After Minh Thanh Road, why, we didn’t have anymore—let’s see, we probably still had a battalion or two up in around Loc Ninh but I can’t recall now for sure. We had the Brigade was down by Di An and Phu Loi. The Brigade was still based at Phuoc Vinh in
War Zone D. The Brigade headquarters was at Lai Khe with Danger Forward. So we were generally in the center of the division brigade locations.

LC: After the battle that you’ve described did General DePuy continue to want to locate large concentrations of forces or their depots and did the strategy that you’ve described before continue?

WL: Yes, it did. We continued to try to get them into a fight. Minh Thanh Road was an event that really put the VC Division back on its heels for a while. As I mentioned before, just before that battle, I believe it was just before the battle, we had a large engagement with elements of the Division up at north of An Loc, between An Loc and Loc Ninh, on Route 13. After that then there was the Minh Thanh Road on—what was that? Ninth of July I believe. Then things were quiet for a while and I can’t recall any major activity until the battle in the Bong Trang Jungle, which was on the twenty-fifth of August.

LC: Twenty-fifth of August?
WL: Yeah.

LC: Can you sort of set the stage for that? First of all, where’s the—?
WL: Bong Trang?
LC: Yeah. Where’s that located relative to Lai Khe?
WL: It’s just southwest. There’s a large area of jungle there. It was a run down rubber plantation. I think it was not even in operation any longer on the edge of the Bong Trang. Bong Trang was, let’s see, north of a village called Chanh Luu, C-h-a-n-h L-u-u, Chanh Luu. If you turned west coming out of—well, first let’s oriented again. Chanh Luu was about five kilometers due west, no, excuse me, due east of Ben Cat. Ben Cat was a district headquarters of the Ben Cat District in Binh Duong Province.

LC: Ben Cat lies on Route 13?
WL: On Route 13, south of Lai Khe about five kilometers I’d say. I don’t have a map in front of me unfortunately. But anyway, that’s about it. So Chanh Luu was on a small unimproved road east of Ben Cat. If you went north and further east of Chanh Luu you got onto Route 14 which would take you up to Phuoc Vinh where the Brigade was.
LC: Yes.
WL: At that time Brigade was commanded by Col. Sid Barry, Sidney Barry. He later became I think commandant of West Point. But anyway, he was commanding Brigade. Micky Marks was commanding Brigade. I can’t recall who was commanding at the time. Anyway, that’s the way it was set up. The Bong Trang Jungle was the base area of the Phu Loi Battalion. We knew that. We knew it was around there, of course, we didn’t know precisely where it was. But we knew it was in that area. Phu Loi Battalion was one of the oldest main force battalions in the VC structure. It had a very good record. It operated with at least three companies and perhaps four rifle companies. It had its own organic mortars and recoilless rifles. It operated in and around Lai Khe, War Zone C, the southern part of War Zone C, and War Zone D for years.

LC: Even back into the French period?

WL: Yes.

LC: How did you know that?

WL: Well, just from histories that the MACV provided us about enemy order of battle. I suspected, and I don’t recall now why I thought this, but we must have had some information on it, that many of its soldiers and officers as well came from or had families in Chanh Luu in that village there. That was kind of their village; their dependents lived in and around Chanh Luu village. During that period after Minh Thanh Road we conducted a number of operations to cordon—we called them cordon and search. We would put in two or three battalions around Chanh Luu, blocking all entrances to the village. Then in conjunction with the Vietnamese counter-intelligence and police folks would go into Chanh Luu and search all their houses, the tunnels, and interrogate suspicious characters. If you found a young man of military age and he wasn’t in the Army the chances were pretty good that he was in the VC in that area. So that’s what went on there. There was one particular incident I remember very well. In my recollection we probably did this in that summer perhaps three times. We made this foray into Chanh Luu and surround the place and then search it. One of these times I was flying with General DePuy, flying over the village. You could see our troops down there in positions around the village. Here comes a fellow, a Vietnamese, on a bicycle riding as fast as he could on the top of a dike, their rice fields around there. He was riding on one of these small dikes that separated the rice fields and was going very fast. DePuy
directed his pilot to fly around the fellow and the gunners to fire some machine guns in
front of him to try to get him to stop so we could capture him and talk to him because he
was breaking the cordon. He wasn’t supposed to be doing that. So, he didn’t stop. Well, they fired several rounds in front of him but that didn’t even slow him down. So finally
DePuy gave the order to go ahead and shoot him. So they did. He fell off the bike and
off the dike into the rice paddy, which was dry. DePuy said to me on the intercom, he
said, “We’re going to land now. You go down and see who that guy is.” So, that was
kind of routine. So we landed and I ran over there. I had to go about maybe fifty yards
over to the body. It was pretty bloody. I pulled out of his shirt a pistol, which was
wrapped in oilcloth, a map, a protractor, a Chinese protractor, and a little notebook of
some kind. Took that back to the helicopter and we took off. Found out later that he was
an officer, a VC officer. I’m not sure now whether he was in Phu Loi or not. But he was
a fairly high ranking cadre. He had marked on his map some positions for rockets, for
their artillery rockets. Apparently he was an artillery officer. His protractor kind of
indicated that too, doing plotting on his map for firing his rockets. It was kind of
interesting. I gave the pistol to my driver. Anyway that’s a little incident that happened
there. There was a couple of little actions around there, not much. Most of the people
submitted to the searches and so on. The police would arrest a few people each time
because they didn’t have proper ID or were suspected to be VC and so on. But that was
kind of a lead up to the battle at Bong Trang. Oh, another thing that happened there. The
CIA in Saigon had a little team that was doing, making devices and—well, I don’t know
what they call them. A technology team. They gave me a radio, a PRC-25, which was a
standard infantry radio. It was equipped with an antenna that had a transmitter in it.
They also gave me a couple of devices to listen in on that antenna. It was just giving a
signal that you could pick up on these little receivers. The receivers then, if you put them
in a proper position, you could triangulate where that radio was at any particular time. So
on one of these raids into Chanh Luu I gave the radio to one of the battalion commanders
and asked him to give it to one of his companies and have them leave it behind after they
left Chanh Luu on the expectation that a VC would pick it up. They’d take it into the
jungle somewhere and we could track it and find out where they took the radio. So we
did that. We did find out that they did take the radio into the Bong Trang Jungle. That’s where I expected them to take it anyway. So that was another little thing that we did. LC: Who would follow up on the information from triangulating and locating that?

WL: Well, we would report it to, of course gave the information to the G3 and if he wanted to do anything about it he could send somebody in there. Actually, I don’t believe that we did exploit that directly. That was just another piece of information that contributed to our understanding that there was some major activity going on in the Bong Trang Jungle. So in August, about the middle of August, Brigade was directed to send a reconnaissance—what they called a reconnaissance in force. I think he used one company of—one battalion to do this. They used, let’s see, they used the Battalion of the Infantry and they went into the Bong Trang Jungle from the east side on this reconnaissance, using one company followed by another one and then the third company following that one—kind of a column. The Company got in there on the twenty-fifth of August and they walked right into the center—this is my reconstruction of it anyway. They walked into a center of a major VC base camp and it was a base camp of the Phu Loi Battalion. They got in there without even realizing it, it was so well camouflaged. The VC attacked immediately. It was an ambush, very difficult one, and I don’t recall how many were killed in that. I think there were probably about thirty killed in the/ in that operation. They were stuck in there. They tried to extract—the jungle’s very, very thick and high. There were no landing zones close. The Company got in there and they got into the same fire zone and were taking casualties. It was pretty bad. They were fighting well. The body count that they reported was over a 120 VC killed. I think that was probably close. General DePuy sent the Battalion of the Infantry in there to relieve. They came in from the west side and they had to march on a compass bearing. There were no trails. Let’s see, Paul Gorman, Lt. Col. Paul Gorman was commanding the battalion. He was in front. He was right up there with his point company, point platoon. He got into it too. They smacked into another VC company of the Phu Loi Battalion. Gorman called for napalm. We had air over there by this time. One of the canisters, the napalm canisters, hit so close that it burned Gorman. It took the map right out of his hands, burned that up. His company he was with took a number of casualties
from our own napalm as I recall. It was a bad battle. But Gorman did a good job in even
finding the place and getting in there. Let’s see, I can’t recall—I think I was with
Hollingsworth that day. Sid Barry, the brigade commander, he landed in there too,
himself, to try to sort it out. It was a great deal of confusion. Barry did a real good job of
even getting in there, helping the battalion commanders sort it out. We had two
battalions at that time operating in the area. They needed some coordination so Barry did
that. He took two or three of his staff in there with him, I believe.

LC: The principal difficulties were being introduced by the terrain?
WL: Yes.

LC: The difficulty of the jungle?
WL: The main jungle is so dense and the VC had been there for years and
everything was so well camouflaged. Obviously they had tunnels through there;
interlocking tunnels among the bunkers that they had constructed that were extremely
hard to see. When they cleared a small landing zone Hollingsworth and I landed. While
we were in there the Air Force sent in one of their Dust-off. I don’t recall why they used
them. I think their Dust-off had a—this was a strange helicopter. It had twin rotors,
counter rotating rotors on one mast. I can’t remember the name of that aircraft. But
anyway it was good in the hover and they had a basket winch system where they could
bring out casualties without a landing zone. They were using that to take the casualties
out—winching them up to the helicopter.

LC: When you say that you and General Hollingsworth were together and that
you had to clear an LZ, can you explain what that means for someone who—?
WL: That means that they put in chainsaws. They usually—rifle companies don’t
take chainsaws with them, obviously. So they had to be dropped in from the division
engineers. The Engineer Battalion would send in a couple of soldiers with chainsaws to
cut down some of the big trees and make enough area for a helicopter to land. That’s
what they were doing.

LC: Did you actually land then in this?
WL: Yes, we landed and looked around, talked to a few of the soldiers. That’s
what Hollingsworth doing and DePuy came in, he landed. Then later in the afternoon
General Westmoreland came in. He landed too. It was quite an event—lot of brass in there.

LC: Well, his purpose obviously would have been to speak to General DePuy?

WL: Yes, yes. To see what was going on and how they were handling the situation. We had quite a few casualties. As I said, there were at least thirty KIA and a rather large number of wounded. So it wasn’t as bad as that action down there in Phuoc Tuy Province earlier but it was close to that.

LC: Bill, can you describe General Westmoreland’s demeanor that day? Were you around the discussions?

WL: I was in the same little command group there with him. He’s very—Westmoreland never lost his cool. Kind of reminded me of what Robert E. Lee might have been like. Very calm and—well, what would you say? He was compassionate but he never made jokes. I never saw him—I can’t remember him ever smiling. He was always very much a business oriented—he was a very serious fellow. Of course DePuy and Westmoreland had been together for a couple of years before so they knew each other very well.

LC: Was there any sense that some greater US operation might take place in support of the Division units that had already been committed here?

WL: No, it wasn’t that big. We weren’t fighting more than one battalion. We identified all three companies. We identified three companies of the Phu Loi Battalion in that action. So we knew that that was that and there probably wasn’t any more people in there. The Phu Loi then, eventually, they withdrew from there. Where they went I don’t know, probably north. In fact north was about the only way they could go. If they went west they would have been in Lai Khe if they went east they would have run into the rest of the Brigade. So they must have gone north.

LC: In a battle like this what do you as intelligence officer learn about the enemy?

WL: Oh, we learned that if you—it was pretty obvious that when you get into their base camp you’re in deep trouble unless you have some warning ahead of time that that’s where you’re headed. Then you can put in artillery. But, see, in the jungle like that it’s almost impossible to know where to put the artillery, where to shoot it. Besides that you have the problem of putting it on your own troops. It’s very hard to tell where
everybody is. They routinely ask the forward elements to pop smoke but if you’re flying
overhead and trying to see the smoke, many times you don’t see it. It doesn’t get up
through the canopy. If it is it’s so widely dispersed that it’s hard to tell where it started.
If there’s any wind at all you don’t know where they are. It’s extremely difficult. As I
say, Gorman had to go in there on a compass course.

LC: Was he injured, do you know?

WL: Yes, he was. He was burned. Not awfully badly but he was burned. He had
been wounded pretty badly in the Korean War too. Gorman was a pretty well
experienced infantryman.

LC: Of course he became a four star general, I think, later on.

WL: Yes, he did. He commanded SOUTHCOM (United States Southern
Command) in one of his [assignments] as a four star general.

LC: Bill, in terms of intelligence gathered, were you or the

WL: I don’t recall picking up any documents, if that’s what you mean. I think
they probably—again, I don’t even know if they had any live POWs. I can’t recall any
POWs coming out of that operation. I think I mentioned before, we had an intelligence
operation against the Phu Loi Battalion in which we had pretty good information that the
executive officer of Phu Loi was willing to Chieu Hoi. That is, to become, you know, to
defect along with a number of people, a number of soldiers, from the battalion. But that
operation went sour.

LC: Why did it go south again? I can’t remember.

WL: Well, it was compromised. I had pretty strong information that it was
compromised by the officer who was commanding the defenses around Phu Loi called
the Lam Son taskforce. That Lam Son was probably penetrated by VC intelligence.

LC: We’re talking now about essentially ARVN forces?

WL: No. We’re talking about an American taskforce there at our headquarters.

They were at what they called Lam Son. It was north of Di An and south of Chanh Luu,
in that area. It was an old airbase the Japanese had used it there at Phu Loi and that was
one reason we had our aviation battalion located there. There were hangars and there were a lot of good concrete helipads and an airstrip for the ASTA (Aerial Surveillance and Target Acquisition) platoon and so on. Our division artillery headquarters was there also. Probably only one battalion of artillery but DIVARTY headquarters was there. General DePuy put the security of that base in the hands of Major Bobby Schweitzer. He had a small task force and some attached infantry and other folks to defend the base. There was a large ARVN headquarters there also so it was a combined operation. I have reason to believe that when Schweitzer found out that our intelligence team at Phu Loi was doing an operation that he insisted on being informed on it. I believe that’s where the leak was. A lot of that is supposition. I never did have anything hard evidence. But I did call Schweitzer in to meet with me in Di An and I told him to get hands off of that thing, that wasn’t his business to be involved in it, to back off. I told General DePuy about it too and I said, “You can’t have people that don’t have a need to know involved in these sorts of things because they can really get compromised very quickly.” But I think it was too late. The intelligence chief, the sergeant who I had in charge of that operation in Phu Loi, had come to me and complained that Schweitzer had asked him to tell him everything about what he was doing and so on. He said that he was caught between two bosses. You know, it was very untenable for him to do that.

LC: Was the sense Bill that there might have been some Vietnamese on his staff or in his headquarters who were relaying information outside appropriate channels?

WL: Yeah, that was probably a good supposition at least. That wasn’t his fault. I mean it was just that that’s the way things were over there. If you had any Vietnamese in your headquarters at all, any number of them, it was always good probability that at least one of them was an agent, a source. You wouldn’t call him a spy but he was reporting to somebody on activities. He was given missions to pick up stuff if he could find it, documents or whatever and turn it in to somebody, to an agent handler, a VC agent handler. We knew that. We were constantly on the guard for it. All employees were screened, vetted, before they were hired. But that was no absolute guarantee that you’d catch everybody.

LC: Did you know much about the vetting process and who it was administered by?
WL: I knew what they did, yeah, sure. If they were an employee of the Division they were vetted by our own counter-intelligence team from the MI Detachment. We had counter-intelligence team and that was one of their jobs. Of course other headquarters had their own. MACV had its own large, much larger, counter-intelligence effort to keep their headquarters clean. The other aspect of VC intelligence was that they had infiltrated virtually all of the ARVN headquarters. So that when you had a joint operation with ARVN units you had to be very careful in your coordination. If you let them in on the operation too far in advance the chances that there would be compromise were much higher than if you told them at the last minute. Then there might not be enough time for the agent, whoever it might be, to get the information out and for the VC to react to it. So that’s why some of the coordination wasn’t with ARVN units wasn’t as good as it otherwise could have been. If you could be sure or have some real high confidence that your operation was not going to be compromised—as I mentioned earlier, in this Minh Thanh Road battle we anticipated that if we told the province chief about our plans to send the Cav down the Minh Thanh Road to pick up this equipment we had working at the airfield—if we told him about that that information would inevitably get to the VC. I’m pretty confident that it did. I think I was one of the reasons why they moved in those three battalions of the Regiment on the Minh Thanh Road because they’d had advanced knowledge that we’re going to send just one troop of down that road. They thought that they could ambush it and destroy it. But of course in anticipation of that we positioned several infantry battalions and virtually all of the division artillery in position to fire on them when the battle started.

LC: You mentioned that you wouldn’t necessarily let ARVN commanders or joint staffs know about operations much in advance unless you had this kind of plan in place like you did at Minh Thanh Road. How much do you think that undermined what ARVN forces could contribute to the pursuit of the enemy?

WL: I don’t think it mattered a great deal because—at this stage of the war anyway—because we, the US forces—I’ll back track. MACV had decided that US forces would be employed against the main force out in the war zones and that the ARVN forces would be devoted, primarily, to the inner defenses of major population centers where they were located. So in our area that meant that the Division and the Division
and the Cav and the and so on, they would be devoted to working up in War Zone C and War Zone D and that the ARVN forces would be operating against the VC and the VC infrastructure in the inner defenses of Saigon. That was generally the concept. So it didn’t—at least in our zone—it didn’t matter all that much. I can’t speak for how it worked in the Delta. I know the Infantry Division moved in to the Delta and how they worked with the ARVN and Divisions I don’t know. I don’t know how it affected their operations.

LC: Did US G2 have to go and meet with a counterpart ARVN intelligence official?

WL: Not very often. I was supposed to do that. But most of the time I couldn’t because of time and distance factors. Also I was concerned about the things that I was just talking about that if I shared too much information with them it would compromise what we were collecting and so on. I met with them now and then though, the G2s of those divisions, and also with the division commanders like General Thuan of the, I guess, yeah, the Division commander. General Dao of, at that time, the Division. I met with them along with DePuy. I didn’t do it independently.

LC: Right. In general, were these more pro-forma meetings than actual exchanges between men?

WL: I think so, yes. I would say that. Yeah. It was only in my later tour when I was intelligence [chief] for DAO that I had regular meetings with my counterpart in the J2 of the Joint General Staff. We exchanged everything each other knew. I couldn’t do that that frequently or that intimately as G2 of the Division.

LC: Sure. Sure. How often did you actually go down to Saigon, Bill, during this tour?

WL: Perhaps once a month or so. I went down there once or twice on [B-52 targeting]. But most of the time I sent my planning officer down to coordinate with the B-52 strikes. I made the initial contact and then sent him down. I went down there once in a while to meet at the Combined Intelligence Center, CICV (Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam), and at the Documents Exploitation Center. We mentioned those before. Combined Document Exploitations Center. I did that more as a matter of courtesy, kind of a courtesy call, to let them know what we wanted and how we
appreciated their efforts and that sort of thing. Just to keep them aware that we were
interested in anything they picked up on our, on the VC order of battle in our region.

LC: So that you could kind of keep on their radar in some ways?
WL: Sure.

LC: Sure. Bill, were you, I mean as an old infantry guy, were you actually
happier being out in the field and trying to help with field operations?
WL: Oh definitely, and from time to time DePuy would let me go out with a
battalion. I mentioned I went out on that one long-range reconnaissance patrol. I went
out with the, let’s see, Jack Conn’s battalion, I guess it was, there at Tay Ninh. Later on
with another battalion up in northern Tay Ninh. So I wouldn’t say I went on operations
but I spent a day with a battalion in the field in action a couple of times just to see what
was going on.

LC: One thing that you mentioned to me in some notes that you gave me was one
occasion—I don’t know whether we’ve come to it in your narrative yet or not—when you
had more POWs than you could handle within the division yourself. There was a MACV
interrogation team that came out to help.
WL: Yes.
LC: Do you remember roughly when that was or under what circumstances that
occurred?
WL: That was probably, let me think now. Let me look in my record here and see
what was—that was probably, that went up on the thirtieth of June ’66. There were a lot
taken there. That was called Srok Dong. We were at Quan Loi that was thirtieth of June.
That was that big battle that just pre-dated the battle at Minh Thanh Road and it was with
an element of the Division. I believe it was the Regiment. There were a lot of prisoners
from there. There were over two hundred killed. The place smelled terrible. The
prisoners, those that were still alive—of course, obviously they’re not a prisoner if they
are not alive. Anyway, most of them were wounded. Dropped them into an aid station at
Quan Loi. Let’s see, the division surgeon was Dalton. Jim Dalton. Lt. Col. Jim Dalton.
Very fine doctor. Member of the College of Surgeons, I believe. Anyway, he had this
aid station set up there and he was doing triage with the prisoners and with the American
wounded. There were a lot wounded. It was a very large operation. He had two or three
surgeons there working with him. Behind where the operating room was, which was in a
tent, was another enclosure closed off with tarps on the side. Like a wall, like a fence
around it, no cover, but a fence around it to hide it where the bodies were—bodies that
were brought in either about to die or died on the way in or whatever. There must have
been thirty or forty bodies there all covered with—very well covered but some of them
with ponchos over them or blankets or something. I walked through there up and down
the rows looking at them and I saw some movement on one of them. Of course all these
people were supposed to be dead. This one wasn’t dead. He had a head wound. So I
went and I told Jim, I said, “Do you know back there in your morgue you’ve got a live
one?” He said, “Oh yeah, yeah? Show me.” So I went back there and I showed him, and
they brought the fellow in. Actually they saved his life. He was a VC probably out of
that Regiment. That was kind of an interesting footnote to triage I guess. It was
amazing. The fellow, he was unconscious. Apparently they couldn’t detect any breath
from him or something. Anyway, but they did. Jim told me later, “You know we saved
that guy. He’s going to be okay.” Another thing about Jim if I can skip ahead since
we’re talking about casualties. I was back at—I don’t remember what time of year this
was—but I was back in Di An, one of the few times that I had to stay back at the
headquarters. I probably was working on officer efficiency reports or something. But I
kept the radio next to my little folding table, which was my office, and the radio came on
and it was 7-9er. That was Hollingsworth, assistant division commander. He says, “7-4,
where the hell are you?” I said, “This is 7-4. I’m in my office.” He said, “Well, get your
ass down to the airstrip. I’m coming in. I’ve got a casualty, a VC, and I want you to find
out who he is.” So I said, “Roger that and I’ll get the surgeon down there.” He said,
“Okay.” So I called Jim Dalton and I said, “We’ll go down to the airstrip at Di An
because 7-9er is coming in with a casualty and he wants me to interrogate him and he
wants you to patch him up.” So I got one of our interpreters, my IPW (prisoner of war
interrogation) section to go with me. We met the aircraft. Now here’s General
Hollingsworth, he’s sitting in his seat, and he’s got this fellow cradled in his arm. He’s
covered with blood and he’s got bone chips in his belt. This fellow had his arm, this VC
had a shattered arm and had been hit by multiple rounds, apparently, up in the shoulder
and upper arm. Handed him over to a litter team from the Medical Battalion and Jim
Dalton was there and he said—I think he told Hollingsworth, “It’s impossible to
interrogate this fellow right now because he’s in shock and we can’t talk to him. Let me
patch him up first.” Hollingsworth wasn’t too happy about that. But it was obvious that
you couldn’t talk to a guy that’s in shock. The circumstances of how he got him were
kind of interesting too. It was one of our battalions operating close to Di An, which was
kind of a wild area. There was brush, there were stands of bamboo, there were little huts,
little farms, around there. It was a local VC outfit that was operating in there. It was
probably a battalion from the Brigade that had the responsibility there. As they were
flying around, Hollingsworth told me about this. He said, “We were flying around and
we saw this little guy run out of the hut and run into this big [stand] of bamboo.” Now,
this bamboo in this area is very large and thorny. These little stands of bamboo might be
twenty or thirty feet across, round clump. He said, “We flew around this thing and we
fired machine guns around the edges of it hoping this guy would come out. But he didn’t
so we fired into the bamboo and then he came out. But he came out and he stumbled and
fell so we knew he’d been hit. So we landed and we picked him up. We found out that
his arm had been almost severed by the shots and that’s why we brought him back.” That
was kind of the end of the story. I don’t remember now what happened except that Jim
Dalton told me later, he said, “We saved his arm.” I said, “Well, that’s good.” But I’m
sure there wasn’t any great intelligence coup coming out of that. The poor little guy was
just a little local VC and so what. You know, we got them by the hundreds. But anyway
that was kind of a typical 7-9er operation.

LC: That being General Hollingsworth?
WL: Yes, yes.
LC: Okay. Bill, let me ask you, under what circumstances would MACV have
sent out a supplementary interrogation team?
WL: When I asked for it. If the number of prisoners and/or documents exceeded
our capability to handle quickly in our own organic resources, why, I would call MACV
and they’d send out a team.
LC: Did this happen Bill?
WL: This happened two or three times. I can remember a couple of the people.
One was Wick Toureson. I can’t recall now whether he was working documents or
working interrogations. It doesn’t matter much. They were kind of co-mingled. The
other one was, let’s see, Jean Sauvagio, Sauvagio, who later turned up when I was
working in DAO Saigon. Later I had contact with him when I was with the Senate Select
Committee on POWs. He was an extremely good Vietnamese linguist, a good officer
too. When I saw him later in the war, you know, when I was with the Senate Select
Committee in 1972 he had just, I believe he had just retired as a colonel.

LC: How do you spell his last name roughly?

WL: Sauvagio. S-a-u-v-a-g-i-o? I might have it written down here somewhere.

When and if we ever get to talk about DAO Saigon—

LC: We will. I promise.

WL: I can tell you an incident with him.

LC: Sure. Okay. I’ll remember to ask you about him. But he had this previous
posting with MACV?

WL: Yes. He was either in their document exploitation team or in their POW
team and I can’t recall which. Toureson. There was a Captain Shipman who was in
charge of it. There was a SPC-4 Clogg, C-l-o-g-g. They were interpreters, and also SPC
Ford Gentry. He was another interpreter for that team.

LC: When did they—?

WL: I can’t recall now what Sauvagio was but I remember meeting him there.

LC: When did they come out? Do you remember what the operation was or the
circumstances?

WL: No, I don’t specifically. I think one of them was after that operation up at
Srok Dong north of An Loc. The other one I’m pretty sure was one that we had up in
Tay Ninh. Let me see if I can see what that one was. That was up near, let’s see—it was
called Ap Cha Do. That’s according to the record here. I don’t remember it by that
name. But this was on the eighth of November ’66. This was a large operation that
had—in which we—I believe this is where we identified the NVA Regiment that
marched down the trail and joined the VC Division. Joined then, , , Regiments. I think
that’s where we ran into that in that operation.

LC: What can you tell me about that operation?
WL: Well, it was in the deep jungle again, north of, let’s see, generally north of
the mountain of Nui Ba Den on Local Route—north of what they called Local Route 13.
Not to be confused with National Route 13, which went north. Local Route 13 was an
east-west highway that went between Tay Ninh and Chon Thanh. Chon Thanh was on
Route Thirteen north of Lai Khe, south of An Loc. Tay Ninh City was there in southwest
Tay Ninh Province. Nui Ba Den was a conical mountain, I think we mentioned it before,
was north of Tay Ninh—north and east of Tay Ninh City. This action around Route 13
was with two or three Vietnamese NVA or VC battalions. By this time all of the
battalions in the VC Division were—we estimated at least ninety percent were
replacements from the North Vietnamese Army. So although we still called the Division
the VC Division, that’s how it started, it was for all intents and purposes a regular
division of the North Vietnamese Army by that time. Its weaponry was the same. Its
organization was the same as the North Vietnamese Army. Although they still had some
southern commanders in it most of them, the soldiers and officers in it, by this time were
northerners. I don’t recall the battalions we had in contact there. Our headquarters at that
time was probably still at Lai Khe in November. I recall one incident. A company of the
Regiment was ambushed by one of our battalions. Seems to me it was Jack Whitted’s
battalion. Now I can’t remember which battalion he commanded, but that’s probably
who it was. We captured several prisoners in there alive and then some of them weren’t
even wounded. They were surprised by this. We interrogated the company commander
who was a lieutenant and I may have mentioned that I had a VC platoon that we used as
guides in subsequent operations. This lieutenant agreed to be part of that platoon. He
was so upset with the fact that the Division provided him with a guide that didn’t know
where he was going and brought him right into the ambush of our battalion.

LC: That he turned over, essentially?
WL: Turned over, yeah, and he joined our platoon. He was one of the first that
we recruited, as I recall. In any case, [he’d had] enough. That was the Battalion of the
I believe was the battalion that captured him. /, what we call the Black Lions. Jack
Whitted was commanding that battalion. He was a very excellent battalion commander.
In any case, that was that event. When we had a number of prisoners like that it was
beyond the capability of our people to conduct all of the interrogations. The MACV
teams were also, I would say, more professional. They had done more of it over the years. Several of these people had been in country for much more than a year so had good experience at doing this.

LC: You know, Bill, interrogation techniques and limits has become a very important contemporary issue with regard to the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and US treatment of those who are held, particularly down in Guantanamo. Can you remember anything about the instructions that were in operation during your time over there?

WL: I instructed all of my people and I also talked to battalion commanders about this and I told them very clearly and firmly that we would not interrogate prisoners with any force or intimidation or any chemicals or electrical or anything. I can give you a couple of instances. In one of these operations we had up around Chanh Luu, in conjunction with the ARVN. We had an ARVN security platoon or maybe some regional forces with us and they captured some people. I was driving in my jeep, which I didn’t do very often, along the road towards Chanh Luu and there was a small hut off to the side of the road, maybe thirty or forty meters off. There was one of our companies there and some ARVN kind of milling around there. I heard some screams coming from this hut. I stopped and went down there and I discovered that they were using the old system of wiring a man’s genitals to a telephone and turning the crank to a field telephone and giving him a shock.

LC: Now this is the ARVN?

WL: Yeah, yeah. The ARVN were doing it but the Americans were standing by and watching it and I put a stop to it right there on the spot. I said, “We don’t do that.” I told them that the fact is that you’re not going to get a great deal of intelligence that way anyway. You’re going to get what he thinks you want to hear and it may or may not be valid. That was one instance that I ran into that. I’m not saying that it didn’t happen again.

LC: No, I believe you.

WL: I can’t be there all the time.

LC: Bill can I just clarify, to your memory, was it actually ARVN or was it regional forces or do you know?
WL: ARVN was doing it. I don’t know whether they were regional or regular. I can’t recall that. General Hollingsworth had the idea that if you gave your prisoners sodium pentothal, so-called truth serum, you’d get more information. Every time he brought it up I said, “There are two things wrong with this. One, it’s a violation of the Geneva Accords on handling prisoners of war and we shouldn’t do it. Secondly, your chances that you’re just going to put him to sleep are high and what you get out of him wouldn’t necessarily be valid anyway. He might be hallucinating or so on. We have found through experience that if a man has anything significant to say that we can find it out through clever interrogation.” I’m not saying you didn’t try to intimidate him with words but there are techniques that the Army teaches in interrogation of POWs are based upon some pretty sound principles, psychology, and so on. I figured if we could get that information that way that was good enough. So I had to impress him on that but he’d bring it up every once in a while. He’d tell me, “Get the doc over here with some sodium pentothal.” I talked to Doc Dalton and I said, “Look, when he asks you for that you know what to say. That is that you don’t have any sodium pentothal to start with and if you did you wouldn’t use it because it violates your code of conduct as a physician. So you just don’t do that and stick by your guns on it.” So we did. We never did use it, of course. It sounded ridiculous. But that’s what old Jim Hollingsworth wanted to do. He thought it was a harmless sort of thing and I again impressed upon him as strong as I could that it wasn’t necessary. It was a violation of the code and we weren’t going to do it.

LC: It sounds like you had good faith in the less invasive methods, let’s say, of extracting information. It seems like you had good luck with them. Is that essentially accurate? I mean there were people who were—I don’t know if Chieu Hoi was yet the term. I guess it must have been, 1966, ’67.

WL: The individual is called Hoi-Chanh. An individual that—

LC: The ralliers.

WL: —That rallied under what they called the Chieu Hoi program. Chieu Hoi was the name of the program and Hoi-Chanh was the one who rallied. I don’t know Vietnamese but that’s—

LC: I think yours is probably better than mine.
WL: Yeah. That’s the way it was. The other part of it is, the prisoners, the type
of prisoners that we would get on the battlefield were not high level people who could tell
you much of value anyway. We didn’t get members of the Politburo. You know?

LC: No. That would have been too much to hope for.

WL: We got privates. The highest ranking that I remember we got was that
lieutenant. Yeah, he could tell you that he marched down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He
told us the whole story about how long it took him to get there. We turned him over to
MACV for more detailed and comprehensive interrogation because they were interested
in anything of strategic importance that he could give him. Such as how many binh trams
did you go through? What was at the binh tram, you know, in Laos?

LC: A binh tram being a stopping station or—?

WL: Yeah. That was a headquarters. They had them spaced along I don’t
remember how many miles apart. But where the infiltrators would stop for the night they
usually had an aid station that is hospital. They had rations, they had protection of
course. They had anti-aircraft protection around them. They were heavily camouflaged.
They had engineer units there to keep the trails, the roads, repaired that got bombed out,
things like that. It was a subordinate headquarters of I think it was the . That was the
designation.

LC: Yeah. I think you’re right.

WL: Was headquartered up in Vinh, North Vietnam and binh tram – I don’t
remember what the precise translation of the words are. But it was, like you say, a way
station along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a communications headquarters and so on. But
that’s the kind of information that MACV—now, that didn’t make a great deal of
difference to us in the Division. We relied on MACV for that sort of intelligence and
there wasn’t much that we could do with that information anyway. We were interested in
immediate tactical information.

LC: Speaking of that Bill, it reminds me that I ought to have asked another
question about this fellow that you saw from the helicopter. I think you were with
General DePuy and he was riding on his bike and eventually it was decided that you had
to shoot him because he wouldn’t stop and he was the one with the Chinese protractor.
You remember him. What would happen to the material found on him? For example, I
think you mentioned he had a map. You would look at it obviously and make whatever
quick evaluations you could. But what would be the chain of custody, if you will, of
material taken like that in the field?
WL: Well, initially I would turn it over to my own document exploitation team in
the division’s military intelligence detachment, the MI Detachment. They would extract
whatever information they thought was of tactical value, immediate value to the division.
Then they would turn it over to the MACV combined intelligence center, or Combined
Documents Exploitation Center rather.
LC: Right. CDEC.
WL: Yeah. One of our guys would get in a jeep and drive into Saigon and turn it
over to them. That’s the way that worked.
LC: Okay. Was there a separate unit that took care of material like, say, the
protractor? So the documents would go one way and—?
WL: I kept that as a souvenir.
LC: Oh you did?
WL: Yes.
LC: Oh boy, well you and I can discuss that later. Wow.
WL: It was just a plain protractor that you find in a ten cent store.
LC: You knew it was Chinese because of the characters or—?
WL: It had Chinese characters on the bottom of it.
LC: Can you read Chinese Bill? I’m not trying to put you on the spot but—
WL: No, not by any means, but I can read degrees. I mean they use the same 360
degree circle that we do. I believe it was in degrees. Our artillery and mortars we used
mils but it was in degrees.
LC: I just wondered if you could tell where in fact it was manufactured. Not just
China, but was made up north—
WL: No. I didn’t figure it made much a difference.
LC: Well, I’m sure you’re right.
WL: This guy might have bought it in a store in Saigon for that matter, you know.
I mean it was the kind of a protractor that you use when you’re taking geometry.
LC: Right. Basic geometry in high school.
WL: Ninth grade, you know, you’re—that’s what it was. He also had a little hammock, a very compact little hammock, and I kept that too. Those are my two souvenirs. I kept that because it wasn’t bloody like everything else on his body. The map was kind of bloody and so was the book. As I mentioned, the pistol was wrapped. It wasn’t in any way ready to be used. It was wrapped very tightly in oilcloth to keep it clean and dry.

LC: Could you tell anything about its manufacturer from looking at it?

WL: Yeah but I don’t remember. It wasn’t anything unusual. It was a Chinese pistol. Looked like something like one of the old Jap pistols for that matter. But my driver never got to the field, never got to pick up anything, so I gave it to him.

LC: There you go. Bill, you mentioned again in a note that you sent to me that you had to convene a commission to determine the status of one particular fellow. Can you tell the circumstances of that?

WL: I can’t remember where he was captured but he was captured somewhere around Lam Son. Remember that is by Phu Loi. That is, again to put it in perspective, near Thu Duc. Thu Duc was the Vietnamese infantry school and that was in that same region. I don’t know if you got a map that shows all that on to—

LC: I do have a pretty good map but I don’t think Thu Duc is on—

WL: I mentioned that Bobby Schweitzer, Major Schweitzer, was commanding that outfit there and I believe this fellow was picked up in a village around there—

LC: Oh, I do see it now, yeah.

WL: —and he couldn’t give a good account of himself. It turned out that he was no doubt VC. He had something on him made it clear that he was a VC. When we got him the question was this: Is he an armed VC combatant? If so he, a soldier in other words of the VC that we recognize as an armed force. Therefore if he was in that category we would turn him over to the ARVN, to the Army of Vietnam. He would wind up in a prisoner of war cage, compound, that the ARVN operated. We didn’t operate any POW cages. We had temporary holding facilities but we did not keep POWs.

LC: They would be turned over to the ARVN as a matter of course.

WL: Yeah, because that was the rule. If he was, if it turned out to be he was a political cadre, if he was an agent of the political arm of the VC, then he would be turned
over to the National Police because they had the counter-intelligence [responsibilities] in
the populated area belonged to the police “special branch.” They were responsible for
rounding up all political cadre of the VC.

LC: Did you call them “special branch?”

WL: That’s what the Vietnamese called them. In affect that was a counter-
intelligence branch of the National Police. Fact as a footnote in my—I had a brother-in-
law who was a captain of this special branch, not that I talk to him much about that.

LC: Is he living in the States?

WL: Yes. Yeah. If he had stayed back they would have killed him.

LC: Oh absolutely! I was trying to tactfully ask if he was still with us.

WL: But anyway. So that was the other category. Or was he just—or maybe he
wasn’t a VC at all. He just happened to be trapped and we would just have to go ahead
and release him. As I recall those were the three categories. So by our rules, by MACV
rules and I don’t remember seeing this in writing. Our judge advocate in the division,
Division, judge advocate—I can’t recall his name now. Real good guy. He was a
lieutenant colonel. The division judge advocate was a lieutenant colonel. He told me
that we should conduct a military tribunal and determine this man’s status and when we
determined that we would know what to do with him. You couldn’t just turn him over to
the police or to the ARVN or let him go without finding out for sure who he was and
what his job was. So we convened this tribunal at Di An. Members of the tribunal were
me, the judge advocate—he ran the thing, was operating it. He operated the tribunal kind
of as a law officer. The division provost marshal, Al Timmerburg, he was a member also
because his responsibility was the handling of prisoners of war. I don’t remember who
else was on it. Maybe the chief of staff, Ed Kitchens, a couple of other people, perhaps
the division AG (adjutant general). I don’t recall. Anyway there were about five of us on
this board or commission and we examined the documents that he had on him for any
indication of what his job was. He was questioned by our interpreters to find out what his
story was and so on. Then after considering all the evidence, why, we determined what
he was. I tell you frankly I don’t remember what he was.

LC: But you resolved the issue at the time.
WL: Well, we did resolve it and we told the JAG (Judge Advocate General) that we believe he is this or that and therefore that determined his disposition. I believe we decided that he was a political cadre, low-level, and that we should turn him over to the ARVN police. I believe that was the determination that he was not an armed VC. He was not a fighter. He didn’t have the category, have the—he wasn’t in the category of a prisoner of war.

LC: So, in terms of—I’m trying to pull a word out here. Essentially he was not protected in the same way that POWs are?

WL: Exactly. He was not protected by our adherence to the Geneva Accords on prisoners of war. The Americans, our side, made every effort I believe at particularly at the higher and middle levels to comply with all of the rules of the Geneva Accords. I’m not saying that prisoners were not abused here and there in the field. Passions ran high and so on and bad things happened. But our rules that we tried to adhere to, at least at my level, and at the battalion level, they tried to protect prisoners of war. They turned him over to first for medical treatment and most of them needed it. Once we got them patched up enough, why, then we could turn them over to the ARVN for disposition. As far as I know the ARVN usually treated them much better than American prisoners of war, for example, were treated by the VC by a long shot.

LC: Do you know where some of the larger ARVN POW stations were?

WL: One was at Long Binh. That’s the only one I know of.

LC: Did you ever get over there, Bill, during this tour?

WL: I don’t believe I ever did go over there. They kept political prisoners in Saigon. What they called political. You know, cadre. They had the big jail. Can’t remember the—Gia Long?

LC: Well, that would be appropriate. Yes.

WL: That’s where they kept political guys and they kept political ones up in all of the military regions. They had a big jail in the center of Can Tho where they kept political prisoners. As far as I could see they treated them as well as anybody could expect to be treated in a big jail in the Far East. It wasn’t the Hilton.
LC: No, I’m sure. I’m sure that’s right. But in any event there was a protocol for
a division like the Division in its own operations to transfer these people to Vietnamese
custody.

WL: Yes. That’s the only commission that I remember that we ever had. I
suppose you could explain that by saying that it was pretty clear in all the other cases
when you had somebody shooting at you. Why, you figured that he was an armed
enemy. It was pretty clear. You didn’t have to discuss it and get evidence. You had a
fellow that had an AK-47. So you figured that he was a member of the VC or a member
of the NVA, one or the other. It doesn’t make any difference which.

LC: For someone who then might not get the distinction, the political cadre that
we’re talking about who would not have come under POW rules, from your point of view
as intelligence officer, what did you know about their functions?

WL: What did I know about the political arm of the VC?

LC: Yeah. What were their functions essentially?

WL: Well, their function was largely intelligence and proselyting, recruiting for
the armed VC, intimidating the villagers to support the VC that were in their regions.
That is, providing them with logistical support and so on. But essentially I would say that
their primary function was intelligence collection and probably counter-intelligence as
well.

LC: Bill, as you came to the end of 1966, do you remember anything good
happening for example at Christmas time or around New Years? Do you remember any
particular celebrations or anything that the general laid on?

WL: Well, yeah. It seems to me it was around Christmas that Bob Hope had
visited us and gave a program at our division theater, amphitheater.

LC: Where was that?

WL: I can’t say that was a high point of mine.

LC: No, probably not for you.

WL: Then we had him for lunch. I remember the division mess. I think the
troops enjoyed it. He spent a couple of days with us and then he went over to the
Division. He went out to the field with the troops, and there was a general stand down
around Christmas and I don’t remember the VC violating it in any major way. I don’t
remember much about that. We had similar situation at Tet where there was a general stand down and our directions were, “Don’t initiate any aggressive operations during Tet week.” You don’t let your guard down because the VC, although they may tacitly accept a stand down at Tet—a lot of their folks probably went home for Tet also—you can’t rely on them. They don’t sign a document that says we’re not going to do anything. But there was kind of a tacit agreement that they wouldn’t launch any major operations. That was during the Tet that I experienced there. That would have been ’67.

LC: Nothing really happened much that you remember?
WL: Unh-uh.

LC: Okay. It was pretty quiet. What were your plans, what were the division’s plans for this period at the turn of the year going into the spring?
WL: I don’t remember much. I know that General DePuy was approaching the end of his assignment as division commander. I don’t recall exactly when General Hay came in but it was shortly after that. I probably have it written down here somewhere. General DePuy left sometime in February of ’67 and I left in March. I don’t remember really much in the way of operations in that winter. Let me see if I got anything. I’m sure there were some but I don’t remember much about what happened there. I don’t have a good sense of chronology, as you probably have detected already, of when things happen.

LC: I think you’re doing pretty well Bill. Let me ask about your new assignment. Did you know where you were going to go?
WL: I don’t remember when I found out where I was going.
LC: Were you sort of marking the days until you would be extracted from this position?
WL: No, I didn’t really want to leave and one of my main efforts was to try to find somebody to take my place. I made some phone calls around to MACV and over to II Field Forces trying to find somebody who would be willing to take over the job and it wasn’t easy. There were not a lot of people that wanted it. I don’t know why but—
LC: How was it that you were—I mean would your say have played into who would accept, who would be given this position?
WL: No. I was pretty well committed to leave. I didn’t anticipate extending
my—I had some problems at home I’m not going to go into.

LC: That’s fine.

WL: But I had to, I really had to leave. I didn’t have—it wasn’t my wife either.
But I did have something to take care of at home and so I really needed to leave as soon
as I could.

LC: You mentioned before that there had been several G3s for the division while
you were there. I think you said four and that there was some thought that this was a real
resume builder for some people.

WL: It was for the G3. I didn’t do badly.

LC: Well, no you didn’t do too badly. But I wonder why there would be
reluctance to accept the position in G2 with the Division. Was it because it was a
dangerous position?

WL: Well, yeah. You were at hazard. If you did it like I did it you would be in
hazardous positions almost daily. A lot of people didn’t want to do that. I think the
fellow I finally got to replace me was a military intelligence career officer, and I’m not
too sure of that. Ted Seely. He was at II Field Forces.

LC: From the military intelligence branch?

WL: Yes. I think he was MI branch. I’m not darn exactly sure of that but I
believe he was.

LC: What was his name anyway?


LC: Okay. Did you know much about him?

WL: No, not very much. He was recommended by somebody, I don’t know who.

So I called him and he agreed to come down and look the place over and he agreed to
take the job. So then I left. Did I—if I can regress a minute, did I tell you about, I think I
told you about Al Haig and the fire fight with the VC?

LC: You mentioned that there was some discussion about the body count and the
numbers.

WL: Not that. This was the time when Al Haig got wounded.

LC: Oh, no. You didn’t. I’d be pleased if you would.
WL: Okay. Is it a good place to put it in?

LC: Sure, why not?

WL: Okay. We have to go back in time. I don’t remember now exactly when it was. I believe it was in the fall. Your records can probably pin it down because the Division and the Division were directed to launch a major operation in the Iron Triangle. I may have mentioned this, I don’t know. So DePuy and I and Al Haig flew up to the Division headquarters at Cu Chi for a meeting with General Weyand, who was commanding the, and his G3 and his G2 for planning this joint operation. The was going to operate on the west bank of the Saigon River in places that they had been before. Ho Bo Woods and up in that region. We were going to operate on the east side of the river, that is, right into the Iron Triangle moving out of Ben Cat.

LC: Yeah. We haven’t discussed this. No.

WL: Anyway, it was a major operation. So we had this planning conference with the Division. When we finished that we were flying back towards Di An. We flew over an area of rice paddies probably in Hau Nghia Province. Looking down you could see that there were some ARVN troops. They were kind of milling around in an open area by some woods and so DePuy as he would often do, he said, “Let’s go down and see what’s going on.” So we landed behind this unit. It was a battalion, an ARVN battalion. Talked to the battalion commander and his advisor. DePuy asked him if he needed any help, that he could get some artillery or air support in for him, or some gun ships or whatever they needed. They said no, that they had everything under control and they had just flushed a VC unit out of the woods there. The VC had retreated, withdrawn across this large rice field, it was dry, it was dry season. That’s why I think it was probably November or something. Anyway, they had withdrawn to the woods on the other side. Now, this rice field was I would say about a thousand meters across. It was a large field with a high dike on one side. Well, we got back in the helicopter and we made some altitude and looking down you could see a body lying beside the dike. It was VC body. So DePuy says on the intercom, “Hey Bill, we’re going to go down. You go down and see who that guy is. See if you can make an identification.” So the helicopter came down and Al Haig was sitting on the right side of the helicopter. The doors were off. We always flew with no doors. He was on the right side and I was on the left side. DePuy’s aide was between
DePuy was in front of us on the radios. Helicopter went down into a hover and the VC was on the right side of the helicopter and I was on the left. I said, “Gee, this is not too good.” The helicopter had gotten down to maybe ten feet off the terrain and expected me to jump from there. Well, that ground was really hard there and I figured I’m going to break my leg if I got out here. But I climbed out and was standing with one foot on the skid, ready to drop, and there was an explosion on the right side of the helicopter, a really loud one. Immediately the pilot pulled pitch and I just managed to scramble back in. I almost lost it. But I got back into the helicopter while he was moving up and looked over there and Al Haig’s face was covered with blood. I thought, “Well gee, what’s going on?” What had happened was that this body wasn’t dead and it had either thrown a grenade or just dropped one and the grenade, one fragment, came through the side of the helicopter and it hit Haig on the bridge of the nose and it kept on going under the skin of the nose and lodged under his left eye, under the skin. Of course I didn’t know that then. All I knew was that his face was blood. So we flew on towards Di An and made contact with an aid station. I don’t know who it belonged to, but a medical aid station in between where we were and Di An and landed. Got Haig in to the dispensary there and a surgeon pulled out the fragment and stitched him up. He was okay, but anyway that was the event. We never did get to find out who that VC was. I don’t know whether he killed himself with his grenade or not.

LC: But he was a decoy.

WL: Yeah. But we didn’t go back to find out.

LC: No, I wouldn’t think so.

WL: Anyway, the interesting part of this is that Al Haig wrote a book. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it.

LC: I have not read it.

WL: Well, don’t bother. Anyway, he gives an account of this event that is remarkably different than what happened. He says that the helicopter landed and he jumped out and the VC jumped up and fired at him with his AK-47 and Al Haig fired back with whatever weapon he had and he killed him in this firefight right there on the rice paddy. Then he got back and whatever the VC had hit him in the nose with a
grenade fragment or something and he got back in the helicopter and that’s his account of
the event.

LC: Not so much.

WL: It kind of rankled me. I suppose he forgot that I’m still alive.

LC: Well, right and you’re barely hanging on on the other side.

WL: Yeah.

LC: I have a picture of this. It sounds like in some ways you were both lucky but
maybe only one of you exploited this.

WL: Well, yeah. I mean it wasn’t an act of heroism on my part by a long shot. I
didn’t want to go off of that helicopter. I figured I was really going to break my leg, the
minimum, if I went down there. But anyway I thought it was kind of peculiar for a guy
of his seniority to make up a story about an event that didn’t happen. For what purpose I
can’t imagine. But that’s the way it’s written up in his book. I made a copy of the story;
still have the book. I didn’t read his whole book either.

LC: That’s two of us he didn’t get. Did you form any impression—you asked me
earlier to be sure to ask you about each of the folks who served in that G3 position and I
guess I’m wondering why there was such a revolving door on that job.

WL: Well, it was mainly because General DePuy wanted to give people that he
thought were good officers and had done their time as battalion commanders; he wanted
to give them an opportunity to get this G3 Division on their records.

LC: Kind of up and comers, in a way?

WL: Yeah. He inherited George Freeman. I think he was a very competent G3.

George Freeman. Yeah. He was the G3 for General Seaman. He stayed as G3 for a
couple of months, maybe not quite that long, while General DePuy took command. Then
DePuy brought in Sam Walker and he was another competent officer. I think he was
probably better G3—well, I shouldn’t say this. I guess he was a good battalion
commander too, although I don’t remember that he had command. I think he was the
executive officer of the Brigade when he took over as G3. Sam Walker later made four
stars also, as I remember. Then he was followed by, let’s see, was it Paul Gorman next or
Al Haig?

LC: I think earlier you said it was Al Haig first then Gorman later.
WL: That was probably right. Yeah, that’s right, because Gorman was commanding the / in the Bong Trang Jungle battle in August. So that time I believe Haig had just taken over as G3, although I may be wrong in that. I don’t remember for sure. But I know Walker had it, then Haig, then Gorman. All three of those eventually became four star generals, as you know. Haig went on to even more—

LC: Lofty. Pretty lofty.

WL: Yeah, more lofty positions. Gorman was probably the, in my view, the smartest and the most innovative, imaginative officer they had as G3 when I was G2. It seemed to me that he made better use of the intelligence we were providing to him and engineered the operations in somewhat better form than the rest of them, although they were all competent. There’s a quite a bit to being a G3 that never meets the eye, you know. All the planning goes into it, particularly when you’re involved with air mobile operations. It’s a big job. They all had very, very good staff officers working for them. They picked some of the best majors and captains that they could find to put in the G3 section. I also, I must say that I had some excellent officers in my G2 operations and my G2 planning staff.

LC: To what extent could you actually identify people and bring them in, Bill, as the—?

WL: I didn’t have much influence on that. It seems to me, as I recall now, that my deputies worked on that. I didn’t have a personal hand in that. I let them find the officers that they wanted. From time to time they would bring up an officer who had done well in the brigade, the brigade S2 section. They’d bring them in and they brought in some excellent officers. They didn’t have any officers that were not top-rank officers, analysts and writers and briefers. They were all good at it.

LC: That’s actually a testimony to the training that had gone into the preparation of each of those guys for those positions.

WL: Right. Most of them had had a good infantry experience at the, you know, platoon and company level at least. They knew what was going on in the field. I’m still of the opinion that intelligence in the tactical level—that is, in the brigade and division level—should be done by line officers, officers who have extensive experience in either armor or infantry operations. That picking them out of the military intelligence ranks is
not a good idea at that level unless the fellow happened to have had infantry experience
before he transferred over into military intelligence. Then it’s okay.

LC: Well, the military intelligence branch was just being launched at this time.

Does that sound right to you? Sixty-four, sixty-five something in there?

WL: I don’t know old the branch is but the branch in those days, they were still, I
would say, technicians. They were trained in collection, that is, in covert, clandestine
operations, human intelligence or they were trained in communications intelligence.
They were specialists in that. Or they were maybe specialists in photo interpretation or in
POW interrogation or documents. They were linguists and so on. They were specialists
and we needed them. Those are the kind of folks that you needed in your military
intelligence detachment. But they weren’t the kind of, they didn’t have the kind of
experience in infantry or armor operations that you need to know what’s important in the
intelligence field. What’s going to be important to the division commander or to the
brigade commander in planning operations. That’s where you need people with
experience in those, in infantry or armor, to provide that kind of staff work for the
division commander. That’s the difference. I think there’s been a trend now recently to
put more specialists in the division staffs. I’m not saying it’s a bad idea because I think
in a lot of cases these days they do give these intelligence officers experience in the line
as infantry or armor before they—

LC: Pull them out to specialize.

WL: Yeah, before they put them in the MI branch.

LC: So that when they’re more senior they come back to the staffs, they have
some operational experience.

WL: Yes.

LC: Let me ask a little bit Bill about your feelings about the general situation, the
general security situation, in Vietnam as you were leaving in the spring of 1967. Did you
think the—I mean I don’t know how to put this generally. But did you have a sense that
the United States was making good military investments that would pay off down the
road in defeating the enemy or was it not so clear?

WL: It wasn’t at all clear; let me put it that way. I’ll give you an example. One
of the last operations we did was up near Katum, K-a-t-u-m, which is a road junction. A
very small Montagnard village I’d say in north central Tay Ninh Province. We had at least a brigade operating in there. We had several engagements. I went with one battalion one day where we got pretty well pinned down. We located a large hospital complex there. I remember bringing in one B-52 strike on a suspected VC area just east of Katum. In fact we were only about a thousand meters from the box and it was very exciting. We practically lifted off the ground by the concussions.

LC: The box is the target area?

WL: The box is the target. Yeah. I think it was nine plane strike. It was a pretty large one.

LC: I bet that shook your back teeth.

WL: It was really interesting. In any case we had a lot of contacts up there.

General Hay had just assumed command and one battalion located a long trace of communications wire. They were in different colors. I remember seeing some were blue, some were red, and they were tracing through the jungle towards the Cambodian border going from east to west. Going in the direction where we had all, for the whole year, plotted as the likely location of COSVN, the Central Office of South Vietnam NVA headquarters in South Vietnam. They were going in that direction. Seeing these in connection also with communications intelligence that showed activity in that direction. Talked to General Hay and the G3 and chief of staff and said, “We ought to be going in that direction. We have to be following these communications lines and we’re likely to uncover a major base camp if nothing else.” In fact it was likely that we were going to uncover at least one element of COSVN in that area. They didn’t want to do that because we could get bogged down in that deep jungle and run into more than we could handle. I had the impression even that early—this was in March, February of ’67—that they were under orders not to take many more casualties. We didn’t want to do that. We didn’t want to take any heavy risks of high numbers of casualties in that area. This is a supposition on my part. I never heard anybody tell me that directly but I got that sensing when they said, “No, we don’t want to do that because we’ll likely run into something real heavy and take a lot of casualties.” That was the attitude. So we never did follow those lines and we just finished off the few contacts we had and pulled out of there and pulled back to Lai Khe and all the battalions went back to their base camps.
LC: So your sense is that something other than, for example, the proximity to the
Cambodian border and the possibility that you might be drawn over the border—
WL: No, I wasn’t concerned. That was a concern. Of course it was quite likely
that if we had made a major incursion in there and had developed anything big that they
would have drawn back over the Cambodian border. They had done that before. But still
we would have uncovered probably some very good information and cause a lot of VC
casualties.

LC: Not to mention interfering with their processes and so on.
WL: Yes. But that was an opportunity I felt should have been exploited but
wasn’t. I would say probably for political reasons. It would have been a difficult
operation but it could have been done and I think we should have done it.
LC: This kind of left a not so good taste in your mouth about the conflict overall?
WL: It did. I don’t know, I can’t recall now that I really felt that we were on the
verge of pulling out, anything like that. No. I didn’t anticipate that.
LC: Of course, you know, it was only a few months later that General
Westmoreland held a press conference talking about turning the war over to the South
Vietnamese and light at the end of the tunnel and all that.
WL: Yeah. Vietnamization—had that begun yet?
LC: It was certainly on the horizon. Of course there’s the intervening variable of
the Tet Offensive. But in the fall of 1967 General Westmoreland made public statements
to the effect that the war was being won and that we could essentially turn it over to the
South Vietnamese at some early stage. When you heard those kinds of things, did it kind
of—did you feel a tug like maybe not?
WL: No. I thought, “Well that sounds good. I hope that’s right.” The thing is
that we had by the time February, March of ’67, it really hurt the main force VC
elements—the divisions and the regiments. In our region we hurt them badly. I was
convinced of that. Whether that was true or not, I can’t attest. But by all indications we
had the VC Division pretty much on the ropes and that was our main opponent. But I
didn’t know that while we were doing that the NVA was massively improving its
situation in MR-1. They were moving in towards Khe Sanh. They were moving major
divisions into MR-1. I didn’t know about that. So while we were more than holding our
own in Military Region III things were not so rosy in the North.

LC: Do you, now thinking back on it, draw a distinction there between the
different tactics that were employed in the two areas or the different troops? Obviously it
was primarily Marines up in the North.

WL: Marines and . I don’t know who else went up north but—

LC: They were doing different kinds of operations though.

WL: Yeah. They worked entirely quite different. They were up against much
heavier artillery than we were. Later on in the war of course we got some heavy artillery
down in the South. But we were operating against forces whose major artillery was a
once in a while it was a 122 millimeter rocket. There weren’t so many of those. They
had the 82 mm and 75 mm recoilless rifles. They had some medium mortars. We didn’t
have that thing like they had up there at Khe Sanh, the 130 mm, the 122 mm guns.

LC: Right. Where they’re just shooting over the DMZ and shooting at—

WL: Right. They got a much more difficult time with mortars, heavy mortars,
and heavy artillery than we did. They had also quite different terrain. The terrain there
when you get west of Hue that cut up range of the mountains there. It was extremely
difficult terrain to operate in, much more difficult than we had.

LC: More difficult than the triple canopy?

WL: Yeah! They had double and triple canopy there too.

LC: That’s true.

WL: They had these precipitous ridges.

LC: The ridge lines, yeah.

WL: Cut up terrain where there was no reasonable ground line of
communications. If they wanted to go anywhere they had to build a road, I think, before
they could even get in there. We had gentle rolling terrain and a lot of almost flat terrain
where we were. We had some hills east of An Loc. But we didn’t operate much up
there, you know, around Song Be. Most of it was just rolling terrain, jungle and sparse
jungle here and there. Do you know DePuy used to say, “You know, there are four
different wars going on here in Vietnam?” He said that in the perspective of being J3 of
MACV. The Delta being one. That entirely different kind of operations that we could
conduct in our jungles of Binh Duong and Phuoc Long and Binh Long and Tay Ninh. Then you get up into the Highlands. You’ve got these rolling savannas and plantations and hills, high terrain. Then MR-1, which was a really tough terrain with those mountains—that mountain range into Laos. You couldn’t tell whether you were in Laos or Vietnam for that matter for many of those places. Plus, the proximity to the main force in North Vietnamese Army. Quite different.

LC: Bill, what was your assignment coming out of Vietnam? Where were you posted?

WL: I’m to command the Battalion Mechanized of the Infantry Regiment, part of which was assigned to the Infantry Division Mechanized at Fort Carson, Colorado.

LC: Okay. I’ll tell you what, let’s take a break here today and we’ll talk about that next time.

WL: Okay.
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WL: First thing I wanted to mention is—I believe I mentioned earlier that we had a joint operation with the Infantry Division against the Iron Triangle. That’s that large area between two streams—the Saigon River on one side and I don’t remember the name of the other one but it doesn’t matter, near Ben Cat. During that operation what I wanted to mention was some of the work of the Engineer Battalion. A couple of incidents.

LC: Okay. Good.

WL: First, we wanted to move a tank, tanks, into the Iron Triangle and we had to move them across the stream just west of Ben Cat. There was a bridge there but the bridge wasn’t heavy enough for the tanks and the tank commander didn’t recognize that before he started across and he broke the bridge. One of the tanks dropped into the stream. Nobody was hurt and they got the tank out. But they had to build—the Engineer Battalion had to actually build a new bridge there across the river.

LC: How did they do it?

WL: They did it with a trestle-bent [bridge]. They did it with wood. One of the incidents there was pretty funny. It came up during one of the staff briefings in the evening. General Hollingsworth came back and he reported that he watched the engineers building this bridge and they were using the same techniques and equipment that the Romans had used when they were bridging the Po River in Italy back in the time of Christ. That brought up quite a few laughs. He said he had seen a soldier with a large rock driving a piling into the stream. I don’t know how—this is probably apocryphal but it’s a good story anyway.

LC: Yes, absolutely. It shows the general had a sense of humor too.

WL: The other thing, the Engineers had attached to them Rome ploughs. Have you heard of the Rome ploughs before?

LC: I have but could you go ahead and just describe those?

WL: Well the Rome plough was, I believe, it was a D8 Caterpillar tractor, a very large tractor. Rome coming from Rome, Georgia, I believe where they designed the blade that they put on the tractor. The purpose of the blade—it had a large spike on one
side of it and they could drive it in to trees and knock trees down to clear the brush and
forest from the edge of main highways in order to reduce the cover and concealment that
the enemy could use to launch ambushes on those roads. They cleared the roads off on
each side, maybe a hundred or two hundred meters off to the side so that at least the VC
and the NVA would be farther away from the road.

LC: Now, would this be only on what we might consider main routes of supply?
WL: Yes, on main lines of communications where we had to use frequently.

That’s what they did. They also cleared some of the base areas, Viet Cong base areas, in
the deep jungle if they could get the tractors in there. That’s one thing that they did at the
northern edge of the Iron Triangle. There was an overgrown and defunct rubber
plantation on the edge of the Iron Triangle. The Engineers cut quite a bit of that down.
In the process they cut the symbol of the Engineer Corps in the rubber. That’s a castle, as
you probably know. They also cut some you might call an acronym, FEA, in the rubber.
Now this is a very obscene slogan that they used now and then in the Division. “E” and
the “M” mean ‘em all. The “F” being the four letter word.

LC: You could probably draw your own conclusion as to what that was.
WL: Yeah. Our ASTA platoon, the Airborne—what do you call? Surveillance
and Target Acquisition platoon of the AV Battalion (Aviation). I mentioned before that
we had four, I think we had four or maybe six, OV-1 airplanes with a photo capability on
at least two of them. They took an aerial photo of that area. I have it and if I can find it
I’ll send it to you.

LC: Very good. That would be great
WL: Kind of interesting. Funny.
LC: They worked hard to get that right I’m sure.
WL: That’s right. The commander of the Engineer Battalion was Lt. Col. Joe
Kearnan. Unfortunately after I left the division he was killed. He was in a helicopter I
believe with a Red Cross team that was going out to visit his battalion and he was flying
them out there and they hit a power line and all were killed. But Joe was a really fine
officer. One thing that comes to mind that I remember with him, I had been up north,
north of Loc Ninh, north and east of Loc Ninh, doing a reconnaissance by myself one
time and I visited a Special Forces camp called Bu Dop.
LC: Called, I’m sorry?

WL: Bu Dop. B-o D-o-p, two words. (Editor’s note: Bu Dop) I noticed bridges and the routes up there. It was a pretty scary area. There was a lot of enemy in the vicinity and it was kind of a tenuous situation. It was north of Song Be. S-o-n-g B-e, which was the province capital of Phuoc Long Province. ARVN had a small garrison up there. But recognizing the threat in that region, when I got back to the division headquarters I told General DePuy that it would be a good idea for the G3 to make some contingency plans to relieve any enemy attack against those outposts up there. He agreed that was a good idea. I told him that the bridges on Highway 14, we should probably reconnoiter those to be sure that they could hold the load—if we could get some tanks up there we’d want to traverse that route of Highway 14 to get up there. He said, “Yeah that’s a good idea too.” So I called Joe Kearnan because he’s the expert on bridges, I certainly am not. I said, “I’d like you to make an engineer reconnaissance with me of Route 14.” I thought that would be pretty easy deal. I thought we could just, being ignorant of how to reconnoiter a bridge, I thought we’d just fly over it and he could take a look at it and say, “Yeah that would be okay.” But not Joe. We had to land on the road and he got out of the helicopter. This is pretty deep into enemy controlled areas. Not that they had major forces there but it was always a little bit hairy to be up there by yourself. We landed on the road and he went down and he measured all of the pilings and the trestles. He took a long time. Did a very thorough job of it and I just wanted to mention that because he was that kind of an officer. He was very thorough and a great commander.

LC: Was he a West Point grad?

WL: Yes. I’m sure he was.

LC: I assume he must have been to be in this position. Was the Engineering Battalion essentially a part of the Division?

WL: Oh yeah. It was organic, what we call organic to the Division. It’s not called engineering. It’s called engineer.

LC: Engineer. I’m sorry.

WL: Engineer Battalion.

LC: An organic part of the division.
WL: Infantry Division. Yeah.

LC: Do you know anything more about Joe Kearnan’s background or where he was from or anything more you can contribute about that?

WL: No, I don’t. It must be available somewhere but—

LC: But you considered him a good officer?

WL: Oh yes. Outstanding.

LC: What did you do Bill while he was busy running about making—?

WL: I stood nervously on the road.

LC: I would have thought. Yeah. Looking around?

WL: Thinking, “Come back!” They kept the rotor turning on the helicopter so that we wouldn’t have to shut down and start again if we had to leave in a hurry.

LC: Was there any security with you beyond your own arms?

WL: No, just the Huey. We had to use a Huey. I don’t remember—we probably got it from the Aviation Battalion although, yeah. Because Joe wouldn’t have any helicopters of his own.

LC: Well, it’s a shame that he lost his life in the accident that you described. That happened after you left Vietnam?

WL: That’s within a couple of months after I left.

LC: Was it up in that same area?

WL: I think it was pretty close to Saigon, probably close to where he was—the Engineer Battalion I don’t remember. I believe they were at Lam Son there just north of Di An. I don’t know where they hit the power line but it would have been around Saigon somewhere because there weren’t any power lines up Route 13 or up QL-14 either.

LC: In general, with an organic battalion of engineers, how many folks are we talking about?

WL: Talking about three line companies, Companies A, B, and C, and a battalion headquarters company. I imagined their authorized strength would have been around six hundred. Their typical in deployment, if anything is typical, would have been one company to support each of the three brigades of the division. A Company probably with the Brigade, B Company with the , and C Company with the . Rarely would they have been committed as a battalion. They would have been parceled out to the brigades for
direct support, engineering support, for the brigades. Then further, once in a while, I remember when I was with the Division before in Germany we usually had a platoon of engineers with each battalion. So that’s the way they broke them out. It depended upon the mission and what you were doing. The engineers in the US Army are also trained to fight as infantry and very often they’ve done so. When the infantry resources have been depleted to the point where we didn’t have any more, why they’d throw in the engineer battalion as infantry.

LC: So they’re all obviously trained as riflemen?

WL: Yes. They’re considered combat. Traditionally, I don’t know how they move now, but they used to move in dump trucks. Engineer battalion, the soldiers rode in dump trucks. They had benches fixed in the dump trucks so one squad per truck. They were mobile, in other words. They didn’t have to march like infantry did.

LC: They had vehicles of all kinds, I would imagine, or at least at their disposal if not—

WL: Their main tool was a d-handled shovel. That was it. Again, coming back to the Romans.

LC: Right. How would other parts of the division view the engineers? In other words, when would they be called in? You mentioned weight-bearing structures like bridges and so on. But what other kinds of things were they doing in Vietnam?

WL: They were repairing roads. They were working on field fortifications. They would deliver the barbed wire for outposts. If a landing zone had to be cleared and the infantry didn’t have the equipment why they’d send in an engineer squad with chainsaws to cut the trees down. That sort of work.

LC: Okay. So roads, bridges—

WL: They also did some what they called vertical construction. They could build buildings and so on. That wasn’t their primary mission. That kind of work should have been done or would be done by an engineer construction battalion from the rear. The engineer combat battalion wouldn’t be required to do that kind of work. They could do it, they knew how. But generally speaking there were several different categories of engineer battalions in the Army. We had what they called engineer battalion combat. At the Corps level and Army level, they had engineer construction battalions that had
heavier equipment than the combat engineers did. They could actually build major roads
and put up major sized buildings, that sort of thing. Then there were engineer bridge
companies that had the pontoon bridges for, you know, for combat bridges across
streams. The engineer combat battalion usually furnished the manpower to put in the
bridges but they didn’t have the bridges in their table of organization. Bridge companies
supplied those. Combat battalion would assist in putting the bridges in.

LC: Was it the case during your tour with the Division in Vietnam that this
Engineer Battalion would move its Headquarters Company to follow the main part of the
division?

WL: I don’t think they usually did that. I think they kept their Headquarters
Company back at Division Rear.

LC: Okay, Division Rear. So have you spent much time then with Joe Kearnan?
WL: I saw him now and then. I didn’t spend a lot of time with him.

LC: Because most of the time you were at Danger Forward?
WL: Yes. Yes. He’d come in for the briefings. He’d come up forward and of
course he spent a lot of time visiting his companies at the three division brigade
headquarters where his companies were located.

LC: Well he sounds like a good officer who wanted to get it right. Bill, were
there any other observations you wanted to make about your time with the Division?

WL: A couple of others. One, have you heard the term with regard to aviation of
artillery advisory?

LC: I don’t think so.

WL: That doesn’t ring a bell? Okay. Now, when you flew around Vietnam in the
combat areas where there were troops, where there were actions against the enemy, there
was always somebody firing artillery somewhere in there. There’d be artillery in the air
and landing in impact areas somewhere in the Tay Ninh or Binh Duong or Phuoc Long or
Binh Long. So before you took off or as soon as you got in the air with the helicopter it
was the responsibility of the pilot to call what they called “artillery advisory.” Now, I
can’t recall now whether this was an office handled by MACV headquarters or it might
have been II Field Forces. I think probably the latter. Their job was to keep track of all
friendly artillery that was being fired in the zone. They would be informed about where
the guns were, what the gun target line was, where the target was, and when the artillery was going to be firing. It was the responsibility of the artillery unit to notify artillery advisory and tell them when they were going to fire and where they were going to fire and where they were firing from so that when you were in the helicopter you were not going to be flying through the trajectory of a 105 battery or a 155 battery or an eight inch. I mean that wasn’t really good practice to do that, or to get too close to where the impact zone was going to be. So it was a routine that pilots all knew about.

LC: So this was kind of like air control but for artillery?

WL: Exactly! It’s the same thing that pilots these days go through before they, when they’re going to land at a major airfield. But in this case you couldn’t see it. Of course you can’t see the ground very easily flying through the air so you better find out what’s happening before you fly around in the combat zone.

LC: Now would artillery advisory, would this be a unit of artillerymen or would there be included officers presumably?

WL: There were—I don’t know who manned it. I imagine I could assume they had a couple of artillery men in the staff to be there to handle the telephones because they spoke the artillery language. But it wouldn’t take a lot for anybody to learn how to do that. What they needed was the coordinates of the artillery battery that was firing and the azimuth on which they were firing and the grid coordinates of the target. With those three bits of information—it would be good to have also the altitude of the trajectory.

LC: So I’m visualizing a group probably sitting with, plotting this. But perhaps I’m thinking too much like World War II where they might be sitting around a table with a map. Was this beginning to be computerized at this point, do you know?

WL: No. There were no computers.

LC: Nothing like that?

WL: They didn’t have that. They probably had it plotted on a map, that’s true. But what was so different between our experience in Vietnam and World War II is that we didn’t have a linear deployment of units. You might have a brigade clear out like we did from time to time. We put the Brigade right up on the Cambodian border north of Loc Ninh. Well, you can’t call that a linear deployment when most of the rest of the
forces, friendly forces in Vietnam, were sixty kilometers away down south. I mean so in
World War II your artillery was generally located—well, if it’s light artillery it was three
or four thousand yards behind the forward line of the forward area occupied by infantry
and armor units. It was generally linear. They were all firing at generally the same
direction. If you were moving west artillery was firing west and that was it. In Vietnam
you had to be firing at 360 degrees, you know. In fact that was one of the problems with
artillery. They had their aiming circles were split, they were in mils and it was thirty-two
hundred mils in one direction and thirty-two hundred mils in the other. If you made a
mistake and were firing west when you were supposed to be firing east you could cause a
lot of trouble.

LC: Pilots had to—?
WL: Technical things that the artillerymen had to figure out.
LC: Right and the implication for flyers was that they had to have this data in real
time. I mean they couldn’t be ten minutes behind or ten minutes ahead. They had to
know what was in the air right then?
WL: Yeah. So you could avoid flying in that direction. Now, I had an
experience. The reason I bring it up is that one day, one morning, I couldn’t—for some
reason or other I wanted to make a reconnaissance. It was up close to the Long Nguyen
Secret Zone was generally a little bit north of that so the only aircraft I could get was one
of the H-13s. That was the little single engine two-place helicopter with a bubble in
front. I mean that’s where you sat right next to the pilot. You had one pilot and then you
sat next to him. You didn’t have a copilot. I happened to draw an H-13 with a very
young new aviator from the States. He’d just been in the country maybe a week or so
and this was one of his first flights. So we took off out of Lai Khe and headed north. It
was rather early and the ceiling was very low. There was fog right above the tops of the
trees and then fog above that. I mean it was a little space in between where you could fly
and see but you couldn’t see the terrain very well. You could see it very little for that
matter. This pilot neglected to call artillery advisory. I didn’t realize that. If I had I
would have told him, “Turn around and let’s land.”

LC: “Right now!” Yeah.
WL: Yeah. We flew right through a concentration of 105s and very close to the impact zone where they were hitting in the trees right below us. It was really scary and I told him to do a [one-eighty] and get out of there fast, which we did, and got back. We had a hard time getting back because of the weather. It was hard to even find Lai Khe and to get back in but we made it. But it was that sort of thing that happened once in a while and that could get you killed. There’s a lot of casualties in flying in Vietnam that were not due to enemy action but rather to just the circumstance of getting lost or doing things like that, or flying into the terrain when you couldn’t see it. I always enjoyed flying but that one—

LC: That sounds a little scary.

WL: Yeah. That wasn’t too much fun.

LC: Bill, did you have a talk with this young pilot?

WL: Yeah. I explained to him his responsibilities were to call artillery advisory. I don’t remember how I phrased it. It was probably rather forceful.

LC: Probably. Did he survive your forceful statement to him?

WL: Oh yeah. I imagine he went on to be a good flyer, although it was one of those things that by the time an aviator—although the aviators got to experience real quickly because they flew so often. They flew virtually everyday. Everybody was flying everyday so their experience level went up much more rapidly than it did for infantry officers who would be in action for, you know, they might be in the battalion for three months before they did anything.

LC: My guess would be that this fellow probably called artillery advisory on every other flight he ever took off because that would rattle your cage.

WL: I hope so.

LC: Yeah.

WL: The other operation that I don’t think I mentioned was Ben Suc. I don’t know if I did or not.

LC: Why don’t you just recap it for a second and I’ll look through my notes?

WL: Okay. Ben Suc was a village on the Saigon River south of Tri Tam and north of the tip of the Iron Triangle right on the Saigon River. It happened to sit in what you might call a big loop of the Saigon River. It’s a very peculiar bend of the river that
virtually enclosed this little village. I found out through intelligence for several weeks
that it was a major VC village. It had nothing to recommend it other than the fact that it
was very close to the Long Nguyen Secret Zone. It was probably very close to the
headquarters of the A, 165A VC Regiment, which is a main force regiment with several
battalions in the Long Nguyen area. I told General DePuy about it. I said, “It’d probably
be a good idea to launch a major attack against this village.” He agreed and he gave the
task to the Battalion of the I guess. Paul Gorman was commanding at that time. They
managed to get enough helicopters to land practically that entire battalion in one lift,
which was very unusual for us. The Cav Division could do things like that because they
had their own helicopters. Well, we had to borrow helicopters from MACV and II Field
Forces in order to do anything. So they got enough and that morning they came
sweeping over the plain that was west of Ben Suc. Very low level, probably no more
than fifty meters or fifty feet above the terrain in one huge flight and landed at Ben Suc.
Took it completely by surprise, routed the few VC that were trying to defend the village,
went into the jungle next to it, found a major supply point, they found a hospital
underground. They uncovered the communications intelligence unit that I had mentioned
before in this operation, a little bit south of Ben Suc, picked up all of their codebooks and
their radios and the receivers from that unit. I can’t remember how many they killed in
there. It wasn’t very high because a lot of them were able to escape and there wasn’t a
great deal of heavy fighting. There were skirmishes here and there. But the main point
was that they did route out and destroy that major base. In order to make it at least semi-
permanent, General DePuy decided to evacuate all of the civilians out of Ben Suc and to
relocate them south of the Saigon River. They used the civil authority, the US civil—
what did they call it? I’m trying to think of the word. Civil affairs officer who was
attached to II Field Forces to arrange with the Vietnamese government to establish this
refugee camp south of the Iron Triangle to which we would move all of these people. All
of the civilians that we could locate and round up out of Ben Suc move them down there
to this camp. I’ll think of the fellow’s name. He’s quite famous. He was later killed I
think in the ’72 offensive. A book was written. Bright and Shining Lie? Who was that?
LC: John Vann?
WL: Yeah! John Vann was the civil affairs official at that time with II Field Force. Very energetic fellow. DePuy and he had major disagreements about how things were handled but that’s beside the point. But in the event we loaded the people on barges, on landing craft, and took them down the river and established them in this refugee camp that John Vann had with the assistance of the Vietnamese government constructed down there on the Saigon River. We even moved their water buffalo and everything that they had out of that village down to the new camp. Moved some of the people by CH-47 helicopters, others by river. Then the division located a great store of ammunition that was outdated. You know, ammunition, it’s got a shelf life. After a certain number of months or years it’s declared unstable and unsuited for combat use so it has to be destroyed. We had a great amount of this. I don’t know how many tons but the number of tons. Here’s where the Engineers came in again. They dug a deep hole right in the center of Ben Suc, packed it with the ammunition, this outdated ammunition, several tons of it. Then fire in the hole. They blew it and blew this great crater in the center of Ben Suc. You can probably find—I know you can in your searches—a little book called *Ben Suc*. Maybe you’ve already heard of it. But an author wrote a story very much unfavorable to the Division and to the entire operation about Ben Suc. It was tantamount to a war crime in the words of this particular author. I don’t have the book. I scanned it once many years ago but it’s an interesting viewpoint on an operation that I would say was controversial at best.

LC: The claim in this book went something like what? That this had been an illegal removal of civilians, an attack on civilians, something like that?

WL: Yeah, and it was a crime against humanity and against everything. Yeah.

LC: Well that sounds pretty hyperbolic. In effect what you’re describing is a relocation of cooperating unarmed civilians to a village that their own government approved it sounds like.

WL: That’s what we did. Of course it probably was a short-lived success. I imagine that after a few months that these folks infiltrated back up to their old village and reestablished it. But that’s just my supposition.

LC: That probably would have taken place after your departure.
WL: After we left. That’s right. But anyway we did limit the capabilities of 165A and anybody else that was getting support out of that area for a few months that’s for sure.

LC: Did you have a chance yourself Bill to walk around in the complex?

WL: Yeah. I landed there with DePuy, probably with DePuy that day, and talked to Paul Gorman and we walked around and looked at it. There were a lot of tunnels under the village, trap doors that went down into tunnels. It was a very well constructed and elaborate system of a VC logistical base right there on the river. Logistical as well as command and control.

LC: Yes, it sounds like this wasn’t just a depot.

WL: No. It was more important than that.

LC: Bill, how would you have established that that was true because of the proximity of the communications unit?

WL: We had communications intelligence as well as possibly some agents in there. Photography—quite a number of resources that were all melded in. You see, I didn’t mention this before but I had a major. My chief planner was a Major Thompson. Can’t remember his first name. A very bright fellow and he was—

LC: He was on your J2 staff, or I’m sorry G2?

WL: Yeah. On my G2 staff. He was a major and I made him my G2 plans officer. He was supposed to look forward and be in charge of the analysts who were trying to figure out what was going to happen next and where were the VC located. Not tactical intelligence that we collected everyday and this is what happened today and this is what’s going to happen tomorrow but looking further ahead than that. He developed what he called the measle map. I thought it was original with him and maybe it wasn’t, I don’t know. But I was impressed by it. What it was is he put an acetate sheet over the map and he would plot all of the information that was received regarding enemy activity on that acetate on top—by grid coordinate. Whether it came from photography, whether it came from what we called red haze—that was infrared—agent report, communications intelligence; no matter what source it came from—or POW report, he put a dot. That would be keyed to that particular source. Were these dots clustered, regardless of where they came from, that was a good indication that at least some of these reports were
probably right because it more or less corroborated each other. It showed an area of
enemy activity. What activity was not irrelevant but the main point was the enemy was
there.

LC: Right. Which is one of the big problems in the entire Vietnam conflict.
WL: Yeah. That was what was going on. So when you saw all of these dots
clustered around Ben Suc, in and around Ben Suc, you knew that something was going
on there even though you didn’t know exactly what. So that compelled you to say, “Well
let’s go and find out what is going on.” That was kind of the way we did it. To jump
ahead many, many years when I was with the Senate Select Committee on POWs, we
saw clusters of activity in Laos on prisoner of war sightings. What we call live sighting
reports and it clustered around places like Sam Neua. No matter how many reports we
got around Sam Neua, why, DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency would say, “We don’t
believe there’s any prisoners there.” We’d say, “Well, we’ve got thirty reports of
prisoners sighted there so are they all of them wrong? I mean none of them is correct?”
They’d say, “Yeah, none of them are correct. They’re all fabrications, or they’re Bobby
Garwood, or they’re Russians, or they’re Poles. But they’re not American prisoners.”
We had great difficulty accepting that analysis from DIA. But that’s just leaping ahead
many, many years.

LC: Well, if I can I’ll put down a marker so that we’ll be sure to discuss that when
the time is right. Bill, let me ask a little bit about John Vann. Is he someone that you
came across?

WL: I only met him once or twice there when we were planning—when we were
planning the operation at Ben Suc had a meeting with him. He came to our headquarters
I believe and later on after the deployment was started I met him there. I had very little—
personally I don’t believe I ever spoke to him. But I was there when he was. DePuy, I
don’t know why, I think it was kind of a personality problem. Vann was very, very, what
do you say? Aggressive. Which is good sometimes and sometimes you have to constrain
it. DePuy was too and they’re both strong personalities. They seemed to clash. DePuy
found great fault in Vann’s planning. We were setting these villagers down in what
looked like a mud hole to me. It was very poorly prepared piece of land. Now, I can’t
say that that was Vann’s fault. I don’t know. I don’t know what he was up against in
trying to get this thing accomplished. I know that he didn’t have very much time to do it
and maybe this was the best possible thing that anybody could have accomplished. I
don’t know that. But DePuy was very unhappy with the way it turned out with the
handling of the refugees.

LC: One thing that is, I think, useful to know is what kind of lead-time would he
have had? Of course you were trying to achieve surprise and that’s not easy to do when
you’re talking about the number of helicopters and so on that you would have had to have
to land the troops as you’ve described.

WL: I don’t think we gave Vann more than two or three days to get this thing
started. Because if we told him to go to the ARVN much earlier than that the VC would
have found out what we were up to.

LC: Right. As you’ve described that was not done.

WL: Yeah. That was kind of a dilemma really. It comes close to being a
dilemma. You can’t give them too much notice but if you don’t give them enough notice
then the whole thing’s going to fall apart anyway.

LC: So you’re between a rock and a hard place in some ways and I’m sure that he
was too at least in this situation trying to make arrangements for how many villagers
would you say? Any estimate?

WL: I would say a couple of thousand I guess.

LC: Wow. Well that’s not insignificant.

WL: Although, I don’t know whether we ever corralled that many. I really don’t
know. I can’t recall. Maybe the fellow that wrote Ben Suc would have a better figure on

that although I wouldn’t—

LC: Yeah. I’m not sure I’d lean on that too much.

WL: Couldn’t trust him. There’s probably some stuff in the MACV files on it.

LC: Undoubtedly. Undoubtedly. I think that’s probably right.

WL: II Field Forces—something on it.

LC: Well, it’s always interesting also to have a sort of first person recollection.

About how many helicopters would you say were needed for the operation?

WL: I hesitate to guess. I guess the Division after action reports are available.

LC: I believe so. Yes.
WL: Yeah. I haven’t seen them. Never looked at them but I imagine this operation is pretty well documented.

LC: Did you feel that overall you’d made a dent? That it was actually a success?

WL: Oh yes. I really do. But again like everything we did in Vietnam, you’d do it and you were successful and you killed two or three hundred soldiers in one operation and six months later the effect of all of that had dissipated. You’d start all over again.

LC: Well, this was a hot area. I don’t have to tell you that. The operations there were some of the biggest of the war so your retelling of your own experience is so important to documenting not just what we might find in after action reports but also what more or less it was like to be there. So that’s very helpful.

WL: Well that’s about all that I was going to bring forward on Vietnam.

LC: Well, you were set to leave Vietnam in the spring of ’67.

WL: In March I guess. Yeah. February, March—

LC: Of ’67.

WL: Yes.

LC: Bill, how soon did you have your orders in hand?

WL: Oh probably no more than a month before I left.

LC: What did they tell you?

WL: Well, the told me that I was going to go to Fort Carson, Colorado to the Infantry Division and command an infantry battalion there. So that was good news to me because that’s why I’d gone to Vietnam in the first place. But I didn’t manage to get a battalion in Vietnam and I was getting a little long in the tooth to be able to ever command a battalion if I didn’t do it very quickly. Getting too old.

LC: How old were you?

WL: Let’s see. I was born in ’22. I was born in ’22. What was this? This is ’67. So forty-five. Forty-five, that’s kind of pushing the limit for battalion command.

LC: Did you feel like you should have already been there, you should already have had that level of responsibility?

WL: I could have handled it in Vietnam. I wasn’t as good a physical shape as I’d ever been. I was in good physical shape as any battalion commander there but DePuy decided not to release me for battalion command.
LC: Well, he had you well employed it sounds like.

WL: Oh yeah. Yeah. About every three months I’d talk to him. I’d say, “Hey, how about it now? I’ve done this G2 thing for six months or nine months. How about a battalion?” He’d say, “No, I can’t spare you.” That was his answer. Now, he might have had in the back of his mind another reason. He might have said, “Well, I don’t want to trust you with a battalion. You’re too old.” Or for some other reason he didn’t want me to command a battalion. From the standpoint of ego I like to think that it wasn’t that, that he really did want me as a G2. He told me several times, he said, “You’re the best G2 I’ve ever had.” He said, “I’d be stupid to let you go.”

LC: I think you can go ahead and take him at his word probably on that. He wasn’t pulling your leg most of the time. So what was the set up at Fort Carson? What did you find when you arrived there?

WL: A couple of things. There’s about four experiences at Fort Carson that I probably should devote most of the time to. When I reported in to battalion the battalion was in the command of its former executive officer. The lieutenant colonel who had commanded it had already left and this major was a very fine officer and he was running the battalion very well. He was a good infantryman, he had plenty of experience as a combat officer. I kind of was a little bit reluctant even to relieve him. I felt sorry for him because he’d had this chance to command a battalion as a major. But I didn’t have any choice in that. So we passed the flag and I took command. I found that I had three very—well, I had two very good company commanders. Both of them captains. Both of them with combat experience. I had two rather green company commanders. In the organization of an infantry battalion at Fort Carson—you know, this changes over years. But we had three rifle companies, A, B, and C. We had a headquarters company and headquarters and support company. Over the years in the infantry battalion you’d have a headquarters and headquarters company, a small company. Then you’d have a heavy weapons company and three rifle companies. But at this stage of the organization of the infantry they had reduced the number of companies to only four. Headquarters Company also had all of the other supporting elements of the battalion. We had an anti-tank platoon; we had a ground radar platoon, communications platoon, pioneer and ammunition platoon, heavy mortar platoon, and a reconnaissance platoon all in the
headquarters and support company. That’s a pretty big company. All of that stuff under
the command of one captain. Fortunately he was a really good man. In my C Company I
had another very good experienced commander. The two other company commanders
were good but they didn’t have very much experience. They were both lieutenants,
lieutenants. Well I had a very good executive officer, Major Laport. I had a good
sergeant major and an excellent motor officer. That’s very important in a mechanized
battalion because I had about forty armored personnel carriers. I think that was six recon
tracks, recovery vehicles, quite a few trucks, jeeps. The motor officer was a warrant
officer and perhaps the most important man in the whole battalion and he was good at it.
An excellent motor sergeant who was from the old Division who did an awfully good
job also. So I had some good people but the shortage was in good experienced platoon
leaders. They were all young, new lieutenants. Even my S3, which is supposed to be a
major, I had to appoint a lieutenant to be my S3 operations officer. The lieutenant is the
adjutant. The lieutenant is the supply officer, not supply officer but the S4. All
lieutenants! Which put quite a burden on me to do most of that kind of planning myself
and on the NCOs, non-commissioned officers. Fortunately we had some excellent senior
non-commissioned officers. I remember specifically my heavy mortar platoon. That’s
4.2 inch mortars, which is a pretty serious piece of artillery and you’ve got to have some
experienced people to handle that or you’re going to get a lot of people killed. Willie
Wilson a master sergeant, a big black guy that looked like a linebacker, was terrific. A
smart guy and really knew the mortars. That was always serious to me because I had
been in mortars myself from time to time.

LC: How many 4.2 inch guns would you have?

WL: Six. Six in the battery.

LC: How many batteries? Just the one?

WL: One platoon, one platoon battery. I picked one of the brightest lieutenants
that I figured in the battalion to be my S3 and another very good guy, Lieutenant Taylor,
to handle the recon platoon. Anyway, we had some good sergeants and things went
pretty well considering the fact that I had very few good lieutenants anyway.
LC: What was at work here Bill? The fact that you had such young folks and not so experienced in these positions and you might have expected to have people a little more seasoned under you. Was this a function of the larger manpower picture?

WL: Oh yes. This was because all the people were moving to Vietnam so rapidly. It was a great drain on the Army’s resources to even man these battalions in the States. I don’t know how many we had in the States. Of course in the Infantry Division there at Fort Carson we had three brigades and each brigade had three infantry battalions and a tank battalion. That was the general makeup of a mechanized division. That’s the way they were organized. So it was pretty hard on the Army to keep all of these units staffed. Fortunately the non-commissioned officers that we had were all, I think without exception, were Vietnam veterans. They’d been, they’d done it, and they knew their stuff. You could rely heavily on them to help train your lieutenants. You knew that within three or four months you’d have a lieutenant for three or four months and then he’d get his orders for Vietnam. I felt that a very heavy responsibility to train these people as rapidly as I could and as thoroughly as I could so that they could do their job when they got to Vietnam and not get killed right off the bat.

LC: What special things did you do to make sure that they would get that training? Of course you would, in this situation, normally have been going through training exercises and so on but did you try to or did the NCOs try to do anything particularly geared toward what they were likely to experience in Vietnam?

WL: I gave them their own heavy responsibilities and night operations out in the range, movement map reading, land navigation, those sorts of things. We did well. In fact the division told me that I was running the best battalion in the division as a result of tests. They’d test us out there in the range on movement and tactics. So I was satisfied with it. I can tell you a couple of things that happened, kind of human interest sort of stuff. When I arrived one of the first things that the sergeant major told me, he said, “We have a master sergeant in the state penitentiary.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah. Sergeant Lowry was convicted of vehicular manslaughter and is in the Colorado State Penitentiary.” I said, “Tell me about it.” Well, Lowry was accused and convicted of driving under the influence. While he was driving he had several soldiers from the battalion in his car and they hit something, I think they hit a tree. One of the soldiers was
killed and that made it vehicular manslaughter. I asked the sergeant major, “Well, was this typical of Sergeant Lowry to do something like that?” “No. Never been in trouble. His record was absolutely clear. No other convictions. No drunkenness. I never saw him drink.” A lot of stuff like that. I said, “Well, this sounds like a rather harsh sentence.” I think he was five to fifteen years for a first offense. I don’t know how you feel about that but I felt that that was maybe too harsh and maybe they should have given him a break. So I told sergeant major, “Now, I want to be sure that one of your senior sergeants from this battalion visits Lowry at least once a month.” We were not too far from the penitentiary, maybe fifty miles or so. “Get up there and somebody visit him to let him know that we haven’t forgotten him. Meanwhile I’ll see what I can do.” I called the Colorado State parole authority in Denver. I talked to a senior parole officer and I explained the case to him. I said, “We kind of think that this man should have been given an option for some probation from the very start.” By this time I think he’d been in the prison for about six months. I said, “You know, I think we should give him some consideration. How about coming down here to Fort Carson and visit and we talk it over?” So he said, “Sure.” So he came down and I got all the sergeants together. They all talked to him and they gave him lunch in the mess hall, in the Headquarters Company mess, and gave him a tour of the motor pool, gave him a ride in an APC.

LC: Put on the dog for him.

WL: Yeah! Sure enough within a couple of weeks Lowry was given probation. He came out of the prison, came back to the battalion. Of course I don’t know what happened to him after that because he was transferred immediately out of the battalion. As a felon, why, this might have had a completely damning effect on his military career. I don’t know what happened after that but he was transferred out and never heard from him again. But at least we got him out of jail and I felt pretty good about that.

LC: Well, the fact that he had never had a previous conviction of any kind, you know—and we’re talking the ’60s here. This was a different era with regard to awareness about DUI issues and so on. It’s interesting.

WL: So this actually raised my status among the sergeants of the battalion pretty high.

LC: I believe that.
WL: I could do no wrong after that, but it was good. Then shortly after I got there I got a call from an old friend who I was with in the old Infantry in Germany, Al Catullo. He was a lieutenant colonel at that time and he was in the Pentagon on the Army staff.

LC: How would you spell his last name?

WL: Catullo. C-a-t-u-l-l-o, Al Catullo. He was a very good guy. We had a lot of fun together in the old. He called me and said, “I see you’re commanding that battalion there and we have an offer from the Brits to receive one of their companies and have it attached to one of our battalions here in the States for, I think, five weeks just for training with us and be host to it. They’d be attached to you. Would you like to do that?” And I said, “Sure. Obviously I’d like to have a company of Brits attached to me.” So sure enough they gave me Company C of what the British called the 1 Gloucestershire Regiment. It’s not spelled like it sounds. You know how it’s spelled, Gloucestershire.

LC: Uh, sure.

WL: Anyway, the Battalion of the Gloucestershire came in and was attached to me for about five weeks and we trained on the plain there by Fort Carson, in and out. We had a great time with them.

LC: Was their battalion strength the same as ours essentially?

WL: It was only a company.

LC: It was only a company. I’m sorry. Company C.

WL: A company of about—I would say probably around a 150 men.

LC: What was the thinking behind this exercise?

WL: I don’t know why they did it but it was fun. I remember in the British Army rifle companies are commanded by majors. In our Army they’re commanded by captains. Any case, Major Allison was the commander of that company. Very fine guy, a lot of fun. I really enjoyed being with the Brits. They’re professionals. They had some really interesting company officers too and nobody got in any trouble and it was a fine experience.

LC: How did you integrate them into the training exercises?
WL: Oh, we just used them as a fourth company. We didn’t break them up. We let them operate as a company with us. We showed them around to Colorado Springs. Took them on a trip up to Pike’s Peak and stuff like that.

LC: I bet they had a great time.

WL: Well, they did. One of them, I remember, when they were leaving on a bus to go to the airport there was a girl from Colorado Springs that apparently had already got engaged to one of these Brits over a four or five week period. It was quite a tearful departure. So I guess they had a good time. Later, as soon as this happened, after they went back, I called Al Catullo and told him it was a great experience. I said, “You know, we should return the favor. They came to us. Why don’t we send a battalion over to them? I mean, a company over to them?” He said, “I’ll work on it.” So he did and he got us authority, travel orders and so on to send a company over to England. I had a company—I sent my Company C. Well, we didn’t take all of Company C. We took out the guys that were most likely to get in trouble over there, took them out, and put in some fellows from A and B Company and from Headquarters to fill it up. So we had a full company of all with guys that we figured were not going to disgrace us over there and we sent them over to England. They were attached to the Green Howards somewhere up north of London on a training exercise. It was great fun for them. Then I got the division to agree to send me and the sergeant major over there to inspect them, see what’s going on. So we went, the sergeant major and I went over there and visited with the Green Howards for a couple of days. I couldn’t stay more. I think I could only stay about five days but it was worth it. It was a good experience for everyone.

LC: Bill, did you hear anything in these different exchanges or did the topic ever come up, I can’t imagine that it would not have, the US involvement in Southeast Asia and what it looked like and—?

WL: Oh yeah. Oh, I remember staying up in the Green Howards mess drinking scotch and soda all night talking to the British officers about our experiences because I was fresh from Vietnam. Telling them what was going on and how it was being done. Some of these folks had been overseas in similar situations, you know, like in Malaya and so on. But they were very interested in my impressions of how the war was going and what we were doing and so on. It was really good.
LC: Did they offer a view at all?
WL: I can’t remember much about that. They were supportive. I mean, soldiers speak the same language and have generally the same attitudes about war and peace and so on and whether it’s worthwhile or not. Always figure that they’re getting shortchanged by the politicians. They all have the same general attitude like that. But it was good.

LC: Well, during this period the British were—I mean they were deploying in Southeast Asia as well. I think they had some trouble in Borneo and so on, ’66, ’67.
WL: I think they had here and there. But of course they were not in Vietnam. The Aussies were. New Zealanders had a battalion or battery, but the Brits didn’t. They kind of wanted to. I’m sure that the British Army would have enjoyed being deployed there but they weren’t calling the tune.

LC: No. Not at this point. Yeah. The British government was not very happy with us, I think, over this issue anyway.
WL: Another thing that happened while I was commanding the battalion was the Chicago riots. You recall when—this is in ’68, yeah, ’68, Martin Luther King.
LC: Yes, sir. He was killed in April, I think.
WL: Yeah. That sparked the riots in Chicago. The situation got rapidly out of hand in Chicago and the governor asked for federal troops and my battalion—actually, the Brigade, which my battalion was part of the Brigade, was selected to fly to Chicago and assist the National Guard. I believe we took only two battalions—my battalion and one of the other ones, I don’t remember who it was. We loaded up on Air National Guard airplanes and flew to a naval base up in the north part of the city, on an edge of the city, put on trucks and trucked down to Soldier Field. We pitched tents on Soldier Field and waited for orders to go into the loop. That was our mission, to go in and support, assist the National Guard which had been having real trouble in controlling the looting and burning and the rest of the mayhem that was going on in downtown Chicago. As it happened, by the time we got settled in to Soldier Field the National Guard had everything under control and the mayor told the governor that he didn’t need the federal troops any longer. The governor called President Johnson and told him that. As it was explained to me by my brigade commander, that we’d have to wait for a while because
President Johnson refused to accept the verbal word that the governor didn’t want the federal troops. He wanted it in writing. So we cooled it there in Soldier Field all day and in to the early evening waiting for a telegram to be delivered from Illinois to the White House. Apparently telegrams don’t work as well as they used to. But that’s what he wanted. He wanted a telegram. It took several hours to get a telegram delivered to the White House and for President Johnson to issue the order to release us and let us fly back to Colorado. But anyway that was our experience in putting down the riots in Chicago. We never got deployed at all, which made us all pretty happy for that matter. My soldiers really wanted to go in and knock heads in downtown Chicago anyway. I certainly didn’t want to do that.

LC: What was the plan? I mean were you going to sort of, I mean how were you going to be deployed?

WL: Oh we had gotten these trucks that they had furnished. I don’t know who furnished the trucks, but somebody gave us these trucks. We were going to drive in to the center of Chicago and deploy and clear the streets in riot formation. They were just going to march through the streets and get everybody out of there that was loitering around and restore order. That was the mission. That was what the National Guard was doing and apparently, obviously, had pretty well completed that by the time we were ready to go in. They said, “We don’t need you anymore.”

LC: Now, Bill, if you would, could you clarify whether this was in the early spring of 1968 or the more famous riots later in downtown Chicago during the Democratic Convention?

WL: No. This was during the Martin Luther King thing.

LC: So this is in April ’68.

WL: Yeah. It was April because I left the battalion in June or July.

LC: Okay. I just wanted to clarify that for someone who might be thinking about the later summer.

WL: They seemed to pick up any excuse they can to have a riot down there.

LC: Well, it was a pretty hot summer I guess.

WL: Right. Anyway, that was our experience there. Another thing that happened, as soon as we got back from Chicago I found out, we were told that the
Brigade—I think this was about that time—going to deploy to Vietnam. First Brigade of
the Infantry Division, mechanized, was going to go to Vietnam. So I went right up to
the chief of staff of the division, seems to me it was Ed Glotsback. I think it was.
Whoever it was I had known as brigade commander in the Division. I went up to see
him. I said, “Look, you guys already told me I had the best battalion in the division. I
want my battalion to go to Vietnam with me in command. I want to take my battalion to
Vietnam.” He said, “I don’t have any authority to change the movement orders. They’ve
already decided they’re going to send—” and he told me the three battalions they were
going to send. In fact they were going to send the Brigade and not my brigade the
Brigade. I said, “Well, geez. You can make the change.” He said, “Let me give you
some advice. You’re on orders for the War College.” In fact I didn’t even know that as I
remember now.

LC: This is when you found out.
WL: Yeah. “You don’t want to delay that. You delay that for a year in Vietnam
and you might not go at all. So you better forget about going back to Vietnam now and
go to the War College.” Well, that was the end of that. So I thought I had a chance to
take my battalion over there. It wouldn’t have been the same battalion when it comes
right down to it because they would have had to fill it up with a lot of—I was a little bit
under strength anyway. Would have had to pick up quite a few new soldiers to fill it up.
Some of the guys that just got back from Vietnam they couldn’t have sent them back
right away anyway. They had to give them at least a year in States before they sent them
back again. So it would have been a little bit different.

LC: Well, what did you think of that policy in general where folks were being
moved not as units, essentially, and essentially as replacements for—?
WL: There are so many different angles to that. It’s obviously not the most
efficient way to fight a war, that’s for sure. But from the standpoint of the resources that
we had it was probably the only way that we could have done it. You couldn’t pull out
entire battalions and bring them to the States and then send brand new battalions over
there. You would have lost all of the experience that you had there. Although I guess
you would have sent over people that had been there before. I don’t know. I think the
individual replacement system is probably the only practical way to do it.
LC: Because of cost or because of the experience issue where you always wanted to have someone there who had—?

WL: Have some people there who had just been through it and knew what they were doing.

LC: Could kind of hand that on to the incoming folks?

WL: Yeah.

LC: You know you get a big argument about that Bill from a lot of veterans.

WL: Oh yeah. I know. There are different angles to it. World War II they sent over—well, they sent replacements over there too, replacements to fill the losses. They kept the same battalions in action for the whole war and just sent in replacements.

LC: But you’re pointing out some of the strengths though of the system that was being used in Vietnam. Which is an important thing to do because, you know, there’s the slam out there that the Army particularly did not organize its personnel well and that they were constantly sending in new folks.

WL: I guess the most—the more serious consideration might have been how long do you have to serve in Vietnam before you’re considered eligible to go home. The Army’s rule is one year. The Marine Corps, what was that? It was more than that.

LC: Thirteen months I think.

WL: Only thirteen?

LC: I think so.

WL: Well, maybe so. But in Korea it was sixteen months. In World War II there wasn’t any. You stayed until you were wounded or transferred to some other unit; you’d stay in combat, or killed. In the Pacific War, after about three years, people started rotating home. But three years is a pretty long time.

LC: That was based on the point system.

WL: Yeah. The points didn’t become active until really very late in the war. Never heard of points until, oh, I would say the summer of ’45.

LC: Really?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Okay. I didn’t realize it was that late.
WL: There may have been but I don’t remember ever hearing about it. I know when my points began totaling them up some time in the summer. I had seventy-seven.

LC: How many did one need?

WL: You needed about that much in order to be considered to go.

LC: Okay. But that wasn’t automatic?

WL: No.

LC: Yeah. Right. Well, Bill, would you explain a little bit about your feelings about having received the news that you were going to be assigned to the War College?

WL: Well yeah. I was very pleased because the number of officers that are selected for War College is not very large. What is it? I don’t know, fifteen percent. Maybe that, something like that. The fact that it was the Army War College, I was pleased about that too. Rather than the National because I was kind of partial to the Army. But anyway I was pleased with that.

LC: I mean is it fair to say that it was kind of a feather in your cap at this point?

WL: Oh sure! Oh yeah. It’s essential really for promotion to colonel. It’s virtually essential to have the War College. You’re being considered for O6 for colonel. It’s almost essential that you have a War College behind you.

LC: Did you have an idea of what it would be like? What the demands were?

WL: Oh I had very little knowledge about what they did at the War College and what the studies were.

LC: Well when did you actually depart from Fort Carson?

WL: It’s probably in June of ’68. Go back to Carlisle and got quarters, let me think now. There was a big apartment building. It was an old barracks had been converted into apartments that we moved in to.

LC: Now this is at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania?

WL: Yes.

LC: This time that you’re noting, June ’68, was of course important because there was also a great deal of domestic disturbance at this time.

WL: Oh yeah. There was a great deal of agitation against the war directed, well, somewhat against the armed services themselves too for that matter. Although in Carlisle I would say we were very much insulated from that sort of activity. Carlisle is not the
most liberal bastion in the country and Pennsylvania being kind of conservative anyway,
at least most of it. That part of Pennsylvania was pretty solidly conservative and you
didn’t see much demonstration. We didn’t see any around Carlisle.

LC: What did you think when you learned about, for example, the assassination of
Robert Kennedy and—I mean did that hit you at all?
WL: Not much. No. I don’t remember. When was that?
LC: I think it was in June of ’68, maybe about the second week.
WL: Well, I would have reacted just about how anybody would. It’s a disgrace to
have a public figure assassinated by a little unknown—kitchen or a restroom. How
bizarre can you get? It’s terrible. I didn’t have any great admiration for Robert Kennedy
but that’s beside the point. It’s just a nasty thing to happen that you could have your
attorney general assassinated. Good grief.

LC: Bill, one thing I didn’t ask you about but it sort of looms over this period that
has to do with the Tet Offensive and the US response to it. Can you offer any of your
own observations on that, either what you learned at the time or what you thought about
it subsequently?
WL: I didn’t know hardly anything about it at the time. Tet ’68 was what,
January or February ’68? I don’t remember. But I didn’t even hear much about it.
Whatever I heard it didn’t stick much. What I learned later is this kind of a conventional
understanding that it was not a VC/NVA military success. In fact the Viet Cong never
really recovered from its losses in the South. They were thrown into Saigon and other
cities to take over politically and they were decimated. So they lost heavily in the South.
The main force made some significant gains initially that were virtually all eliminated
later.

LC: But while it was happening you weren’t paying a great deal of attention, for
example, to the news reports?
WL: No. I can’t recall paying much attention to what was happening in Vietnam.
LC: Really?
WL: No. I was—
LC: You had your own command and you were busy with that.
WL: Yeah. I had to devote all of my attention to keeping this battalion running with the sparse support I had. You know, I had practically no capable staff so I was really busy.

LC: So you’re running around having to do quite a bit of the work yourself?

WL: Getting prepared for inspector general inspections and so on. It was a full time job. If I hadn’t had some awfully good support from my motor officer and my executive officer and a couple of company commanders I could have failed as a battalion commander there because it was just touch and go to keep things together.

LC: When an IG comes through, how much notice do you have about that?

WL: Oh you have several weeks, you know, that they’re coming. There was some rather bizarre experiences there. I recall the motor officer telling me, he said, “We put in requests. We need these parts to keep our availability ratio of our vehicles up and we can’t get the parts we need to keep these tracks running.” I said, “Well, you requisitioned them?” “Oh sure. Yeah. The requisitions are three and four weeks old and we should have had the parts by now.” So we went down to the division support battalion that was supposed to be processing our requisitions for these parts, talked to the battalion commander there. I took the motor officer with me. I said, “What’s going on here? We’re not getting anything.” He said, “Well let’s go see your clerk.” They had one particular clerk assigned to each battalion to handle its request for spare parts for the vehicles and we saw this fellow. His desk was pushed up against the wall and he said, “Oh, I handled them all.” We looked around there and we pulled his desk out from the wall and we found a pile of requisitions on the floor behind his desk. He had been overwhelmed with the task and rather than processing these little punch cards he had just pushed them off the end of the desk. That’s why we hadn’t gotten any of our parts. We got that one cleared up and we did get the parts eventually. But that’s kind of silly stuff that you had to put up with with an army that was on its—really strained with resources to accomplish the missions that it had to accomplish. I felt sorry for this little guy in a way.

LC: Up to a point. Right. But it’s very diagnostic that you as battalion commander had to show up in order to shake this tree, shake this particular tree.

WL: I shouldn’t have to do that.
LC: Yeah. Absolutely. It’s kind of appalling really. But you got your parts in time for inspection?

WL: Passed with flying colors. Everything. Another thing happened that I probably should mention. Shortly after I assumed command of the division, I mean of the battalion, the sergeant major came in and said, “Hey, there’s a soldier here that wants to transfer in to the battalion. He said he drove for you in Vietnam. Name is Meckley.” I said, “Oh yeah? Where is he now?” He says, “Well, they got him assigned up at division headquarters company doing something. I don’t know what he’s doing there. But he wants to be transferred to the battalion to be your driver.” I said, “Okay. Get him.” So this kid that had drove for me in Vietnam found out that I was commanding the battalion and he came to see the sergeant major. So we transferred him in to the battalion and he became my driver in Fort Carson.

LC: What was his name?

WL: Meckley. M-e-c-k-l-e-y. While we were there he got engaged to be married and he rented a horse and carriage and he asked me to be his—he had a horse and carriage and he got married at the post chapel. Very cold winter day probably in December or January the next year I guess. He got married and I was his best man at his wedding there at Fort Carson.

LC: I’ll bet that was a thrill for him.

WL: Oh yeah. It was a thrill for everybody. It was a nice thing for him to do.

LC: So you had him around for a good–?

WL: Yeah. All the time I was commanding the battalion there he was there. In Vietnam, I don’t know if I told you this, but I came back from the field with DePuy or Hollingsworth and landed there at the airstrip at Lai Khe. Here comes Meckley up with my jeep. He’d monitor the radio net. He’d know who I was flying with. He’d monitor the net, he’d hear that 7-7 or 7-9er was coming in or 7-4—that was my call sign—was coming in and he’d always be at the air strip to meet me and bring me back to my billet, my tent. He’d always have hot water ready for me for a shower. He constructed a shower for me. He put a fifty-five gallon drum up on some poles. He’d keep that filled and the sun would heat the water. The drum, he attached a showerhead below the drum with a little faucet on it. I’d turn it on and I could take a shower when I got back from the
He was good. But he met me at the jeep and he had bought some bright blue seat covers and a cover for the spare tire in bright blue with an Infantry Division insignia painted on the thing, on the cover of the tire on the back of the jeep. Also he had written on there, “G2, Infantry Division.” I said, “Wait! Meckley, do you think that you and I want to drive anywhere off this post with that jeep with that sign on it? You want to go drive down to Ben Cat with that down Route 13?” I said, “No! You don’t want to do that. We can keep the blue seat covers but we got to take that sign off the back of the jeep. That’s not good form.”

LC: The big “kill me” sign on the back?
WL: Yeah! That’s right. Yeah. That’s right.
LC: He sounds like a good guy though.
WL: He was a good guy.
LC: Let’s take a break for a sec though. Bill, if you will, let me know what Carlisle Barracks looked like as you arrived. You said it was a fairly conservative area. What was the housing situation for you there?
WL: The housing situation wasn’t very good. There were small bungalows—I would call them bungalows—for the student officers. Because I had only one child living at home then we weren’t authorized a bungalow. I think they had three bedrooms in those. I was only authorized two bedrooms and so I had to live in this three story apartment in an old barracks. It wasn’t anything bad about it. It was just not very commodious.
LC: Not very sumptuous.
WL: No. You couldn’t bring all your furniture with you. You had to put a lot of stuff in storage in order to fit into the place.
LC: How did you manage that? Did you just rent a storage space or something?
WL: Put things in storage. They’d pay for it. I don’t remember now where the stuff was but I know that we had to have some things in storage. You didn’t even need to use your car. You walked to the Root Hall, R-o-o-t, Root Hall named after I guess one of the first good secretaries of war we had after the Civil War. Elihu Root. Anyway, it was a very nice facility, new facility for the War College. The War College had originally
been at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. But after World War II was over and they
unified the armed forces, what, 1947?

LC: Yes.

WL: The War College, Army War College, was moved to Carlisle and the
National War College was established, Joint Services War College. It took over the old
Army War College facility there at Fort McNair and that’s why the Army War College
was at Carlisle. Carlisle had been an Army post way back in the Revolutionary War as I
recall. It had been in a magazine. It had been a supply area; it had an old powder house
there and what else. But it had some history in the Civil War. The Confederate Cavalry,
Jeb Stuart, had marched through there and raided the place, stole some shoes in Hanover
and so on. So it has a long history of the Army. It’s one of the oldest posts in the United
States Army, quite small. Very beautiful old stone buildings. The few buildings dated
well back into the early eighteenth century. So it’s a nice place to be. Quiet and the town
of Carlisle small and friendly. The studies weren’t too rigorous. There are no
examinations. You had to write a paper or two, an essay, and so on. That sort of thing. I
contributed to a military journal here and there. Then after graduation I was offered a
post on the faculty. I didn’t have to accept it. I could have asked to be transferred but I
thought that would sound pretty good because, for one thing, my son was in high school
there. I figured well this is one chance to let him maybe finish in the same high school
that he started in or at least had a year in. So I elected to stay. They assigned me as the
Director of Asian Studies—I think that was the title or maybe the Southeast Asian
Studies. I don’t recall. Anyway my main duty as the faculty member was to handle
seminars on Southeast Asia and to develop bibliographies for the students to use to read
on Southeast Asia. That was my main duty, and to be a faculty advisor. I also had to do
that for what they called a non-resident course. In the summertime reserve officers and
National Guard officers would be assigned to the War College and participate in about a
six, I think about a six week session of on-campus work. The rest of their curriculum
was by correspondence course. But they’d come in the summer for these and I did that
for a couple of years.

LC: Now Bill, can I ask why they selected you for the Asian studies area?
WL: Probably my experience on the, you know, they looked at my dossier. They saw that I served in Vietnam, I’d been on the Army staff on Vietnam, and I had a master’s degree that involved Asian studies. So I suppose those three things motivated that. You know, it’s not like being a professor at a university where you have to have a lot more tickets than that to be a faculty member. But at the War College, why, they took what they could get. That way. I did know more than most people did about Southeast Asia, Southern Asia.

LC: I think that’s probably right. It wasn’t a bad choice. But I wonder if it was something that you saw as helpful for your own career path. I mean were you thinking at all yet about leaving the military?

WL: I was thinking very strongly about getting back into a division, armored or an infantry division, and having a command of a brigade. But I knew that I had not yet been promoted to O6 when I was elected for the faculty. I was still a lieutenant colonel but I was promoted soon after I got on to the faculty. I can’t remember the dates now but it was within a couple of months after I was assigned to the faculty that I was promoted to bird colonel.

LC: Did you have a party?

WL: I don’t remember much about that. We may have had a few friends in, something like that. Soon after I was promoted—I was still on the faculty—General DePuy visited. At that time he was a four star general and he was, I believe he was, yeah, he was commanding training and doctrine command at Fort Monroe, Virginia. He came up and he gave a talk and then we had a reception for him at the officer’s mess. During that reception before dinner he pulled me aside, we went off to a corner, and he said, “Bill, I’m establishing a test division at Fort Hood and I would like you to come down there and organize the intelligence element of this test division and run it. Let me know what you think.” So I said, “Okay I’ll give it some thought.” So we had dinner and so on and he left. I talked it over with the family and they weren’t too hot on that. They wanted my son to—he wanted to remain there and finish high school. So I wrote General DePuy a letter and I told him, I gave him those reasons. I said, “I respectfully decline your offer,” and so on. I found out later that he was on the brigadier general board. I have always felt since then that if I had accepted that offer and done a proper job of it
down at Fort Hood, which I’m sure I could have done, that I would have been promoted
within another year or so to brigadier general. But I turned it down and that was that.

LC: Well Bill, did you know what he was, what the test division was going to be
designed to do and what innovative stuff he had in mind?

WL: No. I didn’t have any knowledge of that.

LC: So you would have been going essentially on your relationship with him and
the idea that he wanted you. I mean he was coming after you particularly.

WL: Yeah. Me personally because he figured that I was pretty smart on
intelligence and I knew how it worked. Put it this way – there are a lot of people that
knew more technical things about intelligence than I did. But there weren’t very many
that understood how it all fit in to the battle plan as I did. You can always get technicians
to do these technical things, but to integrate it in to a tactical plan whether you’re talking
about collection, analysis, or exploitation of intelligence, it takes some experience in the
field to be able to do that well. I think that’s what he saw in my capabilities so that’s why
he wanted me.

LC: Did you ever find out or learn what the test division was? Did it emerge at all
later for you? Did you see what he had been talking about?

WL: I don’t remember. I never followed that up. I know that he had some very
distinct and I would say innovative ideas. I shouldn’t say innovative either. His ideas
were based upon his experience not only in Vietnam but in World War II and how
infantry fights and what makes infantry successful when it is successful.

LC: Maybe revisiting forgotten ideas in some way.

WL: Yeah. That’s right. That’s why I retracted innovative. These ideas had
worked before but somehow or other new technologies came on and new faces and new
ideas and some of the really established ways to gain ground and to kill things, people,
had been forgotten. DePuy really codified with this stuff and if I had gone down there to
Fort Hood I probably would have done a good job in forming an intelligence apparatus or
organization to support any kind of division that he had in mind. I’m sorry I didn’t do it
in a sense but everything else would have changed. I wouldn’t have done anything else
except that I’ve done either, for that matter.

LC: Right. Including going back to Vietnam.
WL: Exactly. So anyway he left and I decided to stay. Then the next thing that happened that was significant in my career was that I found out that Jim Hollingsworth, General Hollingsworth, had been promoted to major general and he was commanding US Army in Alaska. US Army in Alaska had two brigades. One brigade of three battalions up at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks and the other brigade was three battalions in Fort Richardson just outside of Anchorage. So I wrote to General Hollingsworth and I said, “When you have a brigade coming open for a command keep me in mind. I’d love to come up and command a brigade for you in Alaska.” He wrote back and he said, “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea to me and as soon as I get a brigade open I’ll let you know.” Well, within a few months he wrote and he said that he was going to have a brigade open and he gave me the date. So I went to the commander of the War College. I actually went to the deputy commander and I told him. I said, “I’ve got an opportunity to command a brigade in Alaska so I’d like to leave.” He said, “Well you’ve only been here—” what was it? Two years or a year and nine months or something like that. “We don’t let people leave that quickly.” So I discussed it with him some more. Then I think I went to see General McCaffrey who was the commander because this brigadier, he wasn’t giving me much encouragement. McCaffrey agreed to let me go to get this brigade. So I made plans. By this time I had moved in to better quarters. As a faculty member I had a house.

LC: You had a faculty upgrade.

WL: Yeah. I was a faculty upgrade. It was a very modest little thing. Actually, it was probably in the sergeant’s quarters when the old Army. But at least it was a house. When you go to Alaska you put virtually everything in storage. You don’t ship anything up there except your real personal stuff. You don’t ship any furniture at all. You put it all in storage. So I put all my stuff in storage at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania at a moving and storage company there on the banks of the Susquehanna River. We drove to San Francisco, saw the family, drove up to Seattle, went over to Victoria—

LC: Beautiful!

WL: Beautiful. Drove up to Nanaimo I guess it is and took the ferry on the inside passage up to Haines, Alaska with the car and drove the Haines cut off up to the Alaska Highway through Tok and into Anchorage. We got really nice quarters. Unfortunately,
by the time all of this transpired Hollingsworth was promoted to lieutenant general and
assigned to command the Corps in Korea. There was a new commander that had just
come on board in Alaska and I didn’t know him at all. Never served with him before.
He was a nice enough fellow but he didn’t know me from Adam. The other thing that
was happening is the Army was considering eliminating one of the brigades so there was
only going to be one brigade up there anyway. There were still two while I was there.
LC: Now which one were you going to be assigned to?
WL: I was going to the brigade, I believe, in Anchorage.
LC: At Wainwright or at Richardson?
WL: At Fort Rich, Anchorage. But by the time I got there there was no vacancy.
They just brought in a new brigade commander. In other words, by the time I got free
from the War College it was too late. But the die was cast and I was moving. So I got
there and they said, “Okay, you’re going to be the G2, US Army Alaska.” Boy I don’t
want to do that again.
LC: That didn’t light you up?
WL: No. They didn’t light me up at all. Fortunately though the chief of staff was
an old friend of mine from the Division and he said, “Don’t worry Bill. I’ll be able to
take care of you.”
LC: Who was that Bill?
WL: Oh geez.
LC: I had to ask you didn’t I? I’m sorry.
WL: I can’t remember his name.
LC: That’s all right. It’ll come out later or we can look it up. He was the chief of
staff anyway.
WL: But he was chief of staff for Army Alaska. I had quarters. I could walk to
work. In the wintertime I could ski at lunchtime. I could put on my cross-country skis
and ski around. It was great duty. After about six months the G3 opened up so they
made me the G3 for Alaska which was a lot more interesting. Then I had responsibility
for the Northern Warfare Training Center up at Fort Greeley. I could go out and visit all
the battalions in training and fly all over Alaska. I flew up to the flanks of Mount
[McKinley] and skied up two or three thousand meters up to Kahiltna Glacier, up to
around fourteen thousand feet. I mean I had a great time flying around. I was also responsible for Company O, the Arctic Rangers. It was about a hundred man company of Army Rangers who were skilled in northern warfare. All of them skiers, all of them good shooters, parachutists. We dropped them on the polar ice cap, you know, by parachute, and they skied across the Harding Icefield. I joined them there and skied with them all day one day. That’s down southern, south of Anchorage.

LC: You must have been in great shape! I mean I can’t imagine anything much more difficult than—

WL: Yeah. For an old guy—

LC: Yeah! That’s what I’m thinking Bill. You were out there. You were holding your own it sounds like.

WL: Yeah! The Army was going to cut back on the Arctic Rangers. I also had responsibility for the Army Winter Olympic Shooting Team, our Army marksmanship team. That was what they called a winter triathlon—skiing, shooting, and what was the other part of it? No. Biathlon! It wasn’t a triathlon. Shooting and skiing. It’s a Nordic thing where they ski and then they drop down and fire at targets and get back on the skies and ski some more.

LC: Right. It’s now recognized as a regular in the international Olympics it’s now a professional sport.

WL: It’s a great thing but the Army was cutting back. Again we’re talking this is 1972, early summer of ’72 I guess.

LC: So your tour up there was essentially ’71 to ’72, is that accurate?


LC: So these cut backs, what was—?

WL: They were going to cut out—they said we couldn’t afford the Arctic Rangers. We were going to cut back on Fort Greeley, the Army Northern Warfare Training School. We’re going to cut back on your aviation detachment. We had an ASTA Platoon of OV-1s. We had about six of them up there and we—the biathlon. They were going to cut that. I said, “Gee wiz. You’re going to destroy all of the Arctic capability of the US Army in one fell swoop here. It’s important to have some cadre in the US Army that knows something about surviving and fighting in the Arctic. I don’t
agree with this.” So I asked General Gettys, he was the commander. I said, “I’d like to fly down to Washington to see those folks in ACSFOR,” that was the Army staff agency, Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development I think is what they called it. We called it ACSFOR. “See if I can talk them out of some of this stuff because this is going to be really hard for the Army to replace some of these things they want to eliminate.” So I flew down to Washington. I think I had to go space A on a tanker or something as I recall. They wouldn’t give me travel. I flew down to some Air Force base up in Maine and then I managed to get commercial from Maine down to Washington. But anyway it was a useless trip. They said, “We can’t do anything. Congress is cutting it and we’re going to cut it.” So they did.

LC: Now Bill, just to broaden this out, was this all part of the kind of if you want the backlash against the Vietnam buildup? The draw down that President Nixon was overseeing?

WL: Yeah. I think they were just cutting the guts out of the Army. I don’t know how many divisions—they began deactivating divisions about that time too as I recall.

LC: I think you’re right.

WL: I thought, “Look. We’ve got aviators up here at—” The aviation unit was up in Fairbanks where the temperature can get down to minus forty and they were still flying. I said, “Where else in the Army are you training aviators that can operate in this kind of environment?”

LC: Let alone the maintenance crews and everybody else, all the support staff.

Well, were you making arguments about the United States need to be prepared for engagement in these conditions?

WL: Well yeah! Sure. I wasn’t saying that we were going to have to fight—I don’t know if they’re ever going to have to fight Norway or Archangel but we have to be able to do it. If we’re directed to we have to have some people that know how to do it and can train people to know how to do it. Shoot. Just makes sense.

LC: Well Bill, tell me a little bit about the Northern Warfare Training Center. I mean this is a facility at Fort Greeley that you had responsibility for?

WL: Yes.

LC: What was the curriculum and who was in charge while you were there?
WL: Okay. There was a Puerto Rico lieutenant colonel. I can’t remember his name, a real good guy. Funny to have a Puerto Rican in charge of a Northern Warfare Training Center. I thought that was kind of weird, but he knew his stuff. They trained in boating on the Yukon River. They had these big boats that they had to learn to operate and that was in turbulent waters.

LC: Now, special boats that were designed for the weather conditions?

WL: Riverboats for northern rivers that could navigate in rapids and swift water.

LC: Wow. That’s very interesting that the Army had this capability and were developing and training. That’s really interesting. Go ahead. What else?

WL: They taught rock climbing. They had some cliffs down there on the Yukon. You could train in rock climbing. They taught glacier climbing, rappelling, and traversing glaciers using crampons. They put me through all this stuff too. I had to climb on this stuff.

LC: Did you take a short course up there? I mean essentially walk through it or did you—?

WL: Right. Well, yeah. I just walked through. I didn’t spend a week up there. Planned a day or so climbing on glaciers and I don’t like heights.

LC: That’s something we have in common sir. I don’t either. I can’t imagine.

WL: Rappelling down the face of a glacier cliff, that sort of thing. They taught that. They taught snowshoeing. They taught military skiing. That is, cross-country skiing as well as downhill. Those are the main things. Survival out in the sub zero climate. They taught pulling akios. That was a sled that they pulled behind them with their gear on it.

LC: How is that spelled, that sled?

WL: Akio. A-k-i-o. I think it’s probably an Eskimo word. It’s a little sled that they pack their duffel bags or their tents and their food and so on. About two or three soldiers pull and they change off. They can go great distances.

LC: Oh I’m sure.

WL: Snowshoes. Those are the sort of skills they conducted, they trained in. While I was there they put a team up on Mount McKinley and I went up to visit them there. I landed with my helicopter up about, oh, I’m guessing now about eight thousand
feet up the glacier and then I skied up another two or three thousand meters up where one
of their base camps was and they put a team up there. Unfortunately the battalion, team
commander, this lieutenant colonel, got altitude sickness up at around fourteen thousand
feet and had to be extracted by helicopter and brought down to the hospital. That upset
the people in my headquarters because I had authorized the climb. They felt I shouldn’t
have done that. I shouldn’t have allowed a guy who was obviously not in shape to do it
to go up there but that’s good second-guessing. A lot of Army people are good at that.
They won’t take the responsibility for doing anything but if something goes wrong, why,
they’re ready to pounce on you. Anyway, nobody was killed.

LC: Now, how big was the training facility there within Fort Greeley and how big
is Fort Greeley itself?

WL: It’s very small. I don’t know – I’m trying to think. There are just a few
buildings. The staff—I have to guess at this. I can’t remember but we couldn’t have
been more than a hundred people up there.

LC: So I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that we weren’t offering—we, the
United States was not offering this kind of training to foreign nationals. Is that accurate?
WL: I don’t know. They could have. I don’t know who they would have offered
it to because the other armies that operate in the far north do this just as well or better
than we do. You wouldn’t be training Norwegians—

LC: Nope. That’s right.

WL: Or Fins or Swedes, so I don’t know. I don’t know if we trained anyone else
up there or not. There was nothing classified.

LC: Right. But these are very particular skills.

WL: Yeah, they are. They’re not well known. You know, as a footnote, Greeley
is active again because the Army has put these anti-missile units up there. They put them
up there at Greeley.

LC: As part of the defense shield, the anti-missile shield?

WL: Yes! Yeah. So Greeley is active but not as a Northern Warfare Training
Center anymore, I suppose.

LC: Well, while you were either G2 or more likely as G2, Bill, did you have an
overview of US monitoring activities that were essentially aimed at the Soviet Union?
WL: Oh yes. Yeah. There was a big station, that kind of a station, out on the island of Shemya on the end of the Aleutians. I flew out there, well, as G2. You know, that’s like flying from New York to San Francisco. That’s how far it is.

LC: That’s just unbelievable. How is that island—I’m looking at a map?


LC: That’s almost at the very end of the chain.

WL: The last island.

LC: Yeah.

WL: There we had a large listening station, joint services. It was manned by a joint operation by the Army and the Air Force and they rotated command I think every six months. The commander would change over from Army to Air Force. They had a large air strip there in which they launched the air craft that flew up over the Russian and all along the Russian coast, north and south, over the Bering Sea and so on. They flew up that way. I went out there just to visit to see what they were doing and how they did it and so on. It’s quite impressive. The island, you can’t think of a more desolate location, I suppose, in the world except maybe Antarctica. But it’s just tundra and fog, low clouds. They hardly ever got any sun. Of course during the wintertime they got no sunlight at all and it’s just a miserable location. It’s closed now I understand because we got other systems took over and we’re not doing that same kind of monitoring on the Soviets any longer, I suppose. While I was a G2 I had another incident that took place that was kind of interesting. The US Coast Guard asked me if I could supply two Russian speakers to accompany them on one of what they called a high endurance cutters on a fisheries patrol on the Bering Sea. I had a small intelligence section there with G2 Alaska and I had an interrogation team just like I had in Vietnam. But I had up there rather than Vietnam speakers I had Russian speakers. So I asked these two soldiers, well, actually it went through the detachment commander, “You’ve got two soldiers who would like to accompany the coast guard?”

LC: This would be the MI Detachment?

WL: Yeah. MI Detachment Alaska. Yeah. Coast Guard on a cruise up in the Bering Sea. Sure! They weren’t doing anything. They didn’t have any Russians to interrogate so I said, “Sure we’ll do that.” So I sent them down to Juneau where they
linked up with the Coast Guard and got on this high endurance cutter and went up for
their cruise. Well, what happened up there, they came across a large Russian factory ship
in a part of the Bering Sea that the ship was not supposed to be. It was within US
fisheries water. I think the range is twelve miles. Maybe it’s more than that by
international law but I can’t recall now. Doesn’t matter. Anyway, they challenged this
Russian and ordered him to stop. Well, the Russian decided not to stop and took off. He
started making steam and heading out away and the cutter in pursuit. Cutter fired a
round. I guess they had a three-inch gun on the bow and they fired a round across the
bow of the Russian ship and it stopped. They sent aboard a boarding party, a Coast
Guard officer and a couple of swabies and my two interpreters, on to the Russian ship to
interrogate them and order them to stop and to inspect their cargo. What did they have?
What were they catching? Well, as it happened—this was all told to me later—the
Russian captain of the ship was drunk in his stateroom. He wasn’t even on the deck. The
mate was in command and he gave them a hard time. He said he wasn’t going to stop
and they weren’t going to see anything. He made steam again and they took off again
with the Coast Guard cutter in pursuit with the boarding party aboard. They were headed
for Vladivostok. The US cutter was probably built in 1914 and it was operating on one
boiler, couldn’t keep up. Of course with their boarding party aboard they didn’t want to
fire any shots so—

LC: Yeah. This is not an ideal situation.

WL: The Russian took our crew, our guys and everybody, in to Vladivostok and
held them for, oh, a couple of weeks. It was an international incident of rather low order
but enough to get the attention of the folks in the State Department. As it happened, this
was an interesting part of it too, the general consul for the Coast Guard came to Juneau
and he happened to be an old friend of mine from the War College. He had been on the
staff. He was our State Department advisor at the War College so I knew him. We
talked about it and he had a big laugh about it. I didn’t think it was so dog gone funny
but—

LC: Not when your folks are—

WL: I had folks that were missing somewhere in Russia. But anyway, through
negotiations with the Russians, the Russians agreed to release them and they did. They
got back to Juneau and came back up to Alaska and gave us this wonderful story about
their experiences on this Russian factory ship with a drunk master and an obstreperous
mate who wouldn’t agree to anything. It was a good story.

LC: Did they tell you anything about Vladivostok? Did they get off the ship or
were they—?

WL: Yeah. They took them off the ship. They held them in a building or
something there. They didn’t beat them up or treat them necessarily badly. I can’t
remember much more about it than that.

LC: It’s still kind of a problem though to have your folks essentially kidnapped
and these are people who reported to you. You’re responsible for them.

WL: Yeah. I don’t remember getting any trouble about it. There was another
incident when I was G2. It was also kind of strange. Got a call from the National Guard.
In Alaska they called it the Eskimo Scouts on the island of Little Diomede, Little
Diomede. These two islands, Big Diomede and Little Diomede, are in the center of the
Bering Straight. You recognize those?

LC: Yes.

WL: You know where that is?

LC: Yes.

WL: Okay. This was probably in January. It might have been February. I got a
call from them and they said, “One of our natives has been kidnapped by the Russians
and will you come up here and try to get them to release him?” Here I am, I’m the G2. I
mean I don’t have a great deal of influence with the Soviet government. I thought it was
very interesting. So I got, I don’t know the details, but I got a Twin Otter. Otter is a de
Havilland aircraft, a twin engine, obviously. Commercial. I think this was a commercial.
I’m not too sure of that. I think it was. It was a commercial airplane and flew up from
Anchorage up to Little Diomede. The strait is completely frozen over from shore to
shore, solid ice. Which makes me question as a footnote this idea that the only way there
could have been migration from Siberia to Alaska is what they called a land bridge. I
think it just as easily could have been an ice bridge. But that’s beside the point. It was
completely frozen over. So we landed on wheels too, we didn’t even use skids, right
below the cliff of Little Diomede. You could see Big Diomede only a mile or so away
over to the west. It’s about thirty degrees below zero and the wind is blowing pretty
strong. Cold! I mean really cold. Climbed up a ladder or stairway—Little Diomede is a
cliff. We climbed up the stairway up to the top. There’s a sheet metal building happily
insulated somehow or other and got into that and that was the headquarters for the
Eskimo Scouts. On a pedestal at the window they had a telescope. They brought me
over to the telescope and they said, “Now, if you look over there you see Big Diomede
and the Soviet post on top of Big Diomede.” I looked there and I could see a telescope in
the window that I was looking at. So anyway the whole thing is pretty bizarre. I
questioned them and I say, “What about this fellow that’s missing?” They said, “Well,”
and he gave me his name, he said, “He walked across the ice there to see his cousin.”
They’re all from the same Eskimo tribe. They’re all speaking the same Eskimo language
and, “He went over there to see his cousin and the Russians arrested him and they kept
him. They won’t let him go.” Well, there wasn’t much I could do about that but we
discussed it for a while and I said, “Well I’ll report it to the State Department when I get
back and I’m pretty sure he’ll get back again.” Sure enough, within a day or so, they
released him and he walked back across the ice back to his home on Little Diomede. But
strange things would happen up there. The fact that they’re all basically the same native
people. They make their living killing walruses mostly. In fact, flying over the Bering
Sea there you could see openings in the ice from here and there and huge groups—I don’t
know what you call a group of walruses. But they were all congregating on the ice there
next to this little opening. Very interesting. Anyway, that’s what I did as G2. It wasn’t a
great accomplishment but—

LC: Well, did you think that any of these incidents, although minor, were—I
mean was it your feeling that this was part of a pattern of kind of back and forth that had
been going on?

WL: Oh yeah. Yes. It was just harassment by the Russians. We didn’t
reciprocate in kind. I mean we didn’t arrest people that came over but they did. There
were other indications that they were sending their Spetsnaz (Editor’s note: Russian
Special Forces) on to the island of St. Lawrence. I flew over to St. Lawrence, that’s also
in the Bering Sea there, and the natives had picked up indications that the Russians had
landed there. Their Special Forces, they left some debris behind. It was a wet suit, some
flippers, and stuff like that. So they were doing reconnaissance here and there in the
Bering Sea.

LC: You would have expected that I’m sure as G2 that they’d be doing something
anyway.

WL: Oh yeah. But anyway, after I was G3 for a while we got a new chief of staff.
My friend left and the new guy, he was a native [born] Alaskan and I won’t give you all
the details why he was hired but he was an infantry officer without a combat badge and
he was older than me. I wondered how in the world could a guy survive through World
War II, Korea, and Vietnam as an infantry officer and never get in to combat. But I guess
that’s kind of beside the point. But I didn’t have a great deal of respect for him.

LC: Was that why you didn’t or was it—?

WL: Pardon me?

LC: Was your sort of essentially lack of respect for him based on his record or
was it based on how he operated while he was there?

WL: Both, but mainly start with his record.

LC: Yeah. Didn’t come across very well.

WL: How could you avoid three wars as an infantryman?

LC: I don’t know. That’s probably a record.

WL: Yeah. I’m not going to tell you his name.

LC: That’s fine, but it probably is—I can’t imagine any other precedent.

WL: Yeah. Anyway, he didn’t like the fact that I didn’t spend all day, every day,
in my office. That wasn’t my style. I always wanted to go out and visit with the
battalions and see how they were training. That was my job. I was a G3 responsible for
operations and training. So that’s where I felt I had to be and he didn’t like that. He said,
“You’ve got to stay back here and plan for the draw down—” they were talking about
drawing down one of the brigades and all that stuff. Well I said, “I have staff to do that.”
I had two or three very sharp lieutenant colonels and a few majors that could do all of that
kind of work. They showed me everything they were doing. I’d approve it or disapprove
it and give them guidance and so on. But I felt I had to be out there to see what was
going on.
LC: Presumably also Bill, just to kind of come in behind, you’re also offering those younger officers the opportunity to take some responsibility and so on rather than—right, you’re asking them to produce while you’re out, you know, sort of looking on the horizon. So this isn’t just you kind of ditching and running. This is essentially offering them opportunities to participate in what G3 does.

WL: That’s right. That’s exactly right. That’s what they were supposed to be doing. They were drawing up the training schedules and they were conducting training inspections and they were doing all the other things that G3 staff officers are supposed to do.

LC: Sure. Right. Rather than you doing it.

WL: Yeah. So anyway, when he started telling me I couldn’t fly out there anymore I said, “Well look. I’m not going to put up with this anymore.” So I called what they called Colonel’s Branch in the Pentagon. That’s the branch that handles the assignments of colonels and I got the infantry Colonel’s Branch guy and I said, “Look. I’m not happy here in Alaska any longer. What have you got? Where I can go?” He said, “Well, would you like to go back to Vietnam?” I said, “Sure.” I didn’t even ask him what it was. “Sure. I’ll go back to Vietnam.” So this was in the early fall. I guess it must have been around September of ’72. I said, “Sure I’ll go back. What is it?” “Well, you’ll be director of training in the Army Advisory Group.” I said, “Well that sounds good to me. Cut my orders.” So they did. They cut the orders. Then there was kind of some trouble because they were meeting in Paris, as you remember. A ceasefire, and there was kind of what you might call a false ceasefire for a little while. They seemed to agree and then they didn’t agree and I don’t remember all the details.

LC: But you’re exactly right Bill. This was October. I think this happened in October ’72.

WL: So they put a hold on my movement. They said, “Well we don’t even know if we’re going to need you. It looks like there might be a ceasefire so just hang on.” I remember now, I think I was already practically en route back to California to put my stuff in storage down there. Oh, incidentally, while I was in Alaska they had the great flood, you know, on the Susquehanna [in Pennsylvania] and it destroyed about three fourths of my household goods. But anyway, that’s beside the point. So anyway what I
had left I wanted to move to California and get ready to fly to Vietnam. But they put a
hold on it so I kind of cooled it in California for a couple of weeks or so and finally the
talks broke down and they said, “Okay you can go.” So I got a port call and flew out to
Saigon.

LC: When did you arrive?

WL: I arrived on the second of December ’72 and they gave me a special deal.
They said, “Your assignment now,” although the routine assignment in Vietnam as you
know was one yea, they said, “you’re going to be on two year assignment.” I said,
“That’s fine.” He said, “Also you’ve got a accompanied travel. Your wife can go with
you.” I said, “That’s fine. Where’s she going to live?” “She’s going to live at Clark Air
Base in the Philippines. Well that’s about a thousand miles from Saigon but once a
month you will have authority to fly back to Clark and visit your wife. They have nice
quarters there at the base and once a month we have what we call Operation Handclasp.”
Actually people called it Bodyclasp.

LC: I was going to say, there are many other ways you could go.

WL: That’s right. Anyway, well I said, “That sounds okay.” So we shipped the
car. We shipped the dog. I had a big collie dog named Jocko and I made a crate for him
and took him with us. We flew to Manila. We had to take him through customs and
immigration and they had to put him in quarantine for a couple of days, left him in
Manila. Got a sedan to drive us up to Clark. Nice quarters right on the perimeter of the
base. Big house with a maid all paid for and everything was going good. Went back to
Manila, picked up the dog, and he seemed to be happy up there. As soon as I got them
settled, why, I flew to Saigon. That’s when I arrived at Saigon on the second of
December and took over as director of training in the Army Advisor Group.

LC: Okay let’s take a break there Bill.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 12 of 22
November 21, 2005

LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the twenty-first of November 2005. I am in Lubbock and the colonel is speaking by telephone from Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, last time we discussed several interesting assignments you had leading up to your return to Saigon in December of 1972 and you discussed the circumstances surrounding that. What position you had been assigned to and something about the circumstances that you found when you first arrived back in Saigon.

WL: Sure I’d be glad to do that. First, to recap, I flew over to Saigon from Clark Air Force Base, which is up in Pampanga Province near a town called Angeles City on the second of December. We used a DC-6 aircraft. It was a four engine, piston engine aircraft. Took four hours to fly from Clark to Saigon. It’s about a thousand miles so you can see it was kind of a slow flight.

LC: Yeah. A little clunky there.

WL: Yes. When I arrived there I reported in to the Army Advisory Group. Met with Major General Coleman. I think it was Bill Coleman, I think is his name. He was chief of the Army Advisory Group. I got settled in to a bachelor officer quarters near the Vietnamese Joint General Staff Headquarters. I’ll refer to that as JGS from now on. I was assigned as the chief, or rather the director of training in the Army Advisory Group. In that role I was responsible for advising the Vietnamese Armed Forces director of training on training policy and activities for all of the Vietnamese Army. This was Lieutenant General Chinh, C-h-i-n-h. The situation that I faced when I got there was a little bit unsettling in the fact that I think in the second day I arrived there the enemy shelled Tan Son Nhut Airbase with rockets. It was kind of a surprise to me because I thought the war had pretty well wound down since they were still—we still had a delegation in Paris negotiating, along with the South Vietnamese, negotiating with the enemy, with the North Vietnamese on a ceasefire. I didn’t expect we’d be under fire
again at this time. I hadn’t been back to Vietnam since I left in ’67. I left in ’67. I got
back there in ’72. The big difference I saw, superficially at least, was there was a lot less
military traffic in the streets of Saigon than there was when I had left. Of course we had
no more military units in Vietnam at that time, or if we had them they were very small.
There may still have been one or two aviation companies and perhaps part of a battle
group somewhere in Vietnam, I can’t recall now. But they were really kind of packing
up and getting ready to go home. I met with General Coleman, as I said, and he said that,
he gave me the impression that we were going to continue our effort to assist the
Vietnamese in improving their armed forces until the very last moment when we were
told to leave. He was very adamantly about that. He said, “We’re not standing down.
We’re doing our job the best we can with as much vigor and energy as we can muster to
keep this Vietnamese Armed Forces improving.” They had improved greatly according
to General Coleman. I was too new there to make any kind of an evaluation myself of
that but—

LC: Bill, were you given any kind of briefings to get you, essentially, up to
speed?
WL: Well, a little bit. Not a lot. I was told what my responsibilities were and of
course I was very anxious to get out and see what was going on.
LC: Yes, I’m sure.
WL: I did meet with General Chinh very early. We had a meeting with his staff
and I had two or three people in my staff and I attended weekly meetings with General
Chinh and his staff on training matters.
LC: What were your first impressions of him?
WL: Very favorable. Very studious, intelligent, fellow. Very small man. He had
been a combat officer for many years. There was quite a bit of political tension in
Vietnam among the—that I could actually sense—that there was a good deal of
apprehension about reaching a settlement with North Vietnam because they figured—that
is that South Vietnamese figured that they were going to get a really short end of the stick
on this one because the North Vietnamese had so many forces inside Vietnam at that time
and it appeared that we were not going to be able to force them to leave. In other words
they would have a significant military lodgment in South Vietnam when the ceasefire
was signed and they didn’t like that at all. About that time, I believe it was in late
December, General Haig came over. By this time I believe he was a major general and
he was on the staff of Henry Kissinger. National Security Council I suppose. I met with
him, not privately. He wasn’t too friendly with me although we had worked together as
G2 and G3 in the Division years before. But I did get to talk to him a little bit about it.
His mission was to impress upon general, or rather President Thieu, that Thieu had very
few options. That either he buckled in and signed the agreement that we were
hammering out in Paris or we would just leave without him. I think that was generally
the message he was given to present to General Thieu.

LC: Did you attend some kind of dinner or reception or something?

WL: It was a reception at the officer’s mess, what we called the command mess,
at MACV headquarters.

LC: Bill, why was he a bit standoffish towards you? Certainly he knew who you
were, what you were doing there. He would have known all of that. But you guys had
gotten along fairly well back in ’66.

WL: It was kind of a personality thing between him and me. We never did get
very close. I was pretty close to some of the G3s that were there. With Haig it was a
little difficult. I would class it as arrogance if I had to say what it looked like.

LC: I don’t think you’ll be the first person to make that observation so you’re
probably in good company there. But he was essentially there on a diplomatic issue.

WL: Yes. Definitely. He was there to rather lever general, President Thieu into
an agreement. That’s my impression. He didn’t confide in me by any means. But that’s
the impression I got that that was his mission. Of course about that time then there was
the so-called Christmas Bombing. That also was intended to put some pressure on the
North Vietnamese to sign. So it was kind of a two pronged attack. We bombed the
North Vietnamese to convince them to sign and we put some pressure on General Thieu
to convince him to sign. That’s probably kind of simplistic but that’s what it looked like
to me what was going on.

LC: Let me ask a little bit before we get to the sequence of events. Bill if you
don’t mind, can you place the training section and the Army Advisory Group within the
architecture of the American military advisory effort overall remaining in Saigon at this
time?

WL: Yes. There were two major elements of the advisory group. One, and
perhaps the most important, were the advisors that we had put in to Vietnamese [Army]
units and into their Marine Corps. We had Marine Corps advisors with the Vietnamese
Marine Corps units and we had Army advisors in the Army units. We had Navy advisors
in the Vietnamese Navy attached to their units. Early in the war we had advisors down
to—I don’t recall now whether we had them at battalion level. I believe we did. But we
certainly had them at the regimental level. We’d have a major or a lieutenant colonel as
an advisor to a Vietnamese regimental commander and we had colonels at the division,
Vietnamese division headquarters advising the Vietnamese division commanders. These
were not single people but they were probably four or five officers and a few enlisted
men at the division level.

LC: Go ahead Bill.

WL: Yeah. We had those advisors at the units but by the time I got back to
Vietnam our advisors were very few and far between, I believe. We had very few
advisors with the units and we were beginning to withdraw them.

LC: So very few advisors in the field?

WL: Yes. But we did maintain the advisors at the schools and training centers. In
fact, we probably still have them at the regimental and division level by this time. But
General Coleman told me that the Vietnamese units were in good shape to handle their
own tactical operations and that they didn’t really need advisors at that level any longer.
But the training centers and the schools still needed them. Well, you might not say
needed them but they could profit by them.

LC: Where were the principal schools, Bill, if you can tick them off?

WL: The schools and training centers that I was involved with, responsible for,
were really all over the country. There were, in the first place, basic training
organizations similar to ours that we had in World War II and back through the Vietnam
War where they trained newly enlisted soldiers. There was one up in the Delta near the
Cambodia border. That was Lam Son, I think they called that one. There was one down
near Vung Tau and there was one up further north probably around Da Nang somewhere.
There were schools such as the infantry school which is at Thu Duc near Saigon. There was an armor school. They had an artillery school. They even had a band school that I visited, the military band school. They had the Command and General Staff College that they had established at—that was near Bien Hoa. They had their military academy, which they had established before we got there, up at Dalat. So we had advisors at all of these schools and I was responsible for those folks. I started a program of visiting all of these schools and training centers. Sometimes I would be with General Chinh or one or two or his officers. Sometimes I would be on my own. Most of the time I took at least one of his officers with me to help me. Of course I needed an interpreter anyway so I flew around the country looking at these schools.

LC: Okay. Well as we go on I’d like to ask you about what you saw on those different visits. You said that the advisory group had just maybe a handful of people or maybe none, really, out in the field anymore. General Coleman had told you that essentially the ARVN units at least were not really in need of advising at that level anymore.

WL: Yes. That’s true. I had an office very close to General Chinh’s office at the JGS Center. These buildings were the old French Style, two-story, stucco buildings, very thick walls. They’re not air-conditioned. They didn’t have windows; they had shutters. In case it rained you closed the shutters but otherwise there was no glass in them so you had—well, when you were lucky the breeze was coming through. It was pretty difficult to do much work in the afternoon heat.

LC: Where was the JGS Center?

WL: Pardon?

LC: Where was it located Bill?

WL: JGS was only about two or three kilometers from Tan Son Nhut Airbase.

LC: What about your accommodations? Where were you staying?

WL: Well, they weren’t too great. They were not—

LC: Again.

WL: They were about three or four kilometers away and I took a bus over to the JGS compound in the morning and back. Once in a while I could get a lift in a jeep, and
that’s where I stayed at that BOQ (bachelor officers’ quarters). I just had one room with
a shower.

LC: So pretty spartan stuff.

WL: Yeah. It wasn’t too great. Later on I was moved into—well I’m getting
ahead of myself. The last meeting I went to with General Chinh was—actually I guess it
was on the twenty-seventh of January, the day before they signed the treaty, the ceasefire
agreement in Paris. I think that was the twenty-seventh of January. We flew up to Da
Nang for a major staff meeting with the commander of I Corps, in Da Nang. On the way
up—well, a day or so before that I began to have a very severe attack of sciatica. I had
this herniated disc and it was giving me a great deal of pain. I actually had what they
called foot drop. That was an interference of the, you know, on the nerve on my right leg
made it impossible for me to stand on my toes on that foot. I couldn’t move the foot.

LC: This is really serious. This is actually very serious.

WL: Yeah. Yeah. Well it hurt a lot.

LC: Yeah! Among other things.

WL: On the flight up to Da Nang we went in a Vietnamese Air Force DC-3. You
know the C-47 twin engine old aircraft and actually it was so bad that I had to stand. I
stood up all the way to Da Nang which is about a three or four hour flight on that DC-3.
But I survived through the meeting. Most of the time I would try to stand and get in the
back because it was much more painful to sit down. Went through the meeting and while
we were there they announced the ceasefire. It was pretty dramatic.

LC: How did that news come to the meeting? Were you in the meeting actually
or—?

WL: In a meeting and it came over the radio. It was in Vietnamese and I didn’t
know what they were talking about but General Chinh came over and told me. He said
they signed the treaty in Paris. So virtually immediately they adjourned the meeting and
said, “Well, we can pick this up again some other time when we sort out what’s going to
happen next.” There were some serious things to be done in I Corps, in fact in all the
corps. I’m sure what they had on their minds was taking control of the villages that had
been occupied by VC here and there. Of course the North Vietnamese and the VC were
going to do the same thing, what we call land grab. The ceasefire was to take effect the
next day I suppose it was. Both sides were intent upon grabbing as much territory as they
could before the thing went in to effect so they could say, “Well this belonged to us at
ceasefire,” that sort of attitude. There was some significant fighting that went on in the
next two or three weeks. But I won’t get into that now. I didn’t get involved in that
obviously. So I flew back—General Chinh and I flew back to Saigon and I had to report
in to the hospital. By that time we didn’t have any American military hospitals there.
We’d already turned over the field hospital we had in Saigon to the Seventh Day
Adventists. I reported in there and they put me to bed and they said, “We’re going to
have to evacuate you to Clark Airbase.” So, they wouldn’t let me walk anymore. They
kept me on a litter and they put me on a DC-9, an Air Force hospital airplane that they
had there and they flew me over to Clark and into the hospital at Clark Airbase. They
told me there, they said, “Look, we’re getting ready to receive the prisoners of war from
Hanoi so we can’t keep you here. We can’t do anything for you here. We’re going to
have send you to Guam.” I said, “Wait a minute. I certainly don’t want to go to a
hospital in Guam.” I said, “I have quarters here. I have a house and a wife here at Clark
Airbase. What’s another option?” He said, “Well—” I’m talking about the neurologist,
Air Force neurologist. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you. If you lie down for about three
weeks and don’t get up except when you absolutely have to and stay on your back this
might subside. These symptoms might subside to the point where you can go back to
duty without the operation.” They wanted me to go to Guam and have my back operated
on. I guess they’d fuse the vertebrae or something like that. So I said, “Well I like that.
That sounds good to me.” Actually, I just went back to my quarters and I just laid down
for about two weeks I guess until the pain went away and I got my movement back in my
foot and I went back to duty. So that’s what I did there. But I didn’t go back before the
prisoners started arriving. My wife and I went down to the airstrip when the first flight
came in from Hanoi with prisoners of war. We watched them get off the airplane and be
greeted by their members of their family, those that had family there. Some of them, of
course, were flown in from the States to meet them. It was a very, very nice thing to see.
Very emotional to see the poor guys get off the airplane.

LC: Bill, at this point, how were you assessing the peace agreement itself? Did
you have time to read about it?
I didn’t have any news on it. I didn’t see it. I didn’t know anything about it. I just knew that there was a prisoner exchange going on and I didn’t know what my future was going to be because I was over there on a two year tour. I was supposed to stay in Vietnam for two years. Here as soon as I got started in my job—I was in my job just less than two months and my job was being eliminated. We were told immediately that one of the conditions of the ceasefire was that all United States forces, advisors and all, would leave within—I think we were given sixty days to clear out. So I didn’t know what to expect. I go back to Saigon from Clark—

At about when Bill?

Well, this must have been—

February? March?

Late February. About that and maybe in the last week of February. I got there and I got a call from Brig. Gen. John Gifford. John Gifford was then in the G3 office, that’s operations, for MACV. John and I had been together in the Division. He was an artillery battalion commander at one of our, I think our general support battalions. Anyway, John called me and he said, “I know you’re on a two year tour. How would you like to stay back and stay here and organize the intelligence branch of the organization that’s going to stay in Vietnam?” He had some respect for my ability as an intelligence staff officer so that’s why he called me and General Weyand knew about it too. General Weyand was at that time the commander of Military Assistance Command, MACV, and he knew me too from the old days. So I said, “Sure. That sounds okay to me.” I really didn’t want to turn around and go back to the States and pick up something that, you know—I wouldn’t know what they would assign me to do if I did get back to the States.

It kicked in from there on. As I mentioned before, like in Alaska, the chief of staff was Division. The two brigade commanders were Division guys that I knew very well. So it continued on. So, in any case, they told me that I was going to be the intelligence officer for DAO (Defense Attaché Office) Saigon. Meanwhile, the J2 of MACV—I can’t remember his name now, he was a brigadier general—he wanted to go
home or he got his orders to go home so they called me in to be the acting J2 for Military Assistance Command Vietnam until they folded their flag. So I was the J2 MACV for about a month I guess. Waiting for them to leave so that we could establish DAO Saigon. It was kind of an interregnum there, two commands, and I was J2 MACV for a while.

LC: Now, Bill, if you don’t mind, can you review the situation that you found as acting J2 MACV? Obviously, this is a folding operation, MACV itself as an entity. But did you have time to get an overview of the military situation as the sixty days were elapsing following the signing of the Paris Agreements? In other words, what was the distribution of NVA forces in-country and RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) forces?

WL: Yes. I had access to the briefing rooms and I’d go down there everyday and do what they called the boardwalk. These two rooms in MACV headquarters were, let’s see, they were very large open rooms and the walls were lined with one to fifty thousand scale maps of all of Vietnam. So that takes a lot of space and they were divided by military regions. There were sections for all four military regions. Plotted on those map boards, went around the entire room, were the flags, the symbols, for all enemy and friendly units. So I got a good idea of what was there and what was going on. Now, the units were by the orders, by the treaty, were to remain in place. But as I mentioned there was a good deal of local movement where local commanders would take the initiative or being directed by their corps commanders to move out and seize villages where they would see a flag of the enemy. It’s interesting because as soon as the ceasefire was signed the little villages would raise the flag that whatever units were at least ostensibly in control of that area. You’d see as you flew over the area or drove through the area you could see the flag of the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong flag on a flag pole in little villages and hamlets here and there. Then you see in many other villages, in most of them, you’d see the Vietnamese, the Republic of South Vietnam, Republic of Vietnam flag. So it was kind of a spotty thing. There were some, as I mentioned, some major engagements of battalion level and regimental level to seize villages. There’s one particular one on the coast, I can’t recall it right now. I treated it in my book. In fact I have a chapter about land grab in the book, around ’73.
LC: Was there still a briefing staff present?
WL: Yeah there were still some there but they were all packing up and they kind of lost interest in it, naturally. They didn’t have any great stake in it any longer; getting ready to leave. They were cutting down the force very rapidly.

LC: As J2, acting J2 did you have an opposite number with whom you were supposed to be in communication?
WL: Yes. In the Vietnamese Army?
LC: Yes.
WL: That’s when I went over to see—I had my first meeting with Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, who was the J2 for MACV. Also at that time this brigadier general whom I was replacing, before he left, he turned over his sedan and his driver to me, Mr. Lien. So I just fit right into it. I just picked up everything and then they assigned me the trailer that had belonged to the chief of staff of MACV. I moved from that BOQ into a trailer in the command mess compound, which was kind of nice.

LC: Now, was this still in the JGS center or was this at the MACV compound?
WL: This was at MACV compound where my quarters were.
LC: Okay. Did you stay there then just in terms of your living arrangements and so on? Is that where DAO was based?
WL: Yes. So DAO took over the MACV building.
LC: Okay. I just wanted to be sure that that was the case.
WL: As they moved out, why we moved in. They had a ceremony. I don’t remember the date they left. It must have been in the end of March when they finally—General Weyand left. There were big changes going on about to take place at the embassy also. Ambassador Bunker was still the ambassador for the United States to Vietnam. I believe he left in June but I can’t recall now exactly. He was replaced by Ambassador Martin. But early on there, before the—about the time, I guess it was about the time that MACV left, I flew over to Hawaii to headquarters of US, United States Forces Pacific Command, PACOM, and had a meeting with—in fact two or three days of meetings with the J2 of Pacific Command. The subject was the organization of the intelligence branch for DAO Saigon. They had given me some briefing charts and rosters and so on. But I didn’t fully understand what my mission was going to be or what my
resources were going to be and how I was supposed to report and who I was reporting to. So I figured it was essential for me to go back there and get it from the horse’s mouth as it were what they expected of the intelligence branch of DAO Saigon. DAO Saigon essentially was a logistical headquarters. The responsibility that they had was to continue military assistance to the armed forces of South Vietnam so that they had an Army division to handle Army support of the Vietnamese Army. They had a Navy division that did the same thing for the Vietnamese Navy. They had an Air Force division to support the Air Force. So that was the organization. Intelligence branch didn’t fit neatly into that. But they wisely had determined when they organized this stay back force that they really did need a continuing military intelligence capability in DAO Saigon and that’s why they decided that they would be an intelligence branch. They also had an operations division. Operations being keeping track of what the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were up to, what operations they were conducting. We were very firmly told that we were not any longer to be giving any advice of any kind to the South Vietnamese. This was prohibited by the agreements that Kissinger had made with the North Vietnamese. That we were not going to be advisors any longer. But that didn’t mean that we didn’t have liaison with them. We could discuss things with them but we would not advise them. So operations division was responsible also for continuing military training in the United States. We could still send Vietnamese military people to the United States military schools. We could still do that. We had a plans section in operations that was responsible for developing US plans for our operations. Of course we had the regular administrative folks that we had to have: a pay section, finance section, administration, et cetera. As any headquarters did there had to be quite a few people involved in monitoring the activities of the contractors. We had to have contractors to do things that American military units had done before under MACV. We didn’t have any more engineer battalions, for example, to do construction or to keep roads in repair and that sort of thing. So we had Pacific Architects and Engineers as the major engineering contractors to continue that work. We had to have a signal contractor to keep our communications up, which had been done before by US Army Signal Corps and Navy and so on. So there was a large contracting element within DAO Saigon.
LC: Now these could be US, as you’ve mentioned, US companies and not necessarily—?

WL: Yes. These were American companies although there were quite a number of South Vietnamese contractors involved in this too.

LC: Okay. What about third countries?

WL: Third countries? I’m sure there were some of those. I didn’t get directly involved in that. I think there were a couple of companies from the Philippines and perhaps Korea.

LC: It’d be surprising if there weren’t. Bill, while you were in Hawaii, if you can first of all, tell me who you were meeting with.

WL: I was meeting with officers of the J2. I met with J2 also. That was, as I recall now, that was Maj. Gen. Eugene Tighe, US Air Force. Air Force had the intelligence mission in the staff of J2. I think J4 was Army, that’s logistics. J3 was Navy. I mean it was a joint headquarters. Eugene Tighe was a very fine officer. He was hospitable and he had some good officers to brief me on what they wanted. I was facing a rather complex set of circumstances. They told me I was to report, my intelligence reporting would go to Pacific Command, J2, among others. It would also go to Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington D.C. I would send information copies of all of this to Central Intelligence Agency in Washington. I would also have to be reporting directly to Headquarters United States Support Activities Group/US Air Force headquarters at Nakhon Phanom Thailand. We called it NKP for short. That was their headquarters. I reported to them. I also was responsible for giving information copies of everything to the ambassador. So—

LC: The US Embassy in Saigon?


LC: Any other embassies that you remember?

WL: Well, State Department. I sent it to State Department in Washington and it was up to them I guess to send it on. I did get a message from Al Haig later on, maybe a year or so later. At that time had been promoted to general and he was commanding in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). He asked for copies of our stuff, of all of
our reporting. So we sent it to him also. So our reports virtually went around the world. Not that anybody paid attention but—

LC: Well, I think they probably did Bill. What did you learn about—you said that the three things essentially that you went to Hawaii to find out were what your mission really was; what your reporting on would be; and then what were sources you would have to make both of those things good.

WL: The one thing that they told me—this is an example of the kind of things I needed to get clarification on—they gave me what they called—in the organization of my intelligence section, I should say this on the outset, I had ninety-nine people in there. I had two lieutenant colonels and about three majors, one captain, about nine enlisted men, and the rest were civilians. I wanted to know, “Where are these civilians coming from?” Well they told me, “We are borrowing them mostly from Defense Intelligence Agency.” That’s one. That’s our source of civilians. They sent me these civilians who were categorized as analysts, intelligence analysts, out of DIA. Fortunately, nearly all of them had had some experience and some quite a bit of experience in Vietnam. Some as military officers, nearly all of them in intelligence. They were trained and experienced analysts and they knew an awful lot about Vietnam. A few of them had a great, really strong handle on enemy order of battle. So I inherited from DIA a group of people that I think were among the best in the entire federal service as far as analysts on Vietnam. I was very fortunate in getting those folks. The officers I got were kind of a mixed bag but I got two or three excellent ones. The organization of the branch included, as I mentioned before, included a collection section. I asked them, “What do you mean by collection? What are we collecting and how are we doing it?” They said, “In the first place it’s all overt. You’re not going to run any intelligence agent nets, anything like that. Everything is above board and we expect you to assign four or five of these people.” I think that unit was about fifteen people in collections. “Assign them one each to the consul generals of each of the military region.” I should say that the State Department, the embassy organization there in Vietnam then, they had what they called a consul general at the headquarters of each of the four military regions. That consul general was the primary State Department liaison to the political side of the government of the military region. As I think I mentioned before each military region was under the
command of a lieutenant general who was also the civilian head of that region. The province chiefs reported to him in his region, politically as well as militarily. So the US assigned a senior State Department officer as a consul general in each region to have daily, very frequent contact with that military region commander mainly to find out what’s going on and to assist him, transmit to him the embassy thinking on policies and procedures and that sort of thing. I really don’t know what they all talked about. I never got in to their meetings. But they were the liaison from the embassy to the military regions. I was given the authority then and the responsibility to send to each of these MRs (military region) a small team. I had one senior civilian and they had about four, three or four, lower ranking folks to establish a little office for DAO Saigon in each of these regions. I said, “Well what are these people supposed to do?” They said, “Well, they’re supposed to keep track of military operations and activities in each military region. They’re to make contact with the corps commander in each of these military regions and make frequent visits to the divisions and get as far down in the chain as they could and report back to DAO on what was going on militarily in each of the regions.” Well this sounded okay to me and I can tell you a little bit later about the problems I had with that. But there were some. That was their job, and then of course it was pretty clear what my analysts were supposed to do. I don’t know if I had the direction to do this or not, but I assigned them two or three of the analysts to each military region. They became specialists in their particular military region. I had a lieutenant colonel, Lt. Col. Jimmy Harris, who was chief of that operation. That was called current intelligence. That was the current intelligence section of intelligence branch. They were to keep track of all enemy operations and activities in their military regions and report. A daily report, they had to write a daily report on what was going on in the regions, give it to me. I would edit it, rewrite it to suit my own style, and send it out.

LC: Since this was all as you say in the open, open information—

WL: Yes. Well, the information they used in the current intelligence section was not open in this—this is intelligence that came through every resource that we had. The primary resource was communications intelligence and that was our prime source of information. We also had human intelligence, agent reports that came in by the truckload almost. We had the reports that CIA elected to share with us from their sources. I’m not
sure they gave us everything they had by a long shot, but they gave us what they thought we could use, I suppose. So that’s how we kept track of things. I’ll tell you a little bit more about reporting later on but that’s the way we were organized. Then I had, in addition to that, the other major section in the intelligence branch was called a special security office, SSO. This is a highly classified operation with cryptologic equipment that could receive and send what we called code word information. Nearly all of the reports that we got were classified secret to start with. Some of them were top secret. But beyond that if it involved communications intelligence it had a higher classification, a special classification. That’s why they called it a special security office. So we had that. That’s where my seven enlisted men and two of my officers were in that office. One of those, his name will come up a lot in your work with Vietnam, was Capt. Stu Herrington. He was my assistant SSO. I had a major who was the special security officer and Herrington was his assistant. You’ve heard of him.

LC: I have indeed. Yes, and of course he’s published on.

WL: Anyway, I’ll tell you more about how that developed later on too. So I got back from Hawaii with all the information I felt I needed to get started. General Murray arrived around that time. He had just gotten married. He got married in Hong Kong and he flew in with his new bride into Saigon and we had a little reception for him. Then I began dealing with him daily. I met with him. I gave him a briefing on my branch, what I was supposed to be doing and all. Another thing I should mention right up front is that I’ve told you what my internal organization was; but I got a lot of support from two primary sources outside of my control. One was the NSA, National Security Agency office that we had there. This was communications intelligence and I had a very good relationship with the chief of that organization. He had his offices right in our DAO headquarters, although he was working under the auspices of the station chief, the CIA station chief. That was the way they had it organized. So he reported to CIA although he belonged to the National Security Agency and he worked very closely with us in our intelligence collection. The other source that I had was Detachment K of the Military Intelligence Group, US Army. Group had succeeded the MI Group, which had operated there during the war. Army. I believe their headquarters was in—I think it was in Camp Zama, Japan. It was somewhere in Japan anyway. Detachment K was part of it and they
were based in Bangkok. Their chief, their commander, of Detachment K was Col. Al
Weidhas. Now, it was very interesting because Al and I had worked together on the
Army Staff in 1964 and ’65. He was in the office of the Army’s chief of intelligence;
they call the ACSI, Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence, Army. He was a great resource
for me, a great help to me, as I was working the Vietnam desk for DCSOPS (Deputy
Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans). He’s the one that got me involved in special
intelligence at that level.

LC: How do you spell his last name?
WL: Here he was. He showed up in Bangkok.
LC: How do you spell his last name, Bill?
WL: Weidhas is spelled W-e-i-d-h-a-s.
LC: Was he still a colonel at this point as you were?
WL: Yes. He had been promoted to colonel.
LC: Was he essentially in Bangkok most of the time?
WL: His headquarters was in Bangkok. He had access to a twin engine aircraft,
Beech, and he flew over to Saigon frequently. In fact, he gave me lifts back and forth. I
had to go back to Bangkok, oh, three or four times a year for conferences with him and
his folks in Bangkok. But most of the time he’d come to see me in Saigon. He was one
of the best friends I had in the Army, actually, over the years and the most helpful to me
in learning as much as I could about intelligence. As you know, I was primarily
operations and training, although I got stuck with—I shouldn’t put it that way I guess. I
get assigned to intelligence jobs about four or five times during my career and this was
one of them. I didn’t really feel a lot over my head but I certainly needed some technical
advice from time to time and Al could give it to me. One thing he suggested that I do
was to write a letter establishing what we called our intelligence area of interest and
intelligence area of influence. These are kind of arcane terms but in any case I thought
that was a good idea. The point being I wanted to tell the headquarters that could furnish
intelligence to me and the headquarters to whom I was reporting how I viewed my
responsibility as the Chief of Intelligence DAO Saigon. So I drafted this letter and sent it
to the J2 of USAG Air Force. I think his name was Hudson. He was an Air Force
officer and he was the J2 for USAG Air Force. In this letter I said, “My intelligence area
of interest in DAO Saigon was southern China, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and
Thailand.” I believe that’s what I said. From memory that’s about—in other words, I’m
interested in significant intelligence information that will affect our situation in Vietnam
from those particular geographical areas.

LC: Now, in a sense, was this a request that you be placed now in distribution?
WL: Yeah, I guess it was kind of a request. I was just saying how I looked at it.
So I’m requesting that when you have information that you think would have some affect
on our situation in Vietnam from these areas, I’d like to have it. Those are my
intelligence areas of interest.

LC: Did you get a reply?
WL: Well I’ll tell you about the reply in a minute. Then I said, “My intelligence
area of influence, that is, the area in which I should have some influence on what we
collect and how we collect it, is South Vietnam and Laos.” So, and I sent this letter out.

LC: In other words, you should consult me on issues that arise up there on
intelligence activities in this area. Is that fair?
WL: Yeah, and collection.
LC: Okay.
WL: In other words, I should have the authority and responsibility to request, for
example, aerial photography in Laos and in Vietnam and also communications intercept
operations in these areas. You should listen to me when I tell you what I want, in other
words. I signed this thing off and sent it. Well, the response that came back from the
general there was [You are all acting extreme? LeGro 12, Track 35, 43:56]. In other
words, he said, “What do you think gives you the right to write me a letter like this?”
You know, he took it as an affront as if I was telling him how to handle his business and
so on. He wrote this letter to General Murray, not to me. General Murray called me in
and he said, “Look at this. What’s this all about?” He was kind of upset. He said, “What
is this guy doing telling me all this stuff? What’d you do anyway?” After I explained it
to him he cooled down a lot. He said, “You made some sense here. I don’t see why this
guy is treating it this way but that’s—you’re okay,” in other words. He said, “That’s all
right.” Well the next thing that happened, again with this general over there. I had
decided that we should publish a monthly intelligence estimate to tell all of the people
[we were] reporting to how we viewed the situation and what was going to happen next. What was the enemy up to and what did we think his capabilities and intentions were for the future. So we went ahead and prepared our first military intelligence estimate of South Vietnam and sent it to USAG; we sent it to CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific Command) and so on. I signed off on all of these things myself. General Murray gave me the authority to do that, even before I would send him an information copy. So I sent this off to the world. I got another nasty response from J2 USAG and he said, “You don’t have the authority to write an estimate. We do the estimates over here at Nakhon Phanom and you can’t do that anymore.” So I showed that to Murray and he said, “Well what are you going to do about it?” I said, “Well, what I’m going to do about it is to change the name. I’m not going to call it an estimate anymore.” So that’s what I did. That’s how I came up with the term Military Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis. That’s what I called it. MISTA, M-I-S-T-A, for short. I kind of was thinking about Casablanca or something, Play Misty For Me. Anyway, that’s what I called it and I got away with it.

LC: Right. Same document, different title, no feathers ruffled in NKP.

WL: Right. For all intents and purposes it was an estimate but we didn’t call it that.

LC: So did you get away with then—

WL: Yep, from then on.

LC: —producing it for the duration essentially?

WL: Yes. I didn’t have any more trouble with him. In fact he came to our—we had a weekly briefing. That’s another thing I did. I was actually following a pattern from J2. J2 MACV did these things too. I was just continuing their format of this in this operation, which would seem a reasonable thing to do. They’d been at the business for six or seven years. I wasn’t in the position to reinvent anything. So we had a weekly briefing in my conference room. It was top secret, code word. Once in a while the ambassador would come. Usually the DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission, would come. The political officer of the embassy, Josiah Bennett, was a very fine officer. He was—what did they call him? A political counselor. Frank Snepp. Frank Snepp was an analyst, senior analyst, for station chief and CIA. He would come. In fact he’d come every day
and do what we called the boardwalk that I mentioned. Walk around the boards and look at everything. Who else? Oh, Al Francis was a political military consular of the embassy. Another very fine political or rather State Department official that we developed a good rapport with at DAO. He was helpful and we helped him a lot too.

LC: What about, was this briefing only for US personnel?
WL: Yes, because of the classification of the material. Some of these people didn’t have the clearance to go into the intelligence side and get the code word stuff. Those people could not come to the weekly briefing unless we decided to, what we called sanitize it. We’d cut out the code word information and give more of a vanilla type briefing.

LC: But the folks you’ve mentioned, the DCM, the political counselors, CIA station people—
WL: Yeah. They had the clearances to do that.
LC: Would this be attended also by US officers from other parts of DAO?
WL: A few of them. A few had the clearances.
LC: What about General Murray? Would he come along?
WL: Yes, yes. He was there all the time, and very often we’d get General Vogt who was commanding J2 at, excuse me, commanding USAG Air Force. He would come over for these briefings. They got to be very popular. Each one of my briefers would—I’d give a general overall briefing but I turned it over to our regional briefers to brief what was going on in their military regions. Then we’d take questions. I mentioned the analysts who were specialists in their regions. But there was one other analyst who was a specialist, perhaps the most important single fellow in the whole section, and that was Mike Hardin. He was responsible for infiltration. Well, this was a vital element, and I’m not using the word lightly, in keeping track of what the enemy’s capabilities were and what his probable intentions were. Was keeping track of what was coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. How many, what units if they were units, were coming down and being infiltrated into South Vietnam. Mike Hardin kept track of that. Most of this information was communications intelligence that he had to analyze, keep track of. It was really a lot of detective work involved in this, a lot of very careful analysis. They didn’t tell you up front what it was that was being reported or how many and he had to
put a number of pieces together in order to give me a complete and accurate picture of
incoming forces into South Vietnam. Very important.

LC: What was Mike Hardin’s background?

WL: He was an analyst from DIA.

LC: He was from DIA?

WL: Yeah. Later on he, after the war, he transferred over to another agency. But
that’s where he was. Excellent. Another thing to keep in mind, this was before the
computer had been introduced in to very much of the analysis. We didn’t have a
computer in the entire headquarters as far as I know. He was doing this all manually on
little five by eight cards which he showed me from time to time. He’d go over his
analysis with me to be sure I understood what he was doing and where his information in
his opinion was firm and when it was, let’s say possible information and where he needed
more information to nail it down. In other words it was an art as well as a science, the
way he did it.

LC: How did he go about establishing himself and his credibility with you, Bill?

Was it just by the way he presented his information and what he told you about his efforts
or did you have—?

WL: Well, the way things turned out was one thing. I didn’t have a great deal of
choice in it. I think I was impressed with his careful analysis and how he’d tell me
everything about where the information came from and what it meant. One thing I would
say, I guess I can say this. Infiltration groups were given numbers, serially, as they left
Vinh and moved over the Mu Gia Pass into Laos. They had a number. Sometimes our
collection system would pick up that number and then you had to analyze. “Well, where
was it when they picked it up? When did you pick it up again?” You might pick it up in
Vinh and then you’d pick it up down in and around Tchepone somewhere. It would
continue on down. Then there would be maybe a vacant spot. You’d get number 852
and then you’d get 856. Well what happened to fifty-three, fifty-four, and fifty-five?
Mike would be on the look out for those and suddenly maybe he’d pick up fifty-three.
But the others would be absent. Well he knew enough about the system that the reason
we didn’t have the numbers is not because they weren’t there and they weren’t moving,
but because we just were not able to pick them up. So he’d fill in the blank and he knew
the approximate number of people in each one of these groups. He’d find that out from
other inferences and sometimes from other sources and he’d complete the whole picture.
It was very nice work that he did. Another thing about this that I could mention as kind
of a footnote, Frank Snepp at the embassy, he didn’t believe in this system very much.
He thought it was kind of a witchcraft or something, what we were doing, figuring out.
He said, “Besides, all you’re doing is you’re counting everybody that’s coming down but
you’re not counting all of those that are going back.” I said, “What do you mean going
back?” He said, “Well they’re sending a lot of folks back up the trail so you can’t use
your totals as the real situation and strength in South Vietnam because they send so many
back.” I had other information. I said, “Look. You show me any evidence that you have
that the North Vietnamese are sending any able bodied folks back to Vietnam and I’ll buy
you a beer.” I said, “There isn’t any such thing going on. The only people they’re
sending back are those that have been wounded so badly they can’t be used any longer or
they’re so sick that they’re sending them home to die. I mean this idea that they’re just
replacing their losses of people they’re sending home is fiction. I don’t believe it at all.”
We stuck with our guns on that one and we proved to be right.

LC: So Frank never got a free beer.

WL: No.

LC: Bill, let me ask if I can, and whatever you can say to clarify this would be
helpful, in making the estimates was Mike relying on essentially tagging groups of people
moving south or how was he able to trace the groups? Can you say anything about that?

WL: Well, the only thing I can say is that in communications intercept they would
listen to transmissions from the binh trams, b-i-n-h t-r-a-m. These were the way stations
along the trail. They were spaced and I can’t accurately tell you how far apart they were.
But generally I believe they were about a day’s march between them. They had a
communication system that one way or another we were tapping into. They would report
the arrival of a particular infiltration group and they might report its departure and we
might pick up that transmission when they made it. We might not. We might miss it.
But that’s the way it worked.

LC: Mike would be relying then on data that might be coming from other
agencies?
WL: Yes. Yeah. We didn’t have it. DAO didn’t have any kind of a collection capability to do that. We were getting it from our other sources. Some of it, of course, you could confirm his analysis by perhaps the capture of a prisoner by an ARVN unit somewhere. This man would say yes he was in infiltration group number so and so and that he arrived at the border opposite Pleiku on the twelfth of March or whatever. You would get that information and you would compare it to what you thought his infiltration group where it was and you could pretty well confirm, “Yeah. I guess our information on that group was right. That’s about the time we figured it arrived there at that crossing point.” So it was a matter of putting together different elements of information and seeing if one corroborated the other or sometimes you might find a conflict. Then you’d have to search more and find out what really happened. This was an art.

LC: Yes, and a lot of intensive work it sounds like.

WL: A lot of attention to details and a good mind to figure out what the parameters are, what are you looking for? Mike knew how to do that.

LC: As you say also to see what’s missing, to look for what isn’t there as much as what is. Bill, let me just ask, because this touches up another question. Can you tell me a little bit about the structure for cooperation with RVNAF and if there were civilian intelligence sources in the Republic of South Vietnam at this time? What did DAO intelligence have to work with in the way of materials provided by cooperating allied sources?

WL: Yeah. The Detachment K that I mentioned before had—their operations in South Vietnam, the best I can describe them, were liaison with South Vietnamese intelligence agencies. Now, the principal representative that Al Weidhas sent to me from Det K was Capt. Andy Gembara, G-e-m-b-a-r-a. Captain Gembara was still active duty Army at that time. He had an interesting past. He was in the—what was that? , I think it was Airborne. Could have been. I think it was and was wounded badly at Phan Thiet. Seventy-two? I think? I don’t know. I can’t recall. Anyway he was wounded badly. Got one eye knocked out virtually and knocked sideways anyway and a bad shoulder wound. He was reclassified from airborne infantry to intelligence. Very smart guy, very bright, and energetic. At that time, by the time I met him, he was liaison from Det K over to me. His job, besides keeping me informed on Det K operations in
Vietnam, he was liaison to two or three South Vietnamese intelligence units. They had, well let’s see, they had a counter-intelligence operation as one of them and they had some other human intelligence activities in the Navy as well as in the Army. I can’t remember the designations. They’re not too important. But he worked with them. They shared information. As far as I know, they didn’t run any independent operations, any operations independent of the ARVN. They were all joint.

LC: Meaning Detachment K did not?
WL: Excuse me?

LC: Detachment K did not run any separate operations?
WL: That’s true. I don’t believe they did. They were all—there was nothing clandestine about their operations. But they did have very good relationships with ARVN intelligence, with Colonel Lung and his folks. I knew some of them.

LC: What was Colonel Lung’s full name? I missed it earlier when you—?
WL: Hoang was the family name. H-o-a-n-g. His middle name N-as in November, g-o-c and Lung, L-u-n-g. I met with him weekly. I’d go over to his office one week and the next week he’d come over to mine and we would share information. I shared everything I had with him. No matter what its source was I would tell him upfront what it was and why it was sensitive and he would do the same with me. He also had his own independent communications intelligence resources. They had what they called the J7, and I can tell more about this a little bit later. J7 was run by a Brigadier General Nhon. I can’t recall the rest of his name. N-h-o-n was what we called him. He operated communications aircraft, what they called EC, for electronic, 47s. The old PC-3 aircraft, among other things, to intercept North Vietnamese communications within South Vietnam. Anyway, Lung would share his information. A lot of it was from agent reports. A lot of it was from POWs and from documents that they picked up, document exploitation, which we had no capability for any longer there. We had to rely on them for POW as well as document exploitation. So he would share that with me and I’d share everything I had from the communications side and any other sources with him.

LC: Now, in these meetings Bill, would the exchanges be essentially verbal or would you hand him a document?
WL: No, they’d be verbal. I would take notes and he’d take notes. I kept a loose-leaf notebook for the entire period there. In fact I filled up two notebooks of information.

LC: You said that you would essentially outline everything for him?

WL: Yes. Everything I had. I didn’t hold anything back.

LC: Including communications intelligence?

WL: That’s right.

LC: You were authorized?

WL: No I wasn’t.

LC: Okay. Sorry I didn’t mean to ask you such a pointed question but I just wondered about that.

WL: I was following in, I think, good footsteps. I don’t know whether General Potts told me this or whether I picked it up somewhere else but he did the same thing. When General Potts was the J2 MACV he was entirely open with Colonel Lung. You know, it’s interesting. I didn’t find that out until just a few days ago.

LC: How’d that come about?

WL: Well, Lung and I and Mrs. Lung went together to General Potts’ funeral. Did I tell you that?

LC: No. No, uh-huh.

WL: Well, General Potts died a couple of months ago and about three weeks ago they finally got around to burying him at Arlington National Cemetery. Colonel Lung and I both worked with him and so we got together and I drove them into the National Cemetery for that funeral. It’s a very beautiful event really. Potts was an amazing soldier. I don’t want to go in to all the details now but in any case—

LC: What was his first name Bill so that someone who wanted to—?

WL: William.


WL: William E. Potts. He was the youngest battalion commander in combat in World War II, I believe. He was only I think twenty-two when he was promoted to major and given command of an Army cavalry squadron in Patton’s Army across France. Wounded there badly but survived and went on to be General Abram’s J2 at MACV. It was there that Lung knew him. Lung told me, he said, “You and General Potts were so
good to work with because you didn’t hold,” these are not his precise words, “but you
didn’t hold anything back. You trusted me enough to tell me everything that I should
know that you picked up about enemy operations. Of course,” he said, “I did the same
thing for you.” That was not the case with other J2s that were in that office. That’s one
reason he respected General Potts so much. He recognized that we were in the same war.
It was really—it would have been ultimately stupid to hold back, particularly then, you
know, in my situation where the Vietnamese were doing all the fighting. We weren’t
doing any fighting anymore. To hold back that would be useful for them would be close
to criminal in my opinion. So I shared with him everything.

LC: Bill, where is he living now?

WL: Lung? He lives close to me here in Springfield. We see each other about
once a month.

LC: So not once a week anymore like in the old days but at this point once a
month or so is still pretty good.

WL: We’re still very close.

LC: Okay. Okay. Let’s take a break there for a minute.
WL: Any case, that’s one thing that happened. Another thing that happened, there was an American captain that was ambushed in an activity related to that very close to Saigon. He somehow or other, I don’t recall why it happened. But there was that one casualty. I guess who might call he was the last one, last American soldier, killed in
action in Vietnam until the Marines were killed on the last day of April of ’75. That’s somewhere in the archives I’m sure.

LC: Yes.

WL: I have no record of that that I can recall. But those two things, perhaps, kind of set the stage for us. I don’t recall having any firm conviction that the ceasefire was going to work anyway. But these two events pretty well indicated that it wasn’t going to work very well. North Vietnamese had already determined that they were not going to allow any activities close to their areas. A camp was established for the four party commission west of Pleiku at a crossing point that the NVA had used for years to cross into Pleiku Province and that camp was in miserable condition. It was on the side of a hill. They put the latrines up above the camp. I don’t know if they did that with sinister intent or they’re just stupid but a lot of people got sick in that camp so they pulled out. The four party commission pulled out of that camp. The NVA would not allow them to observe their border crossing points. That was part of the agreement was that this four party commission was supposed to observe any traffic into South Vietnam and they weren’t allowed to do that. That was probably one of the motives for shooting down those helicopters up in Quang Tri Province. They just didn’t want any observers close to the border because they were moving stuff in. At the same time they were moving in and establishing an air defense battalion of missiles, air defense missiles—SA2s? I can’t recall the number now, but at Khe Sanh.

LC: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that, about the movement of air defense systems in to that northern area?

WL: Northern. This was south of the DMZ.

LC: Right. But still essentially what was northern part of the Republic of Vietnam.

WL: That’s right. Quang Tri was the northern most province of South Vietnam and these missiles were being established well within the territorial boundaries of South Vietnam, in violation of the ceasefire. As I recall, our embassy protested but there was no attempt to do anything about it except to take pictures. The USAG Air Force had drone systems in place and they flew over this area and took the photos and they were
interpreted by us and by others and it was clear that these were SAM (surface-to-air
missile) sites. Those things were taking place.

LC: Bill, can I ask you a little bit about the drones? How long had they been in
operational use at this point?

WL: I don’t know, for a couple of years at least. You see, they were extremely
important to us because the Congress of the Untied States had decreed that we would no
longer fly any aerial reconnaissance, any manned aerial reconnaissance, over Laos or
Vietnam. So without the capability to get aerial photos from manned aircraft the Air
Force and the Navy had, we had to use the drones. The drones were very effective. They
were very good resolution photographs and they responded to my requests. I put requests
in very frequently, almost daily, to USAG Air Force for flights and we told them in our
messages where we wanted to fly, what we were looking for, and so on. They were
excellent, very responsive to that. This drone—I don’t recall now. I’ve never seen one
operate. I think they were dropped off of a C-130 aircraft and flew on programmed
missions, and then they were captured as they came back towards Thailand in a net under
a C-130. I believe that’s the way the thing worked. I never saw it.

LC: Wow! That’s pretty amazing technology for that time, if you think about it.

WL: Yeah. They were excellent.

LC: So you would make requests for reconnaissance on a daily basis. Who were
you working with, who was your liaison?

WL: I was working with Colonel Tadich, T-a-d-i-c-h. He was an Army colonel.
He was deputy J2. In other words, deputy chief of intelligence for USAG Air Force. He
was an Army colonel, excellent guy. He came to visit me at least once a month and
probably more often than that and we would discuss our requirements and he was very
helpful. The J2 himself—I don’t recall who the first one was. But by January ’74 it was
major general, or rather, Brigadier General Jacobson who was Air Force. He was a good
guy too. I had trouble with the first J2, I think I mentioned, but Jacobson was easy to
work with.

LC: Did you get up to NKP (Nakhon Phanom) during this time?

WL: I only made one flight up to NKP. I don’t recall what it was about, whether
it was a specific conference or I just wanted to see the place and see what they were
doing up there. I can’t recall that but that was the only time I went up. As I mentioned, General Vogt was the commander, Air Force four star general. But he was dual-hatted. He was also commander of the US Air Force, which was a pretty significant assignment. The purpose of USAG Air Force was to provide a headquarters that could execute any orders from Washington regarding the reintroduction of US combat power in Indochina, specifically the U.S. Air Force. That’s what its purpose was. Incidentally as kind of a footnote to that, during this period probably in 1973—although it might have been a little bit later—the commander of Air Force invited the four ARVN corps commanders into NKP to a conference and asked them to provide to Air Force their target lists for B-52 strikes in the event they were authorized, when and if the North Vietnamese violated the ceasefire agreement in a serious way. These generals were told that the United States wanted their target list in case we were able to use the B-52s against the North Vietnamese formations as it came into South Vietnam. Which seemed to me in retrospect kind of ironic because—and I must say that the people of Air Force must have taken their job very seriously or they wouldn’t bother with doing that. They really anticipated that if, like we did, that a very flagrant violation of the cease-fire could compel the United States to intervene. But of course that didn’t happen. Maj. Gen. Ira Hunt by January ’74 was the deputy commander of USAG Air Force. Not of Air Force, of USAG. Maj. Gen. Ira Hunt was a US Army general, again an excellent officer. He provided a great deal of support to me personally. He came over to visit now and then. There was an interregnum between the departure of General Murray and the arrival of General Smith as I recall maybe a couple of months. General Hunt came over to kind of fill in during that period. That was very helpful to us at DAO to have somebody with his ability and stature to take over during that period.

LC: Was he someone you had worked with before or knew of Bill?

WL: [I knew] him before, but not very closely. He was an engineer general, incidentally, although that doesn’t mean much. He was a really good general. I don’t know what ever happened to him after this but—

LC: Was he a West Point guy?

WL: Probably. I’m just guessing on that because he was an Army engineer before he became a general officer.
LC: Right. Bill, can you shed any light on the movements of the NVA? We’ve sort of talked a little bit about this with regard to the development of the SAM sites near Khe Sanh and so on. But can you kind of give us a status report of NVA concentrations as you found them when you were dispatching your duties?

WL: Yeah. That’d be awfully hard for me to do from memory. I would have to really refer to my book, you know, look at the charts that I put in there, the maps. I can generalize this way. Let’s start in the South. There was a concerted effort early in 1973 by the NVA to expand their control with North Vietnamese divisions into the Delta. They came out of the base areas that were very close to the Mekong River as it enters South Vietnam from Cambodia. They made a concerted attack on the border cities of the Delta, the border of Cambodia. There was an extended battle there and the South Vietnamese eventually won it and drove the North Vietnamese battalions back into Cambodia. There was a significant battle in the border area called Seven Mountains in which the NVA Division came across and attempted to establish a permanent lodgment there in the Seven Mountains. These are very interesting formations that rise very steeply out of the very flat Delta in that border area, very picturesque. I went down there and visited—I can’t recall now when I went there—but I remember flying down there. It must have been in ’73. But during the battle the ARVN Rangers primarily, a Ranger group, virtually annihilated the NVA Infantry Division. Drove them out and inflicted serious casualties so that that division was taken off the roles of the North Vietnamese Army. It was finished. Its surviving members were reassigned to other divisions. I remember flying down there with the deputy. Our deputy at DAO then was Brig. Gen. Ralph Maglione. He was Air Force. The alignment in DAO was the commander was a general of US Army and the deputy was a brigadier Air Force. General Maglione was another very fine officer. He was a fighter pilot. In fact, he had flown with the Thunderbirds. I guess that was the Air Force acrobatic outfit. Obviously a very fine aviator and he liked to fly himself. Naturally, that was his job. He was kind of grounded there at DAO so I told him that I was going to fly down to Chau Doc in the Delta, the Seven Mountains, to talk to the ARVN commander down there. I wanted to see what was going on. I got the J2 of the Vietnamese Air Force to fly me down there. You see, I have to explain. It was a little difficult for me to fly around because I had to kind of beg
and borrow a flight out of Air America, which belonged to the CIA, in order to go
anywhere. It was not too bad. I could do it with enough notice if they had somebody
flying that way they’d let me go. But anyway we didn’t have any US Army airplanes of
course. It was a ceasefire. So Le Minh Huong, Colonel Huong, told me that he would be
glad to take me down. He had a little Cessna airplane, a two place airplane. He said he’d
fly me down there so I told General Maglione and he said, “Oh, I’d like to go along!” I
said, “Well, it’s only a two place airplane.” He said, “Oh we can fit in all right.” Which
meant that he and Colonel Huong would be in the two seats up front and I would be in
the baggage compartment behind them sitting crouched down there on a—I don’t know,
there was a duffel bag back there. It was pretty dog gone uncomfortable. It’s a long
flight in a little Cessna. You know, talking about three hours or so. Anyway, we did
make the flight. It was interesting. That’s just kind of a footnote.

LC: Well it couldn’t have done your back any good.

WL: No it didn’t. I could barely climb out of the airplane. But it was fun.

LC: Now, you got down to essentially Chau Doc. Is that where you flew into?

WL: Yes.

LC: Do you remember arriving there?

WL: Yeah I remember we landed in the airfield and the corps commander of the
IV Corps was down there. He knew I was coming and made arrangements to be there so
we could talk to him about the situation in the Delta. That was my main point in going
down there. There’s also a training, an ARVN training, center down there. I had known
about this when I was director of training in the Army Advisory Group and I always
wanted to see it. It was called Lam Son. I think, was it Lam Son? That doesn’t sound
right. Might have been that. In any case it was a major basic training center for the
ARNV down there.

LC: What was the mood down there?

WL: Good. Upbeat. They were very happy they were able to really whack the
North Vietnamese that tried to come in there. After that particular engagement on the
border things were pretty quiet in the Delta except for local activities until the ARVN
decided to try to clean out the Tri Phap, that big Plain of Reeds area. That was always a
VC base area for many, many years and the United States Army had really failed in every
attempt to get in there and do any real damage to the VC. It was extremely difficult, but ARVN succeeded in doing it and I don’t remember when it was. It must have been perhaps in ’74 when they finally got into the Tri Phap and pretty much cleaned it out. They did a good job of it. But the Delta didn’t attract a lot of my attention because it did not have in it major North Vietnamese Army units. The order of battle down there was almost exclusively VC, Viet Cong, main force regiments and a lot of local VC units that had been there for years. In my opinion posed no serious threat to South Vietnam. They were a major interest to us because mainly of what we called the rice war. It seemed that the enemy’s major objective in the Delta was to acquire as much of the rice harvest as they could for their own purposes naturally, they needed to feed their troops. So there was a continuous competition between the ARVN divisions down there and the ARVN local, that is the regional and popular forces, to control the flow of rice and to deny it to the NVA. They were partially successful but not a hundred percent by any means.

LC: Bill, at this point did you—what was your feeling about ARVN’s performance against the NVA? I mean this had to be heartening.

WL: Yes it was. My own impression was that they were doing a very good job of it. We had three divisions down there, what was it? The , the , and the ARVN Divisions plus some of the very excellent popular and regional forces. That’s about all I can remember about the Delta. There wasn’t really much going on except in the locals after that battled around Seven Mountains and on the border and the Tri Phap. Other than that it seemed that for those entire two years it was relatively calm in the Delta.

LC: What about the situation over the border and in Cambodia? Were you as an area of interest monitoring this?

WL: Yeah, I should mention that. It was very important to us to try to eliminate the base areas along the border. Early in ’73 we were still authorized to strike along the border in Cambodia. I prepared, along with Colonel Lung’s help—Colonel Lung the J2 of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and I prepared targets for our B-52s along the border in the known base areas of the NVA. That is, the base areas that generally border the Military Regions III and IV. They were all in Cambodia. I took these targets to general, rather to Ambassador Martin and he would approve them and as soon as he approved them I’d send them off the Air Force for execution. We bombed pretty good up
there along the border for a few weeks. Then as I recall now the Congress stopped that
too. They said we couldn’t bomb in Cambodia any longer. We had to bomb also along
the edges of the Mekong River in order to protect the convoys that were running up. This
was another aspect of the war that I don’t believe has been given very much attention.

LC: Which convoys Bill?

WL: These are convoys of barges with US contract tugs and Vietnamese
contract—Vietnamese contractors did this as well as Americans, I believe. They hauled
barges of ammunition and rice and other provisions up the Mekong River from South
Vietnam, generally from around Vung Tao, depends what the cargo was, all the way up
the Mekong River into Phnom Penh to support the Army and to some extent I suppose
the population of Cambodia as the Communists were still fighting for control of
Cambodia. These tugs and barges, it was the responsibility of General Murray to keep
those barges moving up the Mekong. The Communists in Cambodia prepared ambushes
along the river and fired artillery and machine guns at the barges as they went up the
river. Our effort with the B-52s was to deny them the points along the river from which
they could launch these attacks against the convoys. So that was a rather important part
of it. I didn’t get involved in that directly but there ought to be some work on that.

There’s another project for you.

LC: I guess. I should be busy well into my sixties I think. But these convoys had
begun when? Do you know Bill?

WL: Well, I don’t know. They were probably going on before we got there. I’m
just guessing on that. I really don’t know.

LC: Was there a sense that the Vietnamese Communists at this point were happily
cooperating with local Khmer Communists?

WL: Oh yes! Yeah. They had to, although as I understand it there was never any
great camaraderie between the two groups. They kind of tolerated each other in effect.
The North Vietnamese were occupying large parts of Cambodia. They were particularly
interested, obviously, in the Ho Chi Minh Trail that came down through Cambodia and
entered South Vietnam on a number of points in Military Regions II, III, and IV. So they
had to cooperate with each other to some extent.
LC: You mentioned that these barges were being hauled by contractors, and these would include Americans?

WL: Some of them were American. I know one of the fellows named Pham Van Cai, who was the major contractor with the tugs on the Vietnamese side that hauled the cargo up to Phnom Penh. He also was contractor running the trains and barges and tugs up at Cam Ranh Bay. He got to be pretty wealthy until all of Vietnam when the Communists came in and threw him in jail for a couple of years.

LC: Is he in the US now?

WL: He’s here now, yeah. Real good guy. He’s funny. But he made a lot of money and he had several villas in Saigon and corporation in Japan. He did all right. I don’t know how much he got out. He’s doing all right now.

LC: But this was good steady business I would think, as well as having strategic value for—

WL: All these tugs and all these trucks and all these cranes. So he lost everything.

LC: Yeah. As did everybody it seems. This is actually very interesting. Bill, was there intelligence value to be gained from the movements of these barges?

WL: I can’t recall anything that we learned from those. You learn in general that they were being attacked everyday. They put armor plating along the sides of them in order to try to protect the crews, which apparently did pretty well. It was hazardous duty. I would say that. In there running a gauntlet, in effect. As they passed across the border into Cambodia things got pretty sticky.

LC: Bill, what was your assessment or observation of how things changed once the authorization for bombing inside the Cambodian border was removed? How did things change?

WL: Well, it of course made it very simple for the North Vietnamese Army to mass supplies and replacements in the areas just that we were most concerned with in our area, just across the border from Military Region III. That is, they established—they had taken the town of Loc Ninh, as you probably remember, during the 1972 Easter Offensive. They managed to occupy Loc Ninh. They laid siege to An Loc on Route 13 that goes directly north from Saigon into Cambodia. That route goes all the way up into
Laos. But as it crosses the border into Cambodia there is the town of Loc Ninh. The
Communists succeeded in capturing Loc Ninh and they established in that their
headquarters, their capitol you might say, of their Liberation Front as they called it in
South Vietnam.

LC: Was that essentially, you think, the purpose of taking and holding Loc Ninh
was this political dimension?

WL: Yes. It was political. Also of course it had military value is that it sat astride
the major avenue of approach from Cambodia into Saigon. Route 13. The South
Vietnamese managed to hang on to An Loc but An Loc was also virtually surrounded by
NVA forces. Not with great force on the south side but it made it extremely difficult to
drive a convoy from Saigon up to An Loc was a hazard. The road had to be—you had to
go there with a couple of regiments in order to secure the road before you could move in
supplies up to An Loc. An Loc was heavily dependent on air resupply all through that
period. I never got up to An Loc. I wanted to but I couldn’t arrange it.

LC: This is really not directly in but certainly near your old stomping grounds
when you were there with the Division.

WL: Oh sure. Yeah. I knew that area very well. I’d been up there so much with
Division and from Lai Khe on north. So Loc Ninh had a political importance but it also
had military importance and because we could no longer attack the North Vietnamese
Army’s depots, supply areas, and troop concentrations across the border into Cambodia it
was extremely easy for them to operate there. The South Vietnamese Air Force, now and
then, launched attacks against the areas on our side of the border, on the south and east
side and supply points and so on that they could detect. But these attacks were kind of
pinpricks compared to what you could do with the B-52s.

LC: There’s some question as I know you’re aware of Bill about why the United
States didn’t in the years previous, the year previous essentially, to the signing of the
peace agreement, transfer bigger and better air weaponry to the South Vietnamese Air
Force. Can you comment on that or talk about maybe not why the United States didn’t
do it but what the impact was for not having done it?

WL: The South Vietnamese Air Force was small. If we had tried to transfer any
larger or faster aircraft they wouldn’t have been able to operate them anyway. I mean
they didn’t have enough trained pilots to handle that and it would have taken two or three
years to bring their air force up to that standard. What they had and did very well with
were the A-1s, Navy/Air Force Skyraider. It was Air Force I guess mainly. Well, the
Navy had them too. The big propeller driven bomber, single engine. They did very well
with those. They carried a very heavy bomb load, stay on station long. They had the—
what was it? I can’t recall. My mind’s gone blank. They had a twin engine jet aircraft
that was designed for training by the US Air Force but it was converted into a light
bomber or a light attack airplane by the Air Force for the South Vietnamese. They did
well with that. They had another. They had the F-5, which was really air-to-air defense
aircraft, the fighter. It was a good fighter but of course they didn’t have an application
for that because the North Vietnamese did not send their MGs (machine gun) south to
fight anyway. Then the Air Force embarked on a program to upgrade the F-5 to a later
model. It was very expensive to do that and the funds for that came out of the diminished
DAO budget for South Vietnamese. General Murray tried to stop it but failed to do it.
They didn’t listen to him. The Air Force went ahead and shipped us these advanced F-5
models. We didn’t want them but they were forced down on our throats.

LC: But it created, I mean in the sense that you didn’t want them because it
created the problem of—

WL: Well we didn’t want them because they cost too much. We’d rather use that
money for munitions, among other things. Ammunition and medical supplies and all the
rest of it. We figured it was a great waste of money, our scarce money.

LC: What drove that decision Bill? Do you have any idea?

WL: US Air Force planners decided that they’d already committed the funds and
they wanted to keep whoever was making the F-5s, they wanted to keep them happy. I
had another mission for the Air Force that I tried to push and that was—I think I may
have mentioned the difficulty in the airborne radio direction finding that the South
Vietnamese Air Force was up against. They had some very obsolete aircraft to do that
with, the old DC-3 or C-47. Did I mention this?

LC: You did when we were talking about the intelligence assets that you had as
G2 with Division.
WL: Yeah. In any case, we had—I may have mentioned this before. I hate to repeat myself.

LC: No that’s okay. Well, if you do we’ll clear it up.

WL: Okay. The US Army had thirty or so aircraft. This was a twin engine Beech aircraft, turbo prop, that they used—the Army used—for airborne radio direction finding and other communications intercept systems that they declared excess. These were all located in Thailand. When I found out about it I asked General Murray—could have been General Smith by that time—to propose that those aircraft be transferred to the Vietnamese Air Force and we could use them to upgrade the communications intelligence systems of the Vietnamese Air Force.

LC: What was the Vietnamese Air Force using at this time? Do you remember?

WL: The EC-47 twin engine aircraft, you know, old DC-3, and it was in pretty terrible shape. Did I describe the flight I made with them?

LC: No.

WL: Well I will. But anyway, so General Murray agreed that would be a good idea. Again I can’t recall, it might have been General Smith by that time. I think it was Murray. He said, “Try to get the ambassador to support it.” So I went up to see Ambassador Martin. I explained it to him. He says, “That’s a grand idea.” I said, “I’ll draft you a message to the State Department about it and we’ll see if we can get the Air Force to agree.” So I drafted the message for Ambassador Martin and of course he polished it for his own tastes and sent it and General Murray sent a message. The answer was. “Absolutely not. Those airplanes, we’re going to transfer them to Korea. If we could transfer them to you you’d have to pay for them out of your funds. We can’t just give them to you even though they’re excess. They would have to come out of your budget.” So that whole thing went down the tubes. I should have known better than to even waste my time on it.

LC: On a great idea the implementation wasn’t going to be there.

WL: But to tell you about the EC-47s—E meaning electronic. This is, as you remember, is an old cargo airplane that was designed in the 1930s by Douglas and it’s flown ever since. It’s still flying. These were transferred to the South Vietnamese Air Force to what we call the VNAF and they were equipped with little consoles along each
side of the fuselage in which about perhaps eight stations where the operator would sit behind a desk with his radio receiver in front of him and he would be listening to specified North Vietnamese or VC communications nets, the best that he could pick up. Then they would be listening to these and recording and interpreting and so on. In other words, electronic intelligence. The aircraft were equipped with a navigation system—I was told it was a Doppler system—that enabled them to fly over the terrain and by looking at a console they could tell the coordinates over which they were flying. They would be able to tell where they were by this system. Unfortunately, by the time 1973 these aircraft were in pretty bad shape. The Doppler systems didn’t work anymore. There was no money in the budget available to repair them or upgrade them in any way. So they used a different system. General Nhon was the—Brigadier General Nhon, N-h-o-n, was commander of what they called J7. J7 was the communications intelligence system. That was what they called it, J7.

LC: J7 what? I’m sorry?

WL: That was a communications intelligence activity for the VNAF. It was called J7. J2 was intelligence. J7 was communications intelligence; I guess you’d call it that. But Nhon, General Nhon, was the commander of the operation as well as being the staff officer. He came to see me one day and he said, “Would you like to take a flight and see how we do this?” I said, “Sure. I’m game.” So went down to the flight line and got on this old C-47. They’d taken the side door off on the left side and that’s where they load cargo. They’d taken that thing off so it was open. Took off. One of the VNAF guys was lying on the floor on the deck of the aircraft with his head hanging over the side a little bit through this door. He had a lanyard on his ankle so that he couldn’t be dragged out of the aircraft and it was tied to stanchion on the deck. I said, “Why are you doing that?” General Nhon said, “Well, the Doppler doesn’t work.” So we were flying over—I don’t even know where we were. Probably over zone three somewhere and this guy was lying on the floor. He had a headset and a microphone and he was yelling. He had a map in his hand too, one-to-fifty thousand topographical map, and he was calling out the coordinates over which the aircraft was flying by looking at the terrain and looking in his map. He knew the terrain pretty well so he could call out the coordinates of where we were flying. This information was passed to the people who were doing the radio
direction finding business because they had to plot on their maps where we were and then
draw a line indicating the azimuth to wherever the signal was coming from. That’s the
way the airborne direction finding worked. Then they would fly to another part of the
sky and this guy on the floor would call out the coordinates of where they were then.
Then they’d draw another azimuth and they tried to get three of them and where they
intersected that’s where the transmitter was. That’s the way the whole thing worked.

LC: So he was the human Doppler.

WL: Yeah. He was the human Doppler. Of course if you’ve ever been in a C-47
you know how noisy they are. This is not the civilian version. This is the version that
doesn’t have any insulation at all on the inside and the engines are roaring, these old
piston engines, and the slipstream is coming past the open door. It’s colder than the
dickens up there because of the wind and no insulation. I don’t know how high—we
were not very high maybe three thousand feet or so. But anyway, it was cold and
miserable conditions. Well that’s the way they were doing their job and that they got
anything valuable out of that effort was really remarkable, and they did. So when I saw
that that’s when I started my campaign to get some relatively modern equipment. This
stuff that the Army was declaring excess was not state of the art stuff because the reason
they were excess is because the Army had something better. They were, at that time, and
so they were getting rid of these things and they were going to send them to Korea.
Obviously Koreans were going to have to pay for them too but they had the money and
we didn’t.

LC: Right. They had the money and you didn’t because of congressional
restrictions.

WL: Right. Because the Congress had cut our budget from our estimated
requirements from—what was it? 1.2 billion down to six or seven hundred million. It
wasn’t enough to maintain the equipment that ARVN had. It wasn’t enough to buy any
new equipment, to replace worn out equipment. The ceasefire specified that anything
that was worn out had to be replaced if it could be replaced. That was one of the terms.
You couldn’t make your forces bigger. You couldn’t get new equipment, unless it was to
replace things that were lost, destroyed, or worn out. Then you could buy new stuff. But
to buy anything new you needed money and we didn’t have it. That’s why ARVN was
beginning to put some of their vehicles up on blocks. They didn’t have tires. They didn’t have fuel to operate them. They didn’t have parts to keep them maintained. They were cannibalizing airplanes. They were deadlining airplanes to take off parts to put on other airplanes to keep them flying. That’s the way the whole system was working. So that was in a nutshell what we were faced with.

LC: Could the South Vietnamese government have done anymore than they did to assist the military forces, to maintain the equipment that they had? Let’s say the US option was recognized as—US military aid was not going to be forthcoming because of congressional feelings about the war and so on. I mean could the South Vietnamese government have turned to, you know, I don’t know Australia or New Zealand, other countries that had been involved in the effort?

WL: You know, I never thought of that whether or not they could have appealed to another country to make up the difference.

LC: Not that either of those countries at that time would have.

WL: Yeah. Well, that’s the crux of it. I suppose not. The Australians—of course at the ceasefire time they pulled their troops out too. So did the Filipinos. The Filipinos didn’t have any combat troops. They were civil affairs and other things, and of course the Koreans left at the ceasefire. Those countries provided troops but I’m now aware of any other material aid or funding that those countries provided if they did. I’m not aware of it. No, again, they may have appealed to those countries and that’s beyond my recollection. I didn’t ever hear of anything like that. Interesting idea.

LC: Yeah. It’s another thing that certainly someone could chase up because there were regimes in Southeast Asia that were interested in the survival of South Vietnam. No question about it.

WL: Well sure.

LC: It’s really important, I think, always to remember that the United States, while, you know, the principal power involved was not the only one involved and—

WL: Yeah. But we were the, as far as I know, the only power that was providing funds and substantial amount of military assistance. I mean compare our several divisions that we put in there to one Australian brigade, an artillery battalion. Of course the Thais sent in a regiment, something like that, about a regiment. But they were tokens
in effect. Not that they didn’t fight well. The Australians particularly did. They did a
good job in the area they were assigned. If the Australians had been able to send two or
three divisions it would have been all the much so much better. If the Brits had sent in
something it would have helped a great deal, but they didn’t.

LC: They didn’t. Right. They were very clear and consistent on that. But of
course the South Koreans had had major fighting contingents.

WL: Yeah. They had two divisions.

LC: It’s interesting that South Korea—well, I suppose there’s some competition
for the favor of the donor going on but again all of these—

WL: In the last year or so of the war, as I understand, the Koreans pretty well
withdrew from active, aggressive combat as we did. They wanted to reduce casualties
too. They didn’t want to be the last group to die in a war that was failing anyway.

LC: Right. Was there the sense, Bill, as you remember the mood, that the whole
thing was only a matter of time?

WL: Not that early.

LC: Yeah. That’s what I’m thinking.

WL: Yeah. Not that early. I didn’t think that because I could see from my own
observations that the South Vietnamese Army was in much better shape than it was, say,
when I was there with the Division in ’66, ’67. It was much improved. During the very
brief period that I was director of training for Army Advisory Group and able to travel
around and meet with division commanders and training center commanders and so on I
was impressed with how far they had progressed since the late ’60s in maintenance and
combat ability and so on. Our reports that we got from our land grab period there, they
also impressed me that the South Vietnamese could more than hold their own unit for
unit against the North Vietnamese. I didn’t have any doubt about that. So, we had some
expectations that if the situation didn’t change remarkably—that is if the North
Vietnamese didn’t bring a lot more troops down there—the South could hold its own.

Then as Mike Hardin began briefing me on what was coming down the trail I began to
look much more carefully at the situation and began to revise my own estimate.

LC: Bill, you’ve talked a little bit about the problems that were apparent in the
RVNAF structure and particularly with the Air Force. I wonder, was there a sense of
imbalance in what the US had accomplished in terms of training and equipment transfer between ARVN, which was apparently acquitting itself fairly well in early ’73, and the Air Force?

WL: I wouldn’t call it an imbalance. I’m trying to think of how to put this. The Vietnamese Air Force, they were really highly qualified aviators and maintenance folks in that I had no fear about flying with them at any time. I flew in their helicopters and I flew in their fixed wing airplanes and I never felt in peril by doing it. But there just weren’t enough of them to provide the kind of air support that would have been ideal to support the ground troops of the ARVN. There just weren’t enough airplanes. The other part of it was that the air defense systems that the North brought in to the South were much more capable of shooting down VNAF airplanes than they were capable shooting down the real fast movers that the Air Force had there. I mean there’s a big difference between say an F-4, US Air Force, or a 101, those real fast airplanes, and flying an A-1 that was flying against Koreans, North Koreans, in the Korean War. This is an old airplane. It’s very rugged and very sturdy. But 37 mm anti-aircraft, the kind of stuff the North Vietnamese were bringing in there, was pretty deadly against something like that flying at, say, on a strike at a thousand feet.

LC: What could, for example, ARVN forces do up in what used to be called I Corps, MR-1, about the SAM sites that were being built? Apparently they were being built, you know, in early ’73.

WL: Yeah. No, they couldn’t do anything about it.

LC: Nothing? Because they couldn’t get up there, is that accurate?

WL: That’s right. They would be shot down without any trouble at all.

LC: ARVN land forces were not in position to—?

WL: There was a great battle there in—when was that over? I’m trying to think. The ARVN Marines and the ARVN Division made an effort to go back into Quang Tri and did. They managed to take Quang Tri. In fact I went up there and visited. I went in to the old city of Quang Tri—it was nothing but rubble—and looked across the river to the North Vietnamese on the other side. You could see their flag. But that’s as far north as we got was the city of Quang Tri which was a good deal short of the old DMZ. North of that river—can’t remember the name of it. But anyway that was as far as they ever
got. They made a really gallant effort to go past that but they were unable to do so. So that part of the terrain was pretty much denied to the South.

LC: Bill, did you sit with the implementation documents for the Paris Peace Accords and think, “Hm, there’s no requirement that the NVA withdraw from South Vietnam?”

WL: Oh yeah! Yeah. That was interestingly—in fact, as I remember, I think I mentioned this in the book. Secretary Kissinger was asked about this by the press. “Well, what’s going to prevent the North Vietnamese, what’s going to make them withdraw what they’ve got?” He said, “Well, we can’t make them do that and those units are going to stay in Vietnam.” There were, what, maybe two divisions in the North. There were one or two in Laos and they were going to stay. He said there was nothing we could do about it. It didn’t matter what we wrote. He said, “In effect it doesn’t matter what you write in to an agreement. If the other side doesn’t want to do it you don’t have any means,” I’m paraphrasing a lot, “you have no means to require them to do it, no force. You don’t have a club to use. They’re not going to do it. If that’s the kind of government you’re dealing with.”

LC: I’d like to ask about the operations in North Vietnam, particularly mine sweeping operations in the Hai Phong area and other ports too and also the pick up of released US POWs. Was there any intelligence value to those operations that you saw?

WL: I don’t recall seeing anything. It didn’t come to me. Actually, there’s no reason really why it should because MACV no longer had any operational capability or authority to do anything anyway. Any intelligence would have been of some strategic importance. It might have been some importance to the JCRC, Joint Casualty Resolution Center, but they had their own channels. We didn’t have any authority over them anyway.

LC: They were based where? Do you know?

WL: They were based in Bangkok. They had their liaison team in Saigon. But of course their effort was to recover missing US prisoners of war, or missing in action and prisoners of war. They operated with some constraints on who got involved in there. I didn’t have anything to do with that.

LC: Were they based in the embassy, the liaison team?
WL: No. I think they were based at the old MACV headquarters. Yeah. But their main office was in Bangkok.

LC: I see. Another question—and this is kind of a perspective question—for you coming back to Vietnam in late ’72, early ’73 and getting back up to speed with the order of battle information on the enemy, maybe you Bill can offer an observation on the trope essentially that’s trotted out very often about the impact of Tet ’68 on VC infrastructure in the Delta particularly, but more over largely in southern South Vietnam. The sense that’s entered the literature now, as you know, is that this was a huge defeat for the Viet Cong and that that as a fighting force they never recovered from the smashing that they took from US and ARVN troops in 1968 and that from there on essentially the war was something that the North carried to the South via the infiltration routes that we’ve already talked about. When you came back in late ’72 and early ’73 and were looking at OOB (order of battle) information, did that perspective make sense? Is that what you saw?

WL: Yes. It did. There were only—I don’t know. As I recall there was only one bona fide VC battalion in MR-2. We had a few units—there were more of them in the Delta than there were in MR-3. MR-3 was virtually devoid. We may have still called the Division the VC Division but it was ninety-nine percent North Vietnamese replacements. Regardless of what they called them in the order of battle it was a North Vietnamese division and the VC just were not any longer a main threat as a fighting entity.

LC: So the nomenclature might have stayed on the books but you were looking at NVA trained fillers?

WL: There were only— VC Division was the only major VC division in MR-3 anyway. The was totally North Vietnamese by that time. So was the . That’s true. The Viet Cong were virtually decimated during the Tet Offensive and never really recovered. I suppose that you could assume—assumptions are dangerous—but you could probably assume that the North Vietnamese were pretty happy about that too. They wanted complete and absolute control over the whole thing anyway. Having the VC virtually disappear made it easier for them to exert their control.

LC: Did it also create a different set of problems for ARVN? After all part of the US military advising pitch throughout had been concentration on counter-insurgency
tactics. We had learned that the war was going to be partly large force confrontations but also, importantly, a big element would be counter-insurgency operations and had done a lot of work to train South Vietnamese forces to fight in that way. Was there a lag time now for ARVN to transition to essentially meeting North Vietnamese onslaughts, main force operations?

WL: Perhaps. You could say that—not that there was a lag so much as they were not equipped with the armaments that they needed to fight main force units in large numbers. For example, the artillery that we furnished to the ARVN, the highest caliber, the largest guns, with one exception that I’ll tell you in a minute, were 155 mm Howitzers and there were not very many of those. Most of their guns, or their cannons, were 105 mm. They did inherit I believe it was one or two battalions of our 175 millimeter gun and that was an exception. But there were only, as I say, there were no more than two battalions of those. That would mean six batteries. On the other hand, the North Vietnamese Army had a 130 mm guns, 122 mm guns, 156 mm Howitzers. They had just as many, if not more, cannons in South Vietnam as the South Vietnamese had. They had more tanks and better tanks than the South Vietnamese had. Actually, in numbers they had more in South Vietnam than the South had. So the 130 mm and the 122 mm guns outranged the 105 and the 155 Howitzers that the South Vietnamese had.

LC: So longer range—

WL: Longer range gun.

LC: —and bigger shells?

WL: Well, the shells were—of course 122 is bigger than 105. The 130 is not quite the size of a 155, but the difference is not significant in their destructive power. So they were outgunned.

LC: Were these mostly, as far as you know, eastern European manufactured and Soviet manufactured weapons?

WL: Yes. They were all virtually all Soviet. A lot of the ammunition was coming from China. But guns, as far as I know, were all Soviet, possibly Czech. But it was a standard Soviet Army field piece. These are standard Soviet armaments.

LC: What about the tanks? Can you talk a little bit more about those and how they, if you will, outpaced what the US had provided ARVN?
WL: As I recall, we gave the South Vietnamese some of the 90 mm gun tanks, I can’t recall now for sure, and a lot of the light tanks, the old 75 mm gun tanks. But neither of them were—well, the 90 mm gun tank, it must have been the—I’m trying to think. M-48. It must have been the M-48, was a pretty good match for the Soviet tank that the North Vietnamese brought down. But the light tank was not. The tanks in these Vietnamese forces were in two or three regiments. They weren’t commonly used with infantry divisions.

LC: They were not?

WL: No.

LC: Of course that’s standard practice as you’ve talked about before.

WL: Yeah. We hadn’t been able to get into good combined arms training with the South Vietnamese Army. Not that they couldn’t have picked it up pretty rapidly if we’d given it to them but we didn’t because they weren’t fighting tanks in any significant numbers in the days we were there. It was only later. The first major battle as I recall in the South that involved tanks was up there at Song Be in Phuoc Long Province, South Vietnam. That wasn’t until, when was that? December of ’74 when they used the tanks in Song Be. So you’re right. The South Vietnamese Army was trained and equipped to fight main force units, main force battalions, not only guerrillas by any stretch. But not against a significant artillery or tank threat. The artillery came later and it was significant. Of course the North Vietnamese Army also used to great extent the 122 mm rockets, artillery rockets. Those were used to some pretty good effect too, and the South Vietnamese didn’t have anything like that.

LC: Those 122 rockets, were those something that the NVA had displayed in confrontations with US troops? I seem to think maybe they were firing those across the DMZ toward US Marines maybe at Khe Sanh in that period on.

WL: Sure. Yeah. They used their artillery there too, their tube artillery, against Khe Sanh with pretty good effect. They used the 130 mm guns and those heavy Howitzers as well against Khe Sanh.

LC: That’s back in ’68?

WL: Yeah. Yeah. Was that ’68?
LC: Yes, right after Tet. Well, it continued on into—that siege continued I think into what, March or April.

WL: Of course Lam Son 719, that was ’71 when the attack across from on Route 9 across Lao Bao into Tchepone by the South Vietnamese. They ran against some heavy artillery in that operation too.

LC: So this would suggest that maybe the US ought to have foreseen the possibility on leaving that we would have left the ARVN forces under gunned?

WL: Well, there wasn’t much we could do about it. Once they signed the ceasefire you couldn’t—you were prohibited by the ceasefire from supplying anything that they didn’t have after the ceasefire was signed. Now we did go through what they called—what was the name of that operation? I mentioned it in my book but I can’t recall it. But just before the ceasefire was signed, probably beginning around October of ’72, MACV started a very formidable project to bring in more equipment for the South Vietnamese so that they would have it by the time the ceasefire was signed anticipating that after the ceasefire you couldn’t bring anymore in. They called it Enhance, Enhance and Enhance Plus. I talk about it in Chapter Two. In that MACV made a very strong effort to bring new materiel, new equipment in. But as far as I know they didn’t bring in a lot more tanks or artillery, just kind of more of the same.

LC: Well, and actually now I’m also looking at the book, Chapter Two. You’ve very clearly outlined the numbers of big ticket items, if you want, that were delivered. For example, aircraft to VNAF 286 UH-1s. I mean that’s quite a lot. But as you mentioned earlier today many of these aircrafts were kept flying by cannibalizing aircraft already in country perhaps. Bill, if you can, can you talk about the situation as it developed in the middle of 1973 and kind of going forward, the operational developments on the ground particularly in the North where you saw intimations of the future, if you will, the movements by the NVA?

WL: As you know, again in the book I relate the number of casualties. Casualties among the ARVN began to climb shortly after the ceasefire. There was a short period after what we call the land grab period that was just in the days before the ceasefire was signed. There were very heavy casualties during that period. Then the casualties slacked off until probably a month or so and then they began climbing again indicating that there
was still efforts from both sides to try to solidify or establish their positions for the future. On the South side to deny the NVA enlargements in close to the populated areas from which they could launch attacks, and on the other side to move in as close as they could to us. Then in June of ’73 there was what we called ceasefire two. Alarms about the rise in casualties and the failure of the ceasefire really to work, they convened another conference in Paris as I recall. Both sides agreed to try to put a damper on all the activities and try to get peace actually in South Vietnam. But of course this was entirely window dressing as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned. Sure, they’d agree to anything but it didn’t mean anything. Both sides agreed to withdraw from contested areas and so on and to try to bring peace, and of course that didn’t work. There was a lull for a month or so and then the activities began again. Again, without referring to my book I can’t give you precise casualties or the operations that were undertaken. The North began what I called—what did I call it? I’m trying to think. It was a plan to reduce one by one, gradually, the ARVN outposts that were in the Highlands primarily; the old Special Forces camps that were established up there by the US Army Special Forces that had been taken over by Ranger battalions—

LC: Up in the Kontum area?

WL: Around Kontum and Pleiku. There was a great deal of fighting up there just north and west of Kontum that involved a lot of casualties on both sides as the North tried to get in and cut, get a lodgment between Kontum and Pleiku. That would have been disastrous for Kontum, cut them off almost entirely. So the South made a very important effort to prevent that. That was early on in ’73 as I recall. It might have been in the middle of the year. But this kind of sparring—you might call it sparring in a sense but it was sparring that hurt a lot to both sides. It was a lot of fighting. We reported all of it and I almost felt that no one quite paid attention to the fact that we were again in a major conflict that was going to develop into something even a great deal more serious. We weren’t threatened in Saigon. But there was certainly the outposts were being cut down, as I say, one by one until they had to be abandoned. We lost our hold. We still maintained Kontum. We still maintained a force in Pleiku. In fact, I had a little intelligence team reporting back to me on activities in Pleiku.

LC: Can you talk about that team?
WL: Well, did I tell you about the people I had at the four consul general offices?

LC: No. You didn’t go over that. No.

WL: Part of my intelligence branch, my collections outfit section I guess they called it, involved four—I think I had four or five people, one chief and three or four guys, assigned to the consul generals. Now, I should explain who the consul generals were. They’re not consul general in the same sense as the people that handle passports and look after Americans that get lost on the railroad and things like that in normal times. The consul generals were the representatives of the ambassador in each of the military regions. There was one stationed at Military Region I. He was in Da Nang with a branch office in Hue on the other side of the Hai Van Pass. There was one in Nha Trang for Military Region II with a branch office in Pleiku. There was one in Binh Hoa for Military Region III and there was one down in Can Tho for Military Region IV. I learned when I went to Hawaii to find out what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to do it, what my organization was, that I was to send a team of people to report on military activities in the four military regions. These teams were to be located with the consul general of each of the regions. So far so good, and they assigned to me the people to do it. It was about twenty or twenty-five people and all of them were civilians. Most of them had had military service and had resigned their commissions, got out of the Army, whatever. Most of them had some experience in Vietnam. Some had had significant experience in Vietnam. So I sent them out to these regions. Everything went okay in Military Region I. The consul general up there greeted my people and he let them kind of have their head on how they operated. What I told them to do was to make contact with the corps commander, introduce themselves, tell them what they were there for. They were going to report back to me on military activity in Military Region I. That was simple, and on ARVN activities primarily. They couldn’t report much on enemy because they weren’t with the enemy. But they could report on what was going on with the ARVN, their problems and what they were doing. General Turn up in Military Region I accepted them very well. Lieutenant General Trung was the commander of I Corps. In Military Region II, didn’t have any problem there either. I don’t remember the name of the consul general but he accepted our guys okay. He let me put, that’s where we come to Pleiku, he let me put one or two guys in their headquarters in Pleiku. As you might
know, Military Region II involved the Highlands as well as the coast—Binh Dinh and the other provinces on the coast. They were separated really by geography, by the Mang Yang Pass. Because of the distances involved in II Corps, Corps of Vietnamese Army had a deputy commander up in the Highlands and the commander usually stayed in Nha Trang where its main corps was. That’s the way the consul general operated too. He had a little office up in Pleiku. In Military Region III I had problems from the very beginning. The consul general there, he said, “I don’t see any reason why you have to have anybody here. I report on military activity. I report to the ambassador,” et cetera, et cetera, “and you’re not welcome.” I had to go to the ambassador and I explained that it wasn’t really my idea to do this. “I was directed to do it by CINCPAC. They designed the structure and USAG Air Force. They designed the structure for my intelligence branch and I’m following their orders.” So I guess he called Walkenshaw and said. “Quit fighting the problem. Let these folks in and do their job.” Well, I got my people stationed there but Walkenshaw did his best to keep them away from the corps commander. Fortunately I knew the corps commander from my days in the Division, General Thuon

LC: Spelled how Bill?

WL: T-h-u-o-n. Thuon. Yeah. In fact we still correspond. Anyway, so the fact that I knew him and I knew his deputy, our guys at least got a little bit out of it. Down in IV it was a little bit sticky but it worked okay in IV with Terry—

LC: McNamara?

WL: McNamara. Yeah. I don’t recall if McNamara was there from the beginning or whether he came in later but it doesn’t matter. Anyway, we worked out. So I had a man in Pleiku reporting on activities up there as well.

LC: Now, were they being given intelligence information on the enemy by the ARVN liaisons? Do you know?

WL: Yes. By ARVN. They didn’t get a lot of that. They did coordinate and meet with the corps J2 or with his deputy and I guess they got whatever the J2 wanted to tell them, which was probably different in each region. It depended a lot on the personalities involved and how persuasive they were, how much experience they had to know enough what questions to ask for one thing. It’s not an easy job. But most of my
folks did very well in those situations and they gave me some pretty good reports. I went
up and visited them any time I could, not very often. I usually didn’t have time to do
that, and it depended a great deal upon the cooperation of the consul general. Some of
these folks were pretty good; others had some petty jealousy about information. They
didn’t want anybody reporting anything that they—one of them wanted to see every
report that our guys sent to me and I told them, “You can’t do that. They report to me.
They don’t report through the ambassador or through the consul general. They just send
the stuff down to me.” Actually they didn’t send it to me, personally. I had a lieutenant
colonel who was chief of my collections and they sent it to him and he gave it to me.

LC: But there’s a chain of command.
WL: Yeah.

LC: Well, Bill, this brings up an interesting question, and you’ve refereed several
times to having meetings, both your briefings and then ad hoc meetings with Ambassador
Martin. I wonder if you can give some observations on how he was running the shop in
Saigon in these days, in 1973, before things started to unravel.

WL: Yeah, of course. My first dealings were with Ambassador Bunker. I don’t
remember when Bunker left. It must have been in May or June?

LC: That sounds about right.
WL: Yeah. I didn’t have that same rapport with him. Actually I was new on the
job and he had been there for five years or something. In the beginning General Murray
was the guy who talked to the ambassador. But as soon as Martin came in, because
General Murray didn’t like him and didn’t get along with him and figured that he was
being duplicitous, didn’t want to meet with him. So he told me to do it. So I did. That’s
how I established my relationship with Martin.

LC: Did it put you in a difficult position because of the tension between Murray
and Martin?
WL: No. I didn’t feel it. I didn’t feel that way at all. Martin never said anything
about Murray to me. He didn’t bad mouth him or talk behind his back or anything. We
got along fine. Ambassador Martin had a pretty large ego. People with large egos tend
to be vulnerable to being stroked also, and I managed to do that a little bit I guess. In
World War II he had been an intelligence officer and he respected the Army and
respected Army officers. I think he respected Army officers who were colonels and in intelligence more than he respected major generals who were logisticians. I kind of got that impression anyway. That’s why we got along pretty well. He’d tell me stories about World War II, just privately. Most of my meetings with him were private and we’d just kind of chat for a while and I’d give him my estimate and what I expected to happen. He did tend to give me the impression that he had no faith at all in his station chief and CIA. He let me know that right off; mutter some invectives about Polgar. I would usually as a matter of form, after I’d talk to Martin, after he told me what was going on and what he wanted me to do and so on, I would always stop in to see the DCM, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and give him a briefing. I didn’t want to be put in the middle of anything so I would tell, what’s his name? It’ll come back to me.

LC: Whitehouse?
WL: Whitehouse. Yes. Whitehouse. I didn’t get along with Whitehouse at all.
LC: Why was that? He was kind of a prickly person I gather.
WL: Yeah. He was a—I would use different words. I had a run in with him in General Murray’s office very early, before Martin even came. Whitehouse was the interim ambassador you might say, kind of a—between the arrival of Martin, after the departure of Bunker and before Martin arrived, Whitehouse was kind of the acting ambassador I guess they call it. In Murray’s office he asked me—I was with Murray and Whitehouse in the office and he asked me, “What’s this business about these people you’re sending out to the consul generals?” I explained it to him. He says, “Well that’s not necessary. You can’t do that. We don’t need those people. I’ve got a consular general and he does all the reporting.” I said, “Well, it’s not my call. I was directed to do this by the commander In chief of Pacific and by the commander of USAG Air Force. So I have to follow my orders.” General Murray, I don’t remember what he said. He probably looked kind of blank and didn’t want to enter into this thing because he had bigger fish to fry. I was just concerned about kind of an administrative detail I guess, what they were thinking about. But I wasn’t thinking in those terms. I figured that I had to stand up for what I was told to do and I did and Whitehouse kind of backed off. He goes something like, “Okay but I don’t like it and it’s not necessary.” He muttered a few things but I went ahead and deployed the people anyway and got away with it. So during
the time—I never did go in to talk to Whitehouse. It wasn’t until he left. I think he left to be ambassador in Laos I believe. I think they sent him to Laos, Vientiane.

LC: Out of the frying pan into the fire I think they sent him.

WL: But I had a pretty good relationship, very good relationship, with the other, the new DCM. You mentioned his name, or did you?

LC: I don’t think so. No. I’m trying to think who it was.

WL: I can’t remember. I see him every once in a while. I also had a good relationship with Joe Bennett who was the political consular of the embassy and Al Francis who was the political military—I don’t know what they call them—political military officer. Al Francis came out to see me at least once a week. He would come out and look at the boards, you know, take a round and look at my situation maps and so on. He was very good to deal with. He later became the consul general. He was the consul general at the end up there in Da Nang.

LC: Where they had a very tough time.

WL: They had a tough time. You know what? Just before this whole thing went down, he invited me up to spend a weekend with him up there in Hue. Took me out on a tour of the tombs out west of Hue there in the mountains. It was kind of surreal now when I think about it.

LC: This would have been in ’75?

WL: Yes. This was early. It must have been in January ’75. Things were getting kind of dicey even at that time. But it was an interesting—he was a very good guy. Wolf Lehman! Wolf Lehman was the DCM that came in after Whitehouse.

LC: That’s L-e-h-m-a-n.

WL: Yes. I would always go into—his office was right outside of Martin’s big office and I’d go in there and I’d tell him what I—I always told him what I told Martin and what Martin told me because I didn’t want him to think that I was kind of behind his back or anything. But Martin never invited him in. I thought that was kind of funny that he wouldn’t invite Wolf in to listen to the briefing but he was funny that way.

LC: So you would give kind of a capsule version of the high points to Lehman?

WL: Yeah, sure. Wolf would come out to our briefings now and then too.
LC: Bill, I’m trying to think back over our sessions and whether you had had a
great deal of experience with the State Department people before this posting.
WL: No, I hadn’t. I had a little bit when I was on the Army staff. I would have a
couple of meetings, I remember, over at the State Department with the Army liaison who
was there but—
LC: But not Foreign Service people?
WL: I did have some experience with the Foreign Service folks when I was chief
of intelligence of—excuse me current intelligence for Army. There was an officer,
probably number two or number three in the political section, of the embassy in Seoul
that came out to see me weekly and talk about things but that’s my only contact. He was
a reasonable guy but he wasn’t very high on the pecking order of that embassy. I think
he was number two or number three in political section.
LC: Now here you are with General Murray kind of backing out of interaction
with Ambassador Martin here. You’re planning to see the Ambassador.
WL: When I was on the Army staff I had had daily dealings with very senior
Army generals. So I wasn’t put off or felt defensive or inferior or anything when I was
dealing with senior people. I mean I dealt with the Army chief of staff at least once a
week and with the director of operations two or three times and so on. So I was kind of
used to it.
LC: But did you understand or start to pick up clues about the Foreign Service
having a culture of its own?
WL: Oh yes! That was pretty obvious. Martin seemed to be kind of outside that.
I never got the impression that he ever felt that he was a career officer in the State
Department. I think he always felt that he was more political about it than that. I’m sure
he was career because he had been ambassador in Thailand. Later he was ambassador in
Italy, I believe. But I don’t really believe he came up through the ranks as much as—
LC: I don’t think so either. I think he had some experience during World War II,
as you have noted, that kind of jumped him up.
WL: At that time he was in the Army. He always told me, he told me this more
than once, that he did not report to the secretary of state. He said, “I represent the
president of the United States. I don’t represent the secretary of state.” He made a point
of that, which I thought was interesting. But actually he really did have to talk to Brent
Scowcroft and that gang rather than—I don’t know if he ever got to talk to the president
himself. He may have. I don’t know.

LC: Oh I’m sure at some point he probably did. But he struck you as a fairly
down to earth guy?

WL: Oh yes. You get really violently different opinions about all of that but I
always felt he was being straight with me. Now, maybe I’m naïve. I probably am.

LC: I don’t think so.

WL: But I took him at his word and he took me at my word. You know, when I
wrote these and sent my reports, my weeklies and my monthlies—especially the monthly,
the MISTA was a pretty important document, I think. It was the word of DAO Saigon on
what was going on. General Murray and General Smith never demanded to see my draft
before I sent it out on the wire. They trusted me and when I sent it out to the world I also
sent a copy to General Murray or General Smith when he came in. I did the same thing
with the embassy. I didn’t check it with the ambassador. Some people claim I did but I
didn’t. I never did, with one exception I’ll give you later. Once in a while the
ambassador would call me personally, on the phone, and he’d say, “What about this item
so and so on page so and so? I don’t agree with that. Polgar told me something different.
I want to talk to you about that.” So I’d get my sedan and I drive down to the embassy
and we discuss it. He never took any violent exception to anything. Sometimes things
would kind of take him aback because CIA was selling him something that was kind of
180 degrees different and he’d want an explanation. So I’d tell him why we came to that
conclusion. I couldn’t tell him why CIA came to their conclusion but I could sure tell
him what we thought. I think he kind of liked that. I tell you this goes far ahead but I
might as well put it now in context. When I wrote the final MISTA in Saigon, which
would have been March, yeah, the MISTA for March, I predicted that within two months
we’re going to be finished, the North Vietnamese would be there or something. Words to
that effect. Knowing full well that CIA was saying there was going to be what they
called decent interval. In other words they give the United States time to pack up and
leave before they entered and all this. I didn’t directly counter that view in the MISTA
but I did in effect by saying that we had a different take on it. So I wrote that final
section of the MISTA and rather than sending it on the wire right then I called the
embassy and I talked to Martin. I said that I wanted to come down and see him and show
him what I was sending to the world on the situation and if he wanted to write a reclama,
a paragraph with a different opinion he was welcome to do so and I’d put it in the
MISTA. So he said, “Fine.” So I got my driver and we went down there and I showed it
to him and he thought about it for a while. Then he called in Eva—Eva Kim, his real
nice secretary—dictated a paragraph and she typed it up and handed it to me. I said,
“Okay, I’ll put this in the MISTA,” and I did. I went back and put that paragraph—words
to the effect, “On the other hand, Ambassador Martin believes so and so.” But that was
the only time that I did anything like that. I figured it was important enough that I ought
to do that to avoid any bad feeling later on.

LC: Was it essentially a courtesy that you were giving him or was it this—?
WL: Definitely that was all it was. I wasn’t required to do it.
LC: Right. This wasn’t the protocol, as you’ve made clear, that you followed in
the many months previous on your earlier reports.
WL: Yeah. So that was the only deviation from my practice.
LC: Bill, let me ask you another kind of forward looking question which I think is
relevant here. Did you see Ambassador Martin well after the events of 1975? Did you
ever see him again?
WL: Yes. I drove down to where he was—Chapel Hill I think is where he was
living, North Carolina, and visited him with him and Mrs. Martin. We had a nice evening
together. He wasn’t looking well, kind of sick. He had cancer. But we had a nice chat.
But that was the last time I saw him. I don’t even remember how I did that or why. But I
remember feeling kind of—I think it was shortly—it was after he returned from Italy. It
seemed to me he was assigned to be ambassador in Italy when he got home and that was
rather short if he actually got there because he was sick.
LC: He had returned to North Carolina?
WL: Yeah. But he had retired and he was living there in a house in North
Carolina. But that’s the last time I saw him.
LC: Okay. Let’s take a break Bill.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 14 of 22
December 15, 2005

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the fifteenth of December 2005. I am in Lubbock and the colonel is in Virginia and speaking by telephone. Hi Bill.

WL: Hi. Good morning.

LC: Bill, you wanted to add a footnote about your later interactions with Ambassador Martin.

WL: Yes. I had mentioned that I had traveled down to North Carolina to visit him once after I got home. But I had forgotten to mention that I believe it was in July of ’75 when I was at the Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. that he was present when General Smith awarded me the Army Distinguished Service Medal for my service as chief of Intelligence and Operations in Vietnam. Ambassador Martin was there with Brig. Gen. Jimmy Collins who was the chief of military history in General Collins’s office. That’s where it happened. I don’t recall who invited Ambassador Martin. I believe it was probably General Smith. Anyway, he came up from North Carolina to be there.

LC: That year would have been what Bill?

WL: That was in the summer of ’75.

LC: How did the Ambassador seem to you at that point?

WL: He was very cordial and we shook hands. We didn’t talk very much, as I recall. I don’t remember a great deal about it. I might say that it’s pretty unusual for the Army to award that particular medal to a colonel. They usually give it to general officers and as far as I know I’m the only member of DAO that General Smith recommended for that award and who received it.

LC: I think you have deposited with us a photograph of that.

WL: I wondered if I did because I was looking for it and I couldn’t find it. I guess I sent it to you.
LC: I think you have. Yes, I think it’s safe here or a copy of it certainly is safe here and certainly well deserved. We’ll find out more about what you did that brought that medal to you in our interviews as they go on. But what I wanted to ask you about Bill is as you were living in Saigon during 1973 and into 1974, essentially before the great events of 1974 that led to the fall of the government of South Vietnam, I wonder if you can comment just a little bit on the flavor of living in Saigon at that time with the United States presence so greatly reduced? This is a period that most of us don’t have a lot of information about simply because this isn’t the period that’s portrayed in films. This isn’t the period that’s written about in great detail. The American presence had been so drastically reduced. What can you tell us about life there and the mood there and non-Communist politics, if you want the politics not only of the palace but also of the street? What was happening?

WL: Well, as I remember it, it seemed unusually, well, surprisingly normal atmosphere around Saigon. People were busy. They were working. There was a lot of traffic. There were very few military vehicles in Saigon at that time. Thinking back to my time with the Division there in ’66, ’67 there were always a lot of military traffic passing in and through Saigon. But during this period there was very little military traffic and as I say the shops were full and running. People were going to theater. There were, I recall, parades now and then through town, through the city. It just seemed normal. I can’t recall any demonstrations or any political events that caught my eye. Of course I was really kind of a casual observer of the military situation or rather the political situation. I would drive over to the Joint General Staff headquarters at least once a week to meet with my counterpart, Colonel Lung.

LC: Just remind me again, their headquarters were in the old MACV buildings?

WL: No. Their headquarters was in a very large old French compound about, I would say about a mile where my headquarters was at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. Colonel Lung did get to see President Thieu now and then but not very frequently. He had no comments that I can recall about any interaction between himself and the president.

LC: What about driving over there, Bill? Did you feel safe?

WL: Oh yes. There was no reason not to. There was no gunfire, you know, in Saigon at that time. When I first arrived that first December there was some rockets that
the NVA or the VC units lobbed into Tan Son Nhut. But after that was over, after the ceasefire started at the end of January ’73, there was no more fire, no more artillery or rockets coming into Saigon that I can recall.

LC: Did it feel like a city that was the capitol of a country at war? Did it look like that?

WL: It didn’t really look like that. I remember taking some rather extended trips, in fact. I would drive easily over to Bien Hoa to the headquarters of III Corps, III Corps headquarters. I visited the Command and General Staff College over there at Long Binh. I don’t recall driving as far as the Delta because, not because it was not secure but because it took time and if I had to go down to IV Corps at Can Tho, why, I would fly. I recall again even as late as January ’75 I drove all the way up to Dalat by road with General Smith. I drove up there to the Vietnamese Military Academy to their graduation ceremony. This was just after, well, mid-January probably. We had a picnic at a waterfall about halfway up there. It was a beautiful drive. Spent the night in a guesthouse in Dalat. Attended actually what turned out to be the final graduation of the Vietnamese Military Academy at Dalat. Quite a bit of the diplomatic corps was there. Virtually every ambassador that was in Saigon was up there: the French and the British and Australians and so on.

LC: No kidding.

WL: Yeah.

LC: Would they usually have been up there attending?

WL: I don’t know. It was my first experience at that. President Thieu reviewed the corps of cadets in a very fancy jeep. I have pictures of that somewhere. Maybe I can find them.

LC: That’d be great. Bill, tell me a little bit, if you can, about Dalat. Had you been up there before during your first tour?

WL: No. I never got to Dalat my first tour. I believe this was my first trip up there. In fact, if that’s true this is my only trip up there. Dalat is a beautiful mountain village or town. It’s where virtually all of the temperate zone types of vegetables and flowers are grown for South Vietnam. Very large vegetable gardens and flower gardens that supply the city because it’s really a temperate climate up there. It doesn’t seem
tropical. The mountains around it are covered with pines, conifers. That’s the only place that I saw conifer trees in Vietnam. There’s a beautiful lake at the center of the city. It’s a very nice—of course it’s renowned as a resort area. But it’s really a lot of farming. You know, they grow artichokes and other temperate climate vegetables and flowers.

LC: The fact that the academy was located up there is something of interest, at least to me. Did you have a chance to sort of walk the compound and see what it was like?

WL: Yes. In fact I recall now, this is my second trip. When I was director of training of the Army Advisory Group I went up there. But I’m sure I flew at that time and that was in ’72. Yes, in December of ’72, because that was one of my responsibilities. We had an advisory team up there of officers and I went up to visit them and see what they were doing. In fact, an old classmate of mine was the chief of that section up there.

LC: Who was that Bill?

WL: I can’t recall his name now. I know I was classmates—I don’t remember now for sure whether he was a classmate or maybe he was in the Infantry Regiment with me. I think the latter is probably the case. He was a little bit senior to me and he was a West Point graduate.

LC: About how many men were they training in a class up there?

WL: I don’t know. I can’t recall.

LC: Okay. I want to come back to Dalat maybe a little bit later because I think the events there in the spring of 1975 are of special importance. But Bill, the discussion of the training academy reminds me that last time we talked you mentioned a trip that you made out to the Chau Duc area and that there was a boot camp, a basic camp, out there for in-taking of and training of new recruits. I wonder what your sense was of the overall development of manpower issues for the RVNAF generally. Were they making the numbers that they needed?

WL: They seemed to be. I didn’t hear any comments from any of the generals that I talked to in the Vietnamese Army that they were having difficulty filling their ranks. They seemed to be pretty much up to strength in the infantry divisions. Now, I could be wrong but I didn’t hear any complaints or observations that they were under
strength. Their main complaint and concern was that they lacked the equipment that they needed. Things that got worn out or broken could not be fixed because they didn’t have the spare parts to keep them running. As I think I mentioned before there was a great shortage of fuel for the trucks and no funds to buy it with. You might recall that during that period, I guess it was ’73, there was some problem with petroleum, an oil embargo or something. I think that the oil producing states cut off supplies.

LC: Yeah. The OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) nations—

WL: OPEC. Wasn’t there a big problem?

LC: Yes, sir, there was. I think they got together and decided they were being rooked and so they increased the price drastically.

WL: Yeah. That had a very disastrous effect on Vietnam. They didn’t have the flexibility to cope with anything like that. As I remember there were gas lines, I mean lines at filling stations around the United States about that time.

LC: Yes. Absolutely.

WL: But in Vietnam it impacted on the military capability, the fuel for the aircraft and for the military trucks.

LC: Well, that’s all basic essential materiel that makes an army move and essentially what I’m hearing is that from your perspective, your understanding was they didn’t have the foreign exchange to buy—?

WL: Well, the United States had trimmed their budget to the extent, I mean the appropriation to the extent that they didn’t have the funds to buy it.

LC: Did you find out any information that would suggest that the North Vietnamese were having similar difficulties? Did anything like that ever come past your desk?

WL: No. They weren’t having any trouble at all. The Chinese and the Soviet block kept the materiel coming in.

LC: Right. The petroleum I think too probably.

WL: Well, they moved down on foot. You see, they just had to reinforce and enlarge their capabilities in the South and they could march on foot and strike at isolated ARVN positions and destroy them one by one and they didn’t need the fuel. The South
Vietnamese needed the capability to reinforce and to move from one position to another and they had to do it rapidly. About the only way to do that was by air. They had so far to go.

LC: Yeah. So their needs for petroleum products were much higher, essentially.

WL: Yes.

LC: The mobility issue and the fact that there were isolated posts being attacked also provokes another question. What success do you think the South Vietnamese government was having with some of its basic policies for rural security like refugee resettlement and some of the reinforced villages? Were those being bypassed by NVA forces if they were too hard a target? What did you see as the strategy that the North Vietnamese were developing for dealing with some of the successes that Thieu’s government had had in the rural areas?

WL: Well, there are two parts of that I think. Understand that the war was entirely different in each of the military regions. We used to say there were four different wars going on. If you’re talking about the rural areas of the Delta that’s one thing because that is a heavily populated area and the rural areas were really—almost all the Delta was rural. Only two or three, well maybe more than that, but just a few cities of any size in the Delta and the rest of the people lived out in these little hamlets and villages in the rural areas. Those were always vulnerable to local VC units. However, by this time, by ’74, the popular forces—this is the local militia you might call them, another term for them—they call them the Regional Forces and Popular Forces—capabilities had increased. They had improved a lot so there wasn’t a great deal of VC incursions. As I mentioned before in the Delta the main force North Vietnamese formations had been unsuccessful in penetrating and they had largely withdrawn from the Delta into the Parrot’s Beak and other parts of border areas. So the security in the Delta was pretty good. You could actually drive just about any place you wanted to. In Military Region III, where we were based, the area all in and around Saigon was secure. You would still not be able to drive without a good deal of security north of Lai Khe into An Loc. The North Vietnamese still controlled all of the area north of An Loc, except for Song Be, which they overran in December of ’74. In the Highlands there was a good deal of fighting, continuous fighting, in Binh Dinh Province on the coast and up around Kontum.
But the rest of the area was fairly secure. I think they kept running convoys over the Mang Yang Pass, Highway 19. I’m trying to think of the name of the—from the An Lao Valley to An Khe up over into Pleiku, that wasn’t any great problem. It was entirely different up in the North. The only area of Thua Thien and Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai that we held was right along the coast. The rest of the area inland from there into the mountains was—well, it wasn’t controlled by the North Vietnamese but they did manage to have enough troops in there to keep the ARVN from expanding in that direction. I don’t know if I’ve dealt with your question or not.

LC: Well, sure. Had the South Vietnamese military forces made significant efforts to try to roll back the areas of NVA control up there along the DMZ and Quang Tri and Quang Ngai?

WL: Yes they did. They ran operations westward into the mountains now and then, and particularly in Binh Dinh they were fairly successful. But could never root them all out. It was just a matter of the difficulties in the terrain and the limited forces that the ARVN had to do it with. But they maintained control over the major population centers in all three, in fact, in all four military regions. All of the major population was under South Vietnamese control and security.

LC: You know Bill, much of the literature on this period really talks about the South Vietnamese as—the South Vietnamese government and the military forces as basically in a holding pattern awaiting, you know, the final blow from the North and that there wasn’t really any hope in the higher circles in Washington that South Vietnam would be viable. This was kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy because of course the more congressmen and senators who believed that, the fewer who were willing to support appropriations. But you know, the picture that you’re providing is one of a country that while clearly had some security issues in more isolated areas that the Delta, being fairly secure, was not at immediate risk of falling to North Vietnam. I wonder if you spend much of your time—I mean I know that unparalleled manuscript that you produced about this period is a counterweight to much of the popular literature. But I wonder if you spend time thinking about the disconnect that clearly developed in Washington about the situation that you were observing on the ground.
WL: Oh well certainly. It was on our minds all the time. We could read the papers. We saw evidence of the speeches that people like Kennedy were making in the Senate. We knew that—in fact we predicted early on that unless the United States resumed its support of South Vietnam we didn’t have a chance of surviving. We knew that. As I might have mentioned, just before he retired, General Murray came back to Washington to plead the case of more aid and straightening out the mess that the Army had made of providing what was even authorized. Their numbers and their calculations were all off and there was a real dog’s breakfast of the way that things were being managed there in Washington. He talked to Secretary Schlesinger personally. Just about everybody here that would give him the time to make his pitch but he came back absolutely discouraged that anybody here in Washington in high command was even interested. Then he retired.

LC: Do you think that was due to just American domestic fatigue with the whole issue or do you think that General Murray didn’t have the same recognition that some other politicians and military leaders who could have lent themselves to the issue had?

WL: Well, it’s hard to say. I think that even if Westmoreland was still in charge his plea would have fallen on the same deaf ears. I believe that they had all come to the conclusion that it wasn’t worth it anymore. We got all the American troops out and we said that we got the prisoners of war out, but we didn’t. But that’s another issue. Once those two matters were dealt with, according to the people in Washington, “Let the South Vietnamese handle their own situation and we don’t have to do that anymore.”

LC: We kind of washed our hands of it?

WL: That’s right, kind of a Pontius Pilate almost.

LC: Well, that had to be very discouraging on the ground.

WL: Well yeah! You know what it was, it became kind of a personal thing with me and with a few of us who had devoted a good deal of our careers to Vietnam that we had many comrades in the Vietnamese Armed Forces, many people that we had been with for several years and developed a camaraderie with. Here we were in a position of abandoning them and really reneging on our promises that we were going to stay there and help them defend the country. It was a matter of honor as much as anything else. Even practical matters aside, it’s hard to do when you’re a soldier to abandon your
troops. Not that they were our troops but they were close to that because of our long
association with them. It was pretty bad.

LC: Well Bill, I’ll ask you a little bit more about that as the story unfolds, if you
don’t mind. I’d like to plum those depths a little bit more about your own comrades and
friends over in Saigon who did get out and perhaps some who you are aware did not get
out. Maybe we can talk about them. Maybe not necessarily by name but just kind of
profile some of the people that you think that you have in mind when you talk about
them. Let me ask was there a briefing function in DAO? Did you provide briefings for
non-military people like VIPs who might be visiting Saigon?

WL: Oh yes, very often. There were occasions where we did that. The last major
one was, I guess it was in February of ’75. I wrote about that in my book too about what
happened there. A congressman who’s much in the news these days, Congressman
Murtha of Pennsylvania, he came over first and we gave him a briefing. That was
probably in January of ’75 I think.

LC: Was he in the Congress already at that point?

WL: Yes. It might have been his first term. He’s been in Congress a long time.

LC: There aren’t a lot of those guys left who’ve been in that many—

WL: Yeah. I remember—you want me to go into the congressional visit now?

LC: Well sure. If you would that would be great. Why not? We can go ahead.

WL: Okay. That group was over to look at the situation and go back and advise
the president on the situation, try to develop I guess a policy for dealing with it. Among
them were Bella Abzug, Millicent Fenwick, Jersey.

LC: Yes. Millicent Fenwick.

WL: Yeah. She smoked a pipe.

LC: There’s a blast from the past.

WL: Yeah.

LC: Did she smoke a pipe while she was there?

WL: Yes! During the conferences she’d pull a pipe out and smoke it. Bella
Abzug never took her hat off. Perhaps the most unpleasant, rude member of Congress
I’ve ever met.

LC: No kidding.
In fact, I would expand it to the universe there. One of the most unpleasant persons I’ve ever met of any race, sex, gender, creed, or color. Then there was—it’s a guy from California. I’ll think of it in a minute. I can’t think of it offhand. It’s right on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, they came over and the Joint General Staff of the Vietnamese Army had set up a large display of captured enemy materiel including a couple of tanks they captured and some 130 mm guns, a [156]—what, two [156] mm Howitzers, and other things. Rocket launchers and so on and set up a big display at the Joint General Staff compound and invited these people to come over. Well, Abzug didn’t even want to see it. She wasn’t interested in it. Her main interest was to visit the political prisoners that she claimed that the South was holding in prisons in Saigon. That’s all she wanted to see. I don’t remember what Millicent Fenwick did. Pete McCloskey was the fellow I was trying to—Pete McCloskey.

LC: From California.

WL: Congressman from California, and he was assigned to me to take around to different parts of Vietnam. So I got a helicopter and—I think it was Air America provided the helicopters—and we flew. First I took him down to Can Tho. He wanted to see the headquarters of the Delta, IV Corps. As soon as we got there he said he wanted to see a political prisoner. I was a little taken aback at that. I thought we were going to look at the military situation but he wanted to see a political prisoner. So the corps commander, he was a little bemused about it but he took him. We went into the main prison in the center of Can Tho and sure enough there was a little fellow, a little Vietnamese VC in a cell, a smiling little guy. He was doing all right. There was nothing unusual about—a jail is a jail. I mean the guy was in jail. I don’t remember now what he was in for but I guess he was a political cadre of the VC. I couldn’t see anything wrong with locking up an enemy cadre. I don’t care whether he was political or military. Think back to our Civil War and the suspension of habeas corpus and so on. Vietnam wasn’t doing anything worse than that by a long shot. Anyway, we saw this prisoner. Then I took him up to I believe the Division headquarters in the Delta and as soon as we got there the division commander gave him a briefing and there was a good interpreter there. In fact, I believe this division commander spoke pretty good English and gave him a briefing on the situation in the Delta and McCloskey said, “Do you have a prisoner of
war?” There was a good deal of concern about mistreatment of prisoners. Boy, how
about déjà vu, huh? So, they said—well, they just picked up a VC that morning. This
little guy had been a courier, had been working with the VC for about ten years or so. He
was in a little canoe on one of the canals and they ambushed him and brought him in.
They brought him in with a little piece of string around his wrists to signify that he was a
prisoner I guess and they brought him in to show him to McCloskey. McCloskey asked
him a few questions about how he’d been captured and so on and he answered.
Everything was straight. He showed no signs of having been abused. The division
commander told me, well, they capture one or two of these guys every week or so when
they patrol on the canals. Nothing big. There was no great intelligence information to be
extracted from this guy so that was the end of that day. So then I go back in the
helicopter and I took him up to II Corps. General Nghiem was commanding the, what
was it, the ? I guess the or the . I can’t recall now. Division I think, in Binh Dinh, and
he had a big battle going on in An Lao Valley. Two or three of his battalions were
engaged and from where we were at his division—we were at headquarters—you could
hear the artillery. There was a lot of it. Pretty heavy combat going on and he asked Pete
McCloskey if he wanted to go up to one of the forward battalions and see what was going
on for himself and McCloskey demurred about that. He didn’t want to do that. I wanted
to go up there.

LC: I’ll bet you did too. But that sounds exactly right to me.
WL: It was hard for me to do that myself. General Smith really didn’t want me to
do that but this would have been a good excuse.
LC: Well sure. If the congressman wanted to go you would have had to have
gone. He wasn’t interested in going any closer to the frontline.
WL: No. He asked General Nghiem if he had a prisoner and General Nghiem
said—again he looked kind of blank. He said, “No. We haven’t got any yet, at least at
division headquarters we don’t.” So we flew on up to I Corps and we went through the
same drill up there. General—what’s his name? Hien! Hien was commanding the—we
went to Division headquarters. No, excuse me. I take that back, Division headquarters.
Third Division was holding what they called the Rocket Belt, south and west of Da Nang
City. They did this to try to keep the perimeter of Da Nang out beyond the range of the
[rockets]. In other words, to keep the center of Da Nang and the airfield outside the range of the enemy rockets. That’s where we were, in some hills south and west of Da Nang. General Hien had an artillery battery, 105 battery, just outside the division headquarters tent which made conversation a little bit difficult. But he explained to McCloskey his problems of ammunition and supply. He was down to five rounds per tube per day. The Army has what they call the ASR, the available supply rate for artillery, and it’s usually—well, it’s stated in terms of how many rounds you have available for each gun that you have, each Howitzer—we call them tubes—in the force. His allotment was he could not fire more than five rounds per gun per day because of the limited supply of 105 mm ammunition.

LC: This is the Division?
WL: This is in the Division defending Da Nang.
LC: I mean that’s really frightening.
WL: It is! Yeah! There were at least two NVA divisions that had capability of moving against his single division there. Again McCloskey asked if he had a prisoner of war and General Hien said no he didn’t. He doesn’t keep POWs near the division headquarters. If they capture any, why, they send them back to the holding cage and they wind up under military police control. But anyway, so that was our tour. McCloskey had been a Marine, US Marine, and he had been in Vietnam in the Marine Corps. I don’t know what he did. I don’t know if he was Marine infantry or what. But I was a little bit surprised to see his emphasis on prisoners rather than on trying to get a good feel for the tactical situation and for the problems that I hoped that he would take back regarding our desperate logistical situation. I don’t know what he told anybody when he got back home there. I got a nice letter from him thanking me for the trip.

LC: Well that’s nice. But it sounds like he was on a different wavelength.
WL: Yeah. Everybody seemed to be.
LC: Yeah. I was going to ask about the others in the delegation. Was this the House Armed Services Committee or do you know how it was composed?
WL: I think it must have been the House Armed Services Committee. Let’s see.

There was a heavy hitter from State that brought them over. What’s that guy? He died
about two years ago. I think he was University of California. Oh shoot. I can’t think of his name. I got it in the book.

LC: Oh okay. Well, we can check then.

WL: But he was their escort and I can remember some very unpleasant comments that—we had a meeting in the embassy around a long table. The ambassador was there and the DCM, couple of other folks. I think it was probably Frank Snepp gave them the intelligence briefing. I did not. They didn’t ask me to give them intelligence briefing so I didn’t. But Snepp gave it to them and Abzug was very unpleasant and caustic and argumentative.

LC: Do you remember some of the comments that she made or what was she driving at?

WL: Oh she was driving at the abuses that the South Vietnamese government had perpetrated against political prisoners. It’s all fiction but that didn’t matter. So, I think they took her down to the main [jail]. What was the name of that prison? There’s a big prison in the center of Saigon. I went to it when I was with a POW outfit many years later. But I know that they gave her a tour of the prison so she could see the conditions under which the prisoners were being kept. It wasn’t a resort. The prison was a prison, but shucks—

LC: Well she’s from New York, you know. One wonders whether she’d ever been to Sing Sing. I mean it’s not a very pleasant place either. But this whole visit and the kinds of attitudes that you saw brought with you by the Congress people makes clear that the divide between thinking in Washington and thinking on the ground in Saigon, there was an abyss there.

WL: Yeah. It was about 180 degrees out of phase, that’s for sure.

LC: Right. It doesn’t sound as if—well, their interest in political prisoners, what did you attribute that to or did you have a sense of what they were driving at? Were they trying to indict the South Vietnamese government or the American support?

WL: I’d have to be a psychologist to figure that one out.

LC: Well that’s true. You’re just an old infantry guy, right?

WL: Yeah. They were looking for a way out saying, “Well, we didn’t support them because they didn’t deserve it because they were worse than the Communists.”
don’t know what they were driving at but they never got the point, I think, that we were there for a real genuine purpose. We had made commitments and it was the United States’ honor was at stake. They never thought of it though in those terms the way we were thinking of it. Now maybe I’m crazy, but I thought that the United States had made a commitment and I think we proved it by allowing the war—by keeping sending our soldiers over there and getting so many of them killed. I think there was a commitment that was proven there. They never seemed to—they didn’t look at it in those terms. They looked at it as a way—they looked for a reason to get out. I believe that was it. And some of them may have genuinely been concerned about the welfare of a VC operative that was captured. I can’t imagine why though, anymore than I can imagine why they’re saying the same things about the Iraq War. Similar in that sense anyway to me.

LC: The concern now about detainees?

WL: Well yeah, about detainees, about torture. This crazy bill that they have now about outlawing torture. Torture has been outlawed in the United States—manual for court-martial for many, many years and it’s part of our system. We don’t torture. But now they want to pass a new act to try to codify even what is torture. There’s no common sense involved in this at all.

LC: Do you, Bill, have any concerns that, for example, contractors who aren’t subject to the UCC (UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice)) or the code of military justice or really anything in the way of military regulations that they might be using that fact to kind of step outside—?

WL: I don’t believe that’s true or should happen because when they are awarded the contract there are rules and regulations that are built into the contract about how they’re supposed to operate. They are supervised by contracting officers so I don’t think there are any loopholes.

LC: So there is a chain of responsibility back to the Pentagon even for the people who are hired who are not serving, they’re not commissioned in any way.

WL: Yeah. That’s right. I don’t know. There may be contractors that are doing, that are controlling interrogations but I don’t believe it. Do you know? Have you heard of anything like that?
LC: Not in any degree of specificity. This is what worries me, I mean, just as a
citizen about these allegations that—
WL: No. I think there may be some contract employees of the CIA that are doing
it. But they’re contract employees and they’re governed by the same rules and
regulations that govern a federal employee of the CIA.
LC: The thing that worries me about this—and I’d be interested in your take on
it—is that it opens up whole new areas for our enemies, the enemies of the United States,
to seize, you know, individual servicemen and women and do whatever they want to
them.
WL: Well, my only rejoinder to that is they do it anyway.
LC: I’m afraid that’s true.
WL: It’s not going to give them any more encouragement than they already have.
LC: Well yes. The beheadings and so on that we’ve seen over the past couple of
years.
WL: Look at the way the North Vietnamese treated our prisoners in North
Vietnam. They didn’t do that in retaliation to anything we did to their folks. They just
did it.
LC: That’s right. Just because they could.
WL: Yeah, because they could and because they felt like it and because some of
them, obviously, were sadists. They enjoyed seeing people suffer. I’m sure we’ve got
some Americans like that. But boy if they show up in the Army, find them, why, they’re
out. We don’t keep sadists around just for—
LC: Right. That’s not how the, you know, it’s a system. There’s a big system
here. Well, it’s interesting as you point out that there’s sort of nothing new under the sun
in a way.
WL: No. When I was G2 of Division, I may have mentioned, I came across an
incident of torture and I stopped it immediately. I would do it anytime. But I don’t stop
people from doing their job as interrogators. Our interrogators go through a pretty
rigorous and good training school, training system, to become interrogators. They don’t
go into this thing cold. They know what they’re doing just like good police detectives do.
They don’t have to use torture. Torture is an unusual—and again to try to define it and to
pass a new law about it just complicates the problem that a good interrogator faces. You’ve got to continually looking over his shoulder to see if he’s doing the thing right or not and perhaps checking with the general consul to see whether he’s within the parameters of the statute and I think it’s ridiculous.

LC: Well, this is kind of an interesting link back to, not only Vietnam on your first tour, but as you’ve mentioned Vietnam your second tour where you had elected officials who were concentrating on how we might be mistreating or our allies might be mistreating the enemy. It seems that that overshadowed their interest in whether the United States ought to continue to provide military assistance to South Vietnam.

WL: Yeah. I think we were trying to impress upon them the critical situation that we were facing. I don’t use the word critical without good reason. I was trying to impress upon them that fact and if they didn’t do something rapidly we were going to be defeated there.

LC: Bill, was there any role being played in this, as far as you could tell, by the attack that was developing from the summer of 1974 on President Nixon? Of course by, you know, January, February of ’75 he’s in a very weakened position. In fact I think he’d already resigned, did he not?

WL: Yes.

LC: I guess in the August of ’74, if I’m not mistaken. So, I’m looking Millicent Fenwick, Bella Abzug, were definitely Democrats. I don’t know about Pete McCloskey.

WL: McCloskey I believe was Republican.

LC: But I mean this faction, this group, in the US Congress was riding high, if you want. A president had just resigned. I wonder if you felt that kind of imbalance that they were kind of, I don’t know, appropriating more power to themselves than really they were entitled to.

WL: Well, I couldn’t say that because after all the House of Representatives makes the appropriations so they had every right to do that. I just had wished that they had looked at the picture as it really was rather than to search for reasons to terminate the aid. That was the main thing.

LC: Did Bella Abzug, for example, ever get out of Saigon? Do you know?
WL: So far as I know, no. So far as I know she refused to go to the display of enemy materiel. She only went, as far as I know, to the prison to inspect the conditions under which so called political prisoners—now, that’s another term that was much abused. These people that were there were enemy operatives. They were intelligence or they were operators or they were fighters and that’s why they were there.

LC: I haven’t checked into this but my guess would be that if they were not being held at a military prison they were being held because they had broken some law of the South Vietnamese.

WL: Yeah. They had laws about sedition.

LC: Sure. That would be my guess. I haven’t actually researched the issue but I would guess that they did.

WL: In the summer of ’74, I don’t know if I mentioned this, but we got a new—I had an additional job by that time. I don’t know if I mentioned this.

LC: Go ahead and tell us Bill.

WL: In the summer of ’74, and I can’t remember exactly the dates, General Maglione, Brigadier General Maglione, who was a deputy defense attaché was reassigned to Washington. He was replaced by another Air Force brigadier general, Brigadier General Baughn, B-a-u-g-h-n, a very good officer. But when he came in and he looked over the situation and particularly the situation in the Vietnamese Air Force, VNAF, he decided that he wanted to spend all of his efforts, all of his time, in trying to bring up the capabilities of the Vietnamese Air Force. So he told General Smith this and he said that he, General Baughn, would like to be relieved of the responsibility that he had as being the director of operations for DAO. So General Smith agreed. So General Smith appointed me to be director of operations as well as chief of intelligence branch. So I was dual-hatted. I had responsibility for a number of things, planning. Then we were beginning our planning for our evacuation. I had a training section that was involved in still sending Vietnamese military officers to the United States for training. We had a rather significant program for that. They were going to schools like Command and General Staff College. Air Force was going to the Air Force schools. They were going to language schools and the infantry school, armor school, and so on. We were doing that so I had a section doing that. Then I had the operation center itself, which was kind
of a companion to my intelligence section with my intelligence situation. On the intelligence side we posted the enemy situation and on the operations side we posted the friendly situation on the maps. So I had all of these additional responsibilities. In addition to that, General Smith told me to be the president of the command mess—that’s the dining room. So I had the responsibilities for the—I had a retired warrant officer as a mess officer and about sixty employees over there to be responsible for.

LC: What was the name of the mess, the command mess?

WL: Called it the command mess.

LC: Who all would have been entitled to privileges?

WL: Only senior officers: colonels, lieutenant colonels, and senior civilians who were authorized. Of course the few generals and visiting generals and folks. It had been—well, it was always called the command mess under MACV. When it was under MACV only colonels and above could eat there, and we lived in a compound in trailers. I lived in a trailer just across the tarmac, not tarmac, across the little open area from the command mess.

LC: So you were in there all the time?

WL: Yeah. I ate all my meals there.

LC: But to be president of it entailed—?

WL: It entailed supervising the mess officer. It wasn’t a heavy job because we had some good Vietnamese employees. But about once a week one of the employees would come with a grievance of one kind or another and I’d have to settle stuff like that.

LC: So was it more or less a headache when it popped up or—?

WL: No. It wasn’t bad. I kind of enjoyed it.

LC: What were they doing for food supplies for the mess? Were they, as it were, living off the economy or did you have some flown in?

WL: Most of the supplies they got in Saigon. Yes. The mess officer—as I say, a retired warrant officer, Army—had a couple of employees that he’d send in Saigon with a truck and pick up the food, pick up the fish, or whatever else they had. I mean it was plenty of good food available in Saigon. We had an excellent cook. Turns out that one of the cooks was a VC.

LC: How did you find that out Bill?
WL: Oh, I found that out I don’t know when. Somebody, one of the people that stayed behind, one of the Vietnamese, wrote letters and told us that so and so had been exposed as VC agent after we left.

LC: Did it surprise you?

WL: No.

LC: Not really.

WL: No, not really.

LC: Of course, you know, he had access to a lot of high-level information like what was for lunch.

WL: Very little. Yeah. That’s right. That’s the kind of thing—what our menus were.

LC: Right. Let me ask a little bit Bill if I can about the operations center. Where was it located?

WL: It was located there right in the basement of the MACV headquarters building that we took over. It was right adjacent to my intelligence section so they were across the hall from each other. The only difference was that my section was behind a guarded door. You needed a combination to get in because it was called a vault. We could use highly classified information in there. In the operations side we couldn’t go above secret. But in my side you could use all kinds of intelligence. Next to my office was my special security office with the cryptographic equipment in it. Incidentally, at that time—well it was early—somewhere around before General Murray left he also made me what they called the SSO. That was another one of my responsibilities. SSO stands for special security officer. When I took over the job I had a major, a captain, Captain Herrington, for example, and about seven enlisted men who were responsible for that special security office. Every major Army headquarters has one. In fact, I had one in the Division too but smaller. They handle the communications intelligence systems. So they’re what they called codeword and they had the equipment back there to send messages in special systems. There were about nine military spaces there out of the fifty that we were authorized at DAO, a pretty good chunk. General Murray asked me if we couldn’t get the Department of the Army, actually the ACSI, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, for the Army was responsible for that whole worldwide system, if we
couldn’t get them to civilianize it. Rather than using enlisted men and two officer spaces there send us civilians so we could use those officer and NCO spaces to beef up the logistical element of DAO. That was our main effort was logistics—to keep the military assistance going for the South Vietnamese. I said, “Well we can find out.” So I sent them a message and asked them if they could send me civilians and I’d send these soldiers home and reassign the officers and General Murray could get some logisticians in to replace them. So they agreed to do that. But I had to agree to be responsible for the SSO. Fortunately, they sent me a couple of very good civilians who knew the system. I didn’t know anything about it. I [shouldn’t] say that. But I didn’t know any of the technical things about it. But I was still going to be the stuckee if anything went wrong.

LC: Did they give you the same numbers of people?
WL: Yes. They gave me the same numbers only civilians.

LC: So you were able to utilize those slots, and again these are the slots that were agreed to in the Paris Accords and afterwards?
WL: That’s right. I don’t remember who came in but a group of logisticians. Probably a couple of majors and lieutenant colonels and some others that General Murray needed.

LC: When did this change take place?
WL: This took place—I would have to look it up. In fact I think I may have sent you a copy of the order that did that. That would have the date on it.

LC: That’s one of the telegrams that you sent us.
WL: Yeah. All I can remember now is that the most important thing is Captain Herrington went over to the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, which was good for them because he was one of the few accomplished Vietnamese linguists that they had in that outfit. They were using interpreters. But Herrington had a good command of Vietnamese and it worked out well. On both ends it was a good deal.

LC: Now, he had been with the special security office?
WL: Yes. He was the deputy. I had a major in charge of it and he was the deputy for that major.

LC: Let me ask, how high tech was the equipment that they were using, given the standards of the time?
WL: I suppose it was the best they had in the Army. It was, by today’s standards, pretty much obsolete, very much obsolete.

LC: But at that time it was would you say on the edge of what was available in terms of—?

WL: Yes. I don’t think there was any—I never heard them say it was obsolete or anything wrong with it. I remember, skipping ahead to ’75. When they left I sent them out—I kept one or two until the last day or so. Then they had to go through a process to demilitarize the equipment. In other words, they had to disable it and to remove classified, anything that was classified about it, and take it with them. And I made sure that everything was done all right because on that last day I went back there in their little office with an ax and I busted everything that I could see that looked like it was electronic just to make sure.

LC: With an ax?

WL: Yes. I had an ax and I just chopped up everything that I could hit with the ax, letting off a little steam at the same time.

LC: I’ll bet that did help a little bit.

WL: Yeah.

LC: Okay. Well let’s take a break there Bill.

WL: Okay.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 15 of 22
January 4, 2006

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Colonel William LeGro. Today is the fourth of January 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bill is speaking by telephone from Virginia. Hi Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Happy 2006.

WL: Same to you. Thank you.

LC: Thank you. Bill, let’s talk about 1974 a little bit more if you don’t mind. This is a period of extraordinary interest and one in which you played a big role in the American side of events. I want to ask about the summer of 1974 and how the office of director of operations came to be given to you on top of your existing duties.

WL: Okay. Well, what happened—I guess you can put it this way. General Murray left in the summer and so did Brigadier General Ralph Maglione, the Air Force brigadier who was General Murray’s deputy, deputy defense attaché. In addition to being the deputy defense attaché he was also director of operations of the operations division of DAO.

LC: Now he left on a routine—?

WL: Just a routine reassignment. General Maglione went back to the Pentagon where he became chief of legislative liaison for the Air Force, as I recall. He was promoted to major general about that time. Perhaps it was his pending promotion that compelled his transfer because that position of deputy was a brigadier general slot. So he went back and he was promoted and became legislative liaison for the Air Force. He was a very personable fellow. He was an Air Force fighter pilot. Great personality. Good to be around. He was replaced by Brigadier General Baughn, also very fine Air Force officer. Quite a different personality than General Maglione but that’s neither here nor there. The Vietnamese Air Force was receiving new aircraft. There was a move afoot to give them a newer version of the F-5. I think it was the F-5E that was coming into the country. They had logistical problems as did the Vietnamese Army because of the shortage of funds and so on. General Baughn decided that he had to spend all of his
energy and time on Vietnamese Air Force matters and he didn’t have time to also
supervise the operations division. So he asked General Smith, who had come in to
replace General Murray, to assign me to be chief of operations division as well as
intelligence branch. Intelligence branch was part of the operations division. So that
meant that I was also responsible not only for the intelligence but for operations which
included keeping track, essentially keeping track of South Vietnamese Armed Forces and
what they were doing. Reporting on their activities and their status, their combat
readiness, and that sort of thing, as well as what we call plans. The plans part of
operations division was responsible for all contingency plans that we had. Of course our
essential contingency plan was planning for our departure whenever that would come and
whether it would be peaceful orderly thing or have to be a rather hurried evacuation. So
we had to plan on that. That was our big plan. Then also we had the training branch
which was responsible for establishing training, not establishing training, but for sending
Vietnamese officers and non-commissioned officers to the United States for military
training. That program of course it started very early under MACV and we continued it.
The Vietnamese armed forces nominated officers to go back to the United States for
training. We sent them to the Command and General Staff College, to the infantry
school, the artillery school, and so on all the way through the—and of course Air Force
officers also went to the United States for flight training and other specialized training.
So we had to do that too. I can’t recall now. I must have had about—I think I gave you
the organization chart but probably had about sixty people involved in that, most of them
civilians. I had about three or four lieutenant colonels and a colonel, O6, under my
supervision for that particular activity.

LC: One other area that you mentioned briefly last time had to do with the
operations center. I think this is of interest because this, if I’m correct, carried forward
the operations center utilized by MACV. Is that right?
WL: Yes.
LC: It was in the same place.
WL: Yes. We inherited all of the MACV facilities. Of course our staff was
much, much smaller than the MACV staff. But we still maintained two large rooms for
briefings of the military situation. One room was the operations center and that had
maps, one-to-fifty thousand scale maps, all around the walls. Three walls were covered with the one-fifty thousand scale maps from floor to ceiling. That included the entire area of South Vietnam: every province, every road, every trail in the entire country was on those maps. So the operations section was responsible for posting on those maps the locations of all South Vietnamese units and where they were, you know, and essentially what they were doing, and receive reports from the field, from ARVN, from the Vietnamese Army, about troop movements and that sort of thing. They kept track of that. We were not advising them on where to put the units but they were reporting to us where they were. That room was—the highest classification that was posted on those maps was probably secret. Then I had what we called a vault. In that room anybody that went in there had to have a classification, a security clearance, with the codeword, what was called codeword access. That is, they had to be cleared for classified documents, information above top secret. That was kept under a combination lock but it mirrored the operations center in its layout. We had the one-to-fifty thousand scale maps again around all—I guess two walls we managed to crowd it in. We kept track of the enemy situation there on that side.

LC: Now, Bill, just out of interest, were there numerous classifications or clearances for access to material above top secret? In other words there were several levels above that?

WL: Several what you called compartmented intelligence is the word that they used. It was compartmented. One compartment was signal intelligence, intelligence derived from intercepts, triangulation, that sort of thing. That was one category of information. That was the primary source of intelligence that we had posted in that intelligence section. There was another category of information that we hardly ever posted. In fact we never did, and that was from the human intelligence side. You needed another special clearance for some of that information. Some human intelligence was not compartmented at all but a little bit of it was. But only very few people, myself and two or three others, had access to that information. We didn’t post that.

LC: You did not post it. Bill, can you give an overview of the kinds of information that might be available to you from what we call HUMINT (human intelligence) sources? Would it be tactical data or would it be more political?
WL: No, it would be tactical. At our level it was. I'm absolutely sure that I was not even given information that the CIA was picking up here and there with their human intelligence systems. They kept that very close hold and although I saw nearly all of their reports of that kind of intelligence I’m sure that I didn’t see all of it, compartmented. There was good reason for them not to distribute that beyond their own circle. You’d get the essential information but you would never find out where it came from.

LC: Right. Source would not be revealed.

WL: It would be protected and the information itself would go through what they called sanitizing to remove anything in the information that would give a clue as to where it came from. So they had to be careful about that. The ARVN, the Vietnamese intelligence system, they had some agents within the Viet Cong structure and within the North Vietnamese structure in the South, that is, COSVN. They had one or two pretty good agents in there. I got that information, whatever they had, from Colonel Lung but he never would reveal where it came from. He had to be careful too because of the sensitivity of that source. That kind of information usually filled in some of the blank spots, gave you a better indication of intentions rather than capabilities perhaps. The big problem, I wouldn’t say big problem. One of the limitations of human intelligence in Vietnam was the timeliness. By the time the agent, the source, was able to get the information into the intelligence system, get his report into Saigon, several weeks might pass before he was able to get the report. By that time, in some cases, the information was so stale that it was no longer of any use. That was the one drawback from the human intelligence system. The other drawback in human intelligence in Vietnam, if you want me to make a couple comments about that, was a lot of the information was from very, very low level agents. They were doing what they were told to do. They were watching trails. In the Delta, for example, they had people who were reporting on boat traffic on the rivers. I’d get a report and it would say, “At two o’clock on the morning of such and such a date a canoe,” or they call them a sampan usually, which was wrong but they used that word, “traveled from one point to another. There were two VC aboard. It appeared that they had a cargo of rice.” That was an intelligence report. Well, it was, in my view, virtually of no value at all. I knew, we all knew, that the Viet Cong were using the canals to move supplies here and there.
LC: That they were eating.

WL: They were eating. Yeah. They were moving ammunition too because they were shooting and so on. So it was no great value. I felt that we were wasting a lot of resources in tracking that sort of stuff and even bothering to report it. The US Air Force had an intelligence, HUMINT system, that was reporting to me there and I told them upfront. I said, “You know, as an Air Force unit you’re telling me about low level Viet Cong logistics in the Delta and I find it of very minimal value at all. I would prefer that the US Air Force use its intelligence resources to report on the SAM systems in Military One, Military Region I. I’d like you to find out where they are and the capabilities of the air defense systems that the North is moving into South Vietnam. I want to know where are the handheld, shoulder-fired missiles.”

LC: Surface-to-air.

WL: “Also, are there any indications that they’re moving their own Air Force south? Is there any aviation traffic coming out of the North flying into the South? Couriers, for example, flying into Tay Ninh? Those are the sorts of things I want to find out about and I would think that the Air Force should concentrate on that.” Well, in fact I sent—I don’t remember how it happened. But I sent a message somehow or other to the Air Force assistant chief of staff intelligence in Washington and he became livid. They really wanted my neck on that one. I was interfering with internal Air Force systems and so on and I had no business doing this and they had a fine system going. They were very, very defensive about it.

LC: Bill, can I ask, did you have any sense—and this is not to denigrate the Air Force effort—but that you were seeing only some of what they were producing rather than all of it?

WL: No. I think I was seeing it all.

LC: Really? Okay.

WL: It was all awfully worthless and I told them that. I said, “You’re wasting my time and you’re wasting your money collecting this stuff.” They really got their backs up on that one.

LC: On the question of development of air defense systems being placed in Military Region I, for example, what would be the best source of information given that
the Air Force wasn’t developing that for you? What would be the best?

Photoreconnaissance?

WL: Reconnaissance was about all we had, although if they were in the human intelligence business I would have expected them to establish their own system, their own base, up in Hue or Quang Tri somewhere and get some people on the ground out there to look at it and give a few real expert opinions on capabilities and movements. Maybe get an agent located inside. All of this is—I wasn’t in the HUMINT business but I figured that they should be trying to do that sort of thing because there was a big blank spot. We didn’t know how far they were going to move these missile systems down. We do know that they moved a lot of anti-aircraft artillery south. It forced the VNAF to fly, when they were flying their mission in Tay Ninh and up in Phuoc Long and Binh Long Province—they’d fly at ten or fifteen thousand feet to avoid—or even higher to avoid the anti-aircraft artillery that the North Vietnamese were moving down. Made their own capabilities very, very inefficient. They missed almost everything they shot at or tried to bomb as far as I could see.

LC: Was that due to the altitude being higher than what they—?

WL: The altitude being very high and they were told, “Don’t lose any airplanes.” It wasn’t that they were cowards or anything. They did the best they could under the circumstances but they didn’t have the aircraft that could survive the air defenses that the North was moving down in there and still be able to replace their losses. That was the thing. You lose an airplane you’re not going to get another one. So that’s the way they fought their air war down there. I just felt that if the US Air Force had an intelligence system they ought to be looking more at the air defense systems rather than at the low level VCs paddling down the canals in the Delta.

LC: Okay, with a couple of bags of rice. Bill I don’t know whether this is something you recall offhand, but I wonder if you found out about the emplacement of SAM sites actually within the borders of South Vietnam at some point in ’74.

WL: Oh yes! We found them in ’73.

LC: In ’73. Can you tell me essentially where they were? I know we’re probably talking about Military Region I but do you have a sense of where?

WL: Yeah. They were at Khe Sanh. They moved them into Khe Sanh.
LC: How many?

WL: Gee I don’t know. We took photos of them and there were at least two or
three separate sites, as I recall. In fact, they attracted the attention of the Four-Party Joint
Military—well no the—what’d they call it? There were two activities going. We had the
Poles, Hungarians, Canadians—

LC: That was kind of the update of the old ICC?

WL: Yeah. It was the International Committee for Control—ICCS (International
Commission for Control and Supervision). Is that what it was?

LC: Supervision and Control? ICSC? Something like that?

WL: Yeah. Something like that, but whatever. ICCS I think. Control and
Supervision. Anyway, we got the photos. That is, DAO asked for photos from USAG.
USAG Air Force took the photos as I recall. I can’t remember now whether this is
before or after the Congress told us we couldn’t fly any more manned aerial
reconnaissance over Vietnam. The timeframe kind of escapes me right now.

LC: So these might have been taken by drone aircraft?

WL: Yeah, by what we call Buffalo Hunter. That was the codeword for the
drones. But they were good photos. It was very clear that they were in South Vietnam.
They’d come over the DMZ and they were located at Khe Sanh. That was reported to the
ICCS. They went up there to look at them and immediately two of their helicopters were
shot down with Canadians aboard.

LC: Right. You mentioned that before.

WL: Yeah. There were two or three—I don’t know how many killed but there
were quite a few casualties. That precipitated the Canadians withdrawal from the ICCS.
They said, “We don’t want any part of this thing and our people killed here.” Anyway,
the whole thing was precipitated by the movement of these SAM missiles into South
Vietnam.

LC: As time went on Bill did you learn about or see photographic evidence of
additional sites elsewhere?

WL: No. I don’t recall any movement south of the DMZ area.

LC: But as you mentioned—
WL: It did have 37 mm anti-aircraft guns and perhaps some 40 mm, I don’t know. I can’t recall what else. Of course they had the 12.7 mm that is equivalent to our fifty caliber machine guns for air defense. So it was pretty formidable array of gun artillery.

LC: What about the shoulder held weapons that you mentioned?

WL: They had those down there too. They got it from the Russians.

LC: Now were those relatively new weapons or had those been available earlier in the ’60s?

WL: They’d been available perhaps for maybe ten years. They were a heat seeking weapon. I think I sent you a photo of one that was used at Tan Son Nhut to shoot down a C-119 gun ship over the airbase. Of course that wasn’t until ’75 but they had them down there.

LC: These were coming from the Soviet Union?

WL: They came from Soviet Union or China.

LC: Okay.

WL: I don’t recall now which.

LC: I’m going to imagine that as head of intelligence you were also trying to keep track of the arms flow into North Vietnamese units both in North Vietnam and those in place in South Vietnam?

WL: Yes, although the movement of equipment into North Vietnam was really not my area of influence at all. I was interested in it, of course. The United States of course responded by—well, that was before the ceasefire. We mined the harbor.

Remember?

LC: Yes.

WL: That was when? In ’72?

LC: Two. Late ’72.

WL: Yeah. Of course then as soon as the ceasefire was in effect, why we went up and removed all the mines. We should have kept them there.

LC: Well I’m going to ask you about that operation because of course that went well into early—well, I guess, let’s see. It went into early ’73. Yeah.

WL: I don’t know how long it took them to remove all those mines but it took them quite a lot.
LC: Was there an intelligence element to that operation as well? I mean we had ships in Hai Phong Harbor.

WL: Well, I didn’t have any take out of that. I think I mentioned the incident in the—was it Spratlys or the Paracels? I mixed up those islands. But I think I told you I had a man aboard a Vietnamese—did I mention that?

LC: I’m not sure that you did. Go ahead and—

WL: You know, I’ve been talking to Jay Veith too. He’s been calling me every once in a while and so I can’t—

LC: Oh he’s working on—yeah.


LC: Yes, I know. I knew that he was.

WL: Yeah. He called me two or three times last week about one thing and another so I get confused—

LC: So you’re getting hammered from every side now. Well, go ahead and if you can recall for us that incident.

WL: I think we’re talking about the Paracels, which are a group of islands between Hainan, China and the coast of Vietnam. Those islands were considered by Vietnam, both North and South for that matter, as part of Vietnam. China, of course, in its imperial ways decided, “No, they’re not. They’ve been Chinese for the last three centuries,” or three hundred centuries, whatever, “so they belong to China.” Well, the Vietnamese Navy decided to make an excursion into the Paracels. I can’t recall now what its real mission was but they did land a few troops on one of the islands. These are hardly more than coral atolls. They’re very small and their only significance is the potential of having some petroleum resources below them or around them.

LC: Right. So they can claim an extension of territorial water beyond, around and beyond, these islands.

WL: Right. It’s kind of a tossup of who they belong to. I don’t know whether there’s been an international decision on it or not but it doesn’t matter. Anyway, there was a Vietnamese, I think it was about the size of a gunboat. I had a small team of people reporting to me from the consul general’s office in Da Nang. I think I mentioned I had a little team of people reporting from all four of the consul generals’ offices. One of
my men from the Da Nang office got permission from the Vietnamese Navy to go aboard
one of their ships to go out to the Paracels to find out what the Vietnamese Navy was
doing. That was part of his job as far as I was concerned. I agreed that that would be a
good idea. So he went out there with the Vietnamese Navy. The Chinese Navy
responded with considerable force, enough so that they captured this boat that my soldier
was on. Not soldier—he was a civilian.

LC: Okay. He was a civilian?
WL: Yeah. He was a civilian and they captured him along with the Vietnamese
sailors and the gunboat itself. They took him to China. I think they took him to Hainan,
maybe to the mainland, I can’t recall. There was quite a minor international incident.

LC: Roughly when did this happen Bill?
WL: Oh shoot.
LC: I would ask you, right?
WL: Yeah. Probably ’74. Probably around the summer of ’74. I think I treated it
in my book somewhere. Too bad they didn’t put an index in my book.

LC: You know I just grabbed it and looked and here I—someone as a labor of
love could go ahead and do that.
WL: I asked them to do that, [military history]. But they said they couldn’t afford
it.
LC: Well, maybe we can drudge up some graduate students who would love to do
that.
WL: Anyway, it was quite an incident.
LC: How did it come out? How long?
WL: Oh he was held for a couple of weeks I think and then they released him. I
don’t remember now how he got home. The details kind of escape me but I do remember
that the embassy was kind of upset with me. Although Ambassador Martin, he didn’t
criticize me on it. A couple of the political officers were kind of upset, “Why did you let
him go on that ship,” so on. I thought it was kind of funny. General, whether it was
Murray or Smith I don’t remember, but he didn’t get too upset about it.

LC: Well they probably, like you, thought there might be some intel value from
making these observations.
WL: Yeah. Our purpose—you never know what you’re going to turn up on one of these things and their purpose was to find out what was going on in the South Vietnamese Navy among other things. That was my real purpose in putting these people in these four areas was to report not just on what they might pick up about the enemy, but what the South Vietnamese military was doing. If the South Vietnamese Navy was going out on an excursion into Chinese waters we ought to know about it. That was the purpose of it.

LC: Bill, do you remember this fellow’s name?

WL: I don’t.

LC: He was not a State Department employee though I’m going to guess.

WL: He was a DAO employee. He belonged to my intelligence branch. Intelligence branch had two main parts to it. One was the current intelligence branch, which ran the center and did all the analysis. The other was collections branch where I had a lieutenant colonel who was commanding that one and he’s the one that these people really belonged to. There were about four of them in each of the consul general’s offices. One chief and about three men to go out with the Vietnamese units and see what was going on. That was their job.

LC: Did you know much about how the operation came to be open to this DAO employee? In other words, did he kind of cultivate the contact with the South Vietnamese Navy such that he garnered the invitation or did it come from higher up? Do you know?

WL: No. It was probably right there at the consul general’s office. The man that I had in charge there was a real aggressive little guy. When I say little he was a former Army intelligence sergeant but he had retired or resigned from the Army. He was a civilian also. He did his best to get into the conference and so on, and we got pretty good cooperation from the consul general up in Da Nang too. That was not always the case. Some of the consul generals objected to us even being there. We were intruding upon their turf and we shouldn’t be there. As I think I mentioned before I had to explain to them that this was by direction of CINCPAC and they told me what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to put my people and what I was supposed to report on and that’s why I was doing it and if they wanted to talk about it well talk to CINCPAC.
LC: Do you remember which of the four offices you had the great difficulty with around this issue of—

WL: It was Military Region III without a doubt. Consul general’s name was Walkinshaw. He didn’t even want my people anywhere near his office. I had to appeal to—I don’t remember if it was Bunker or probably to Wolf Lehman, the DCM, to tell Walkinshaw to back off and that he had to accept my people. I didn’t get a good deal of cooperation from Military Region IV initially either, down in Can Tho, but that got better over time.

LC: Why did it get better? Do you remember?

WL: Well, just because they finally saw that, in the first place, they shouldn’t be fighting the problem with nothing to be gained by making things difficult and to cooperate. Our people did a good job.

LC: Who was the consul general down there? Do you remember?

WL: Terry McNamara.

LC: McNamara. Okay. So he was already there at that point.

WL: I’m not sure. I don’t think he was the first one down there. I think there was someone else that was down there first.

LC: Tom Barnes? I think Tom was only there for a few months.

WL: Yeah. I don’t remember.

LC: A few months maybe.

WL: Military Region II I had Monty Spear, I think was his name. Montcreet Spear with the State Department.

LC: Absolutely.

WL: Anyway, and he was cooperative and I had a good man there in—I’m sorry I can’t remember the name of him.

LC: That’s okay. I think it’s probably in the book. You probably did mention it.

WL: He was cooperative. That was in Nha Trang. I posted one of the men from that team up in Pleiku because that was the alternate headquarters for Military Region II.

LC: Things were certainly happening up there in 1974. Just to clarify, these DAO teams, their primary job was to give you a source of information about South Vietnamese military dispositions and so on?
WL: Yes.

LC: Rather than the enemy.

WL: Right. Their morale—they reported on morale. If they could see evidence
of corruption or so on they would report that. I think it was the people in Military Region
IV that reported on a really egregious incident of some Vietnamese Navy base down in
the Delta that was selling fuel to the VC. I think they were the ones that reported to me
about that one.

LC: Roughly do you know when that happened on the timeline?

WL: Probably in ’73.

LC: Really? What action was taken within the South Vietnamese system? Do
you know?

WL: I think the South Vietnamese Navy took care of that about the same time we
found out about it and removed the people that were involved in it.

LC: So that was solved fairly quickly as far as you know.

WL: Yeah.

LC: You mentioned that the teams’ responsibilities included reporting on morale.
I wonder what you were hearing and what sense you have of that issue with regard to
ground forces, what we call ARVN generally, in ’73 and ’74.

WL: It’s not really good to generalize too much about that.

LC: Okay. What about up north?

WL: Up north I think that the morale was probably not as good as it was in
Military Region III, and again it was spotty. I’ll give an example. The division that the
South Vietnamese had in the Highlands, their morale was not as good as the morale of
the division that was on the coast in Binh Dinh and I think it was all a reflection of the
commander, the commanding general of that division.

LC: Why do you say that?

WL: Well, it was just that the commanding general of the division that was on the
coast was more aggressive. He kept his troops in contact almost continually and he was
fighting and winning battles. Up in the North, or rather in the Highlands, they were
scattered around in regimental size units and just trying to hold their own and were not
faced with the same sort of situation that they were on the coast. It wasn’t as—again,
generalizing could be misleading. There were some very good battles that that division
fought up around Kontum in the Yali Falls area. I remember early on in ’73 they did a
good job up there. But then things went kind of downhill for a while.

LC: This actually points to a larger question that I would like to get your
observations on. The suggestion, from what you said, is that the personalities of the
commanders for South Vietnam had a big impact on the operational efficiency of the
guys they were commanding at the lower levels—

WL: That’s true in every army.

LC: Do you think it is?

WL: Of course.

LC: Okay. How does it play out? I mean you’re an old infantry guy. How did it
play out for you to know who was calling the shots and how that impacted you when you
were, you know, an ammo carrier back in World War II?

WL: Well, I didn’t have a great deal of confidence in my own company
commander. I’ll put it that way.

LC: I think we talked about that. Yeah.

WL: It has an affect on the ability of an infantry unit in the attack more than
anything else. I mean you need to be able to have confidence that the officers and the
senior non-commissioned officers are aggressive and will not hazard the unit
unreasonably. They’ll plan the mission carefully and they’ll give plenty of fire support.
They’ll be in good communication. Everything that is done professionally tends to
reduce the number of casualties and affect the success of the mission. If you get real
professionals in command and people with the guts to carry it through your morale is
good even though you’re in pretty severe danger and hardship. That’s the way I look at it
anyway. There are some Vietnamese commanders that were inspirational to their troops.
General Dao of the Division—well, Division, it was the before it was the—he was
another example of a soldier who led by example and his troops followed him and they
acquitted themselves with great distinction actually.

LC: Now are we talking about the general who led at Xuan Loc?

WL: Yeah. Xuan Loc. Yeah.

LC: Where was he in 1974 before the climactical battle?
WL: His base was at—his division headquarters, as I recall, was at Xuan Loc. He operated up Route 20 and down into what they called Hat Dich Area. He had with him, of course, a brigade of Australians. They didn’t report to him. Of course at the ceasefire they left so he had the whole thing. He had Phuoc Tuy Province and—what is that—Long Khanh? I think Long Khanh Province and over as far as Bien Hoa. When things got tough in some of the other regions like in MR-3 he deployed—I believe that he took one of his regiments into the Iron Triangle, as I recall. That was in ’74. I can’t remember now but Iron Triangle, yeah. May to June ’74. Pretty sure that he had a regiment that made the counterattack in Route 4. I mean in the Iron Triangle.

LC: During 1974.

WL: May to June ’74.

LC: Were there others who come to mind as kind of having that kind of stuffing?

WL: Yeah. General Nghiem up in—what was it – ? I mix up the and Divisions. But the division on the coast was under General Nghiem, N-h-i-e-m. (Editor’s note: Nghiem) He was another inspirational commander who did a very fine job in a very difficult area in Binh Dinh Province.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit about the political side of this. What kind of leadership was President Thieu exerting over the military forces? What was he doing, if anything, that you recall to kind of buck up their performance, either the generals or the guys on the ground?

WL: I don’t know. I wasn’t really included on that. I didn’t have any contact with President Thieu. Colonel Lung did and he would tell me a little bit about meetings with him. I got the impression that General Thieu, excuse me, President Thieu—who had been a general of course—did exert his own personal influence on operations in some of the corps, and perhaps not with very good effect. That is, it might have been better for him to leave some of the decisions up to the corps commander and not interfere with them.

LC: Where have we heard that before?

WL: Yeah. You have heard it.

LC: But actually it’s an interesting point. You had the sense anyway that he may have been kind of trying to reach into military operations.
WL: Also, you know, another thing I don’t think I mentioned before but United States, we were told—initially when we started DAO we were told very specifically by General Murray and he was told very specifically by the commander in chief Pacific, and probably by the Defense Department, that we were no longer advisors. We were not supposed to give any strategic or tactical advice to the Vietnamese. Now of course at the tactical level that was very easy to follow those instructions because we didn’t have the people to do it. We didn’t have people out stationed with the divisions in the corps headquarters or the regiments like we did when MACV was there. We had advisors with every unit down to initially down to battalion level. Later on I think they withdrew the battalion advisors and they had them at regimental level, but that’s beside the point. We didn’t have the people to do that. At the national level we had logisticians at DAO. They were essentially—they were good generals, General Murray and General Smith—but they were not the kind of generals that we had advising Vietnamese corps and operations when we had MACV there. We had combat trained officers doing that. So we were not really equipped to go out and tell General Truong in Military Region I how he should deploy his divisions or what he should do about one thing or another. We didn’t have the people to do that, so we generally followed those principles. However, when we found—I say we, General Murray, we found out that the corps commander up in Military Region II was—I think the accusation was that he was profiting by illegal sales of cinnamon bark from the trees up there and may be involved in some other activities that were not, were irregular. I won’t go into detail about that. But the embassy and DAO agreed that he should be removed from that post. He was commanding Military Region II. I thought at the time, although I couldn’t voice this and if I did it wouldn’t have any affect, that we should not intrude on that either even if we had good reason of thinking that he was corrupt. Because at the same time he was one of the most effective corps commanders that they had in the Army and he understood military operations and he was a very good commander. But anyway we effectively pressured President Thieu enough that he removed General Toan from that post and replaced him by a general who did not do well when the attacks started at Ban Me Thuot.

LC: Now this is General Toan that we’re talking about?

WL: No. That was General—
LC: Who was removed?
WL: General Toan, T-o-a-n. Yeah. He was the one that was removed.
LC: Right. His replacement?
WL: Was general—what was it? Phu or—?
LC: I don’t remember.
WL: I think Phu. P-h-u or T-h—yeah. I think it was Phu. But anyway he—and
of course President Thieu is the one who is credited with ordering the very precipitous
withdrawal of ARVN from Pleiku and Kontum in that very disastrous withdrawal down
Route 7 Bravo. Anyway, the thing developed into a real chaotic situation. I think in
hindsight if they’d left General Toan in command the situation may have been quite
different there at Ban Me Thuot and there wouldn’t have been any disastrous withdrawal
out of Pleiku and Kontum without the adequate preparation as such a thing like that
requires.
LC: When General Toan was removed were also some of his closest subsidiary
advisors, right, were they removed as well?
WL: The staff I don’t recall now what happened to—he probably took some of his
staff with him. He may have taken his deputy with him. I believe that he left his G2 up
there. I don’t know what happened to the G3, whether he went out with General Toan or
not.
LC: But it is a tough situation for someone to come in there, even somebody who
probably is firing on all pistons to come into that situation and take it over because of
course the military situation up there for South Vietnamese forces was not good to begin
with. Bill, let me ask a little bit about your situation down in Saigon. Did you feel that
given the restrictions that you knew you had to operate under that DAO was effectively
providing information to CINCPAC and to Washington? I mean could you tell them
what they wanted to know or what they needed to know?
WL: I think we did. We were dependent upon—there were two aspects of this.
One, my big advantage was I had some of the best intelligence analysts I think in the
country in my intelligence branch, my current intelligence section. If we could be
provided the information we needed we could give a pretty good estimate of what was
happening and what was going to happen. We were good at that. The shortcoming was
really in the collection of information because our systems were being cut back. The Air
Force was doing the best they could, I’m sure, to keep on flying the missions to pick up
the information for us but, again, they were limited. The budgets were cut and they were
denied over flight, over terrain that they should have been able to fly over. So I think all
things considered we were doing a good job. Now, when you say were we providing all
information we should have, if we had been provided with a considerably larger force, a
bunch of people, and I could have put some intelligence folks out with every Vietnamese
division and regiment we would have had a great deal more information. But that was
not in the cards.

LC: Were you getting any kind of signal from CINCPAC or Washington that
although you only had the resources you did they would prefer that they got more out of
it than they were getting?

WL: No.

LC: So they had realized, there was a realization?

WL: Yeah. We were limited in our ability to collect. I had no control over
anybody that was collecting for that matter. I had some influence of course over the,
Detachment K, MI group. But that was human intelligence. I had some influence over
where they take photos. All I had to do was tell USAG Air Force what I wanted and
they responded. They’d send their Buffalo Hunter out to any area that I wanted, and
usually of course our interests were the same. USAG was also interested in the same
thing I was interested in, the J2 over there. So there was no problem there. When it came
to communications intelligence I had direct access to the fellow that was running that in
MACV. He was in the same area that he was when MACV was there. I’m talking about
the NSA (National Security Agency) representative. I had almost daily contact with him
and if I wanted something specific, some particular North Vietnamese unit, I wanted
information on that, why he would accept my request and they’d try to find out what I
wanted. They were all responsive to our requests. It’s just that the resources were
limited. I went out to the field now and then with Colonel Lung and looked at tactical
situations. I couldn’t do that very often because of limitations on transportation.

Actually I wasn’t supposed to be out there because of the security clearances that I had.
LC: Right. Was there any limit on where you were supposed to be in Saigon itself?
WL: No.
LC: You could go anywhere?
WL: Yeah.
LC: Okay. Other people with high clearances that I talked to, and this would be much earlier in the game, had very restricted areas within Saigon where they could be. If they were found beyond those parameters they were in trouble. But it was a different game in ’74, ’75, for sure.
WL: Oh yeah. There wasn’t any— I felt very safe anywhere I went in Saigon. Of course I didn’t go down to the back alleys of Cholon looking for women or anything like that, so I was—
LC: Right. You were keeping your wits about you.
WL: Right. One trip that I made with Lung most clearly was when there was North Vietnamese Army attack at Quang Duc.
LC: How do you spell that Bill?
WL: Q-u-a-n-g D-u-c, and I think the D is a soft D. I think it was Quang Duc. That was at the end of October. The campaign started around the last day of October and lasted until almost the middle of December. The point was that it was on Route 14, as you know that long highway that traverses down the Annamite Range all the way from Quang Nam Province, all the way down into— where does it go by? It ends up down in—
LC: It goes all the way down to Ban Me Thuot and then—
WL: Yeah. Well, it goes into Military Region III. It goes up through Song Be, as I remember. Yeah. It does.
LC: It actually intersects with Route 13.
WL: That’s right. Down south of—
LC: Back in your old stomping grounds from Division 1, back in that area.
WL: Anyway, it’s a long highway and it was very important to the North Vietnamese as a logistical corridor. At Quang Duc they had to divert from Route 14 over into Cambodia because the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, still held a little town
called Kinh Duc, K-i-n D-u-c. (Editor’s note: Kinh Duc) Kinh Duc. Well, anyway, the
North attacked there and captured the little outpost that the South Vietnamese had along
Route 14 there. What was significant about the battle is that this was the last time that
the South Vietnamese were able to make a significant aerial deployment. They deployed
elements of an entire regiment out of Pleiku, as I remember is where it was. They flew
them from Pleiku down to Quang Duc Province into Gia Nghia. That’s G-i-a N-g-h-i-a.
There was an airbase, airfield, down there and these were elements of the ARVN
Division that they flew into there. They had the Regiment and part of the Regiment and
they counter-attacked out of Gia Nghia. As I say, it was the last time because of
logistical shortfalls that the South Vietnamese Army was able to make a significant
deployment by air.

LC: What kind of aircrafts were they using?
WL: C-130s.

LC: All flown by South Vietnamese pilots obviously.
WL: South Vietnamese Air Force. Right. It was a really good operation. I flew
up there with Colonel Lung. I think we flew in a VNAF helicopter up to Gia Nghia and
rode into the little crossroads town of Kinh Duc with one of the regimental commanders
in his jeep and he gave us a little tour of the very small battlefield. There was a lot of
dead there. By this time they were beginning to smell real bad. I remember that part of
it. That smell reminded me of World War II for that matter and also of the experiences
with the Division in Vietnam and it was just smelling so bad. But anyway we toured
that battlefield and drove up the highway a little bit further up. But it was again one of
the successes that the Vietnamese Army was able to pull off when it had the adequate
support.

LC: Air support particularly.
WL: Support and logistics and ammunition.

LC: Right, and mobility. Everything. Everything that the US had not only used
when US troops were there but had trained the South Vietnamese forces to integrate and
apply on the battlefield.

WL: Exactly.

LC: I mean that had been the whole point.
WL: They were good at it. You gave them the stuff they could do it. That was Quang Duc. I think it was a significant operation.

LC: Was its significance greater than the materials utilized? In other words, was the result that the North Vietnamese were continued to be forced into Cambodian territory to move support south?

WL: For a while. In fact, until probably—I don’t recall any more battles up there. The Vietnamese held on to the little village of Kinh Duc and were able to control Highway 14 from there on down. But of course then—when was it—around Christmas of ’74 the North Vietnamese attacked in Phuoc Long Province there at Song Be. Once they got Song Be, Kinh Duc was irrelevant. It was north of there and they cut Route 14 at Song Be there was no point in holding Kinh Duc anymore.

LC: Well, Bill, that’s what I’d liked to talk to you about next time—that battle in Phuoc Long. Okay? Let’s take a break there.

WL: Okay.
Interview with William LeGro
Session 16 of 22
January 18, 2006

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University
continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the eighteenth
of January 2006. I am in Lubbock and the colonel is in Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, I want to ask you if you would to say a bit about the MISTA reports that
you were filing monthly from the DAO’s office. It’s something that we talked about
earlier when you were giving an overview of the efforts that you were putting forward in
terms of reporting. But these MISTA reports took kind of an interesting turn I think in
the middle of 1974 and I wonder if you can talk about that.

WL: Yes. It was about that time we began to see a definite change in the strategy
of the North. I can’t recall right now whether we had any documents from the North that
supported that conclusion. I believe we probably did. If we did they are quoted or at
least referred to in the MISTA of that period. But in any case it became obvious, because
of the level of combat and the attacks we were having, that the North was conducting
against the South that they had adopted a military, they were looking for a military
solution. Not that they weren’t going to continue their propaganda and their political
effort. But they were really concentrating on eliminating the outposts that the ARVN had
along the border and particularly in the North and Quang Tri and Thua Thien Province.
Those were under series of attacks. Some of them had to be abandoned. There were
significant attacks in Tay Ninh along the Saigon River there at a little outpost there. Of
course they already had Loc Ninh. They had occupied Loc Ninh and Binh Long Province
in the ’72 Easter Offensive they had that. So that was a major base that they had
established right there on the Cambodian border and they were using that to support their
attacks in Phuoc Long and Binh Long and right down into Binh Duong Province.

LC: Bill, if you can it might be helpful for listeners to get a sense of why this
change of emphasis in the intelligence material that you were seeing was significant. In
other words, can you talk a little bit about the background of Communist planning
previously that had emphasized political mobilization and working toward the third phase
or the general counter-offensive, that kind of thing?

WL: Well yeah. I guess in the broadest contexts you remember that in the
agreement ending the war that it was concluded that the two sides would develop some
sort of a modus vivendi to come to an agreement to have the two countries join peaceably
into one and that never happened. So when they finally agreed to go to the table, under
pressure from the United States incidentally, the South, the southern government, the
Republic of Vietnam, saw great flaws in the peace agreement to start with and they didn’t
want to sign it but they were pressured into doing it. It was either take that or take
nothing from the United States. I believe that was tacit ultimatum that President Thieu
was delivered, probably by General Haig there around Christmas time of ’72. Anyway,
the North evidently saw that the United States was significantly reducing its support of
the South. They determined that there was no point in them waiting for a political
solution that wasn’t going to happen so they redoubled their efforts to move more troops
down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Not only replacements for their losses from the ’72
Offensive and later on but to send new units down the trail. Of course they didn’t have to
use exclusively their roads in Laos. Because they had the northern part of Quang Tri
Province and had Route 9—it goes across the northern part of Quang Tri Province. They
had all of that and they could develop the logistical system down Route 14, which went
down along the ridges of the Annamite Mountains all the way into the Highlands inside
of South Vietnam. They began building their fuel pipeline, extended that down clear into
the Central Highlands. So in a way all of those developments that we saw convinced us
that they had determined in the Polit Bureau that they were going to launch a major
offensive in the near future. We couldn’t tell in the summer of ’74 exactly when it was
going to happen but we saw all of the indicators that it certainly was. The infiltration rate
was probably the primary indicator that they were going to use their main force. There
was no point in going to the expense of sending thousands of troops out if they were not
going to use them. That was our conclusion. The local CIA guys didn’t believe that.
They told us that they were sending just as many troops home as they were bringing them
down. I asked them to show us the evidence of that and of course they couldn’t do it.
Argument was yes, they were sending some troops north but these were troops that were
so badly wounded or so sick they couldn’t participate in combat any longer. Those were
the people that went north. The rest of them stayed.

LC: Bill, did you get a chance to discuss with some of the CIA station folks the
intelligence that you saw versus what they saw. Were they open about what they were
basing their conclusions on? Not just the data about folks going north but presumably
they had other information as well.

WL: Yes. They were relying a good deal, it seemed to me, on their contacts with
the Hungarians and the Poles that were in the Four-Party Joint Military Commission. Of
course those were Communists and they had a direct pipeline, or at least they were
presumed to have good information from the North and they were passing this along to
the station chief. They were telling him that they were going to reach a political solution
to this. They were going to give United States time to gather its people together and go
home and that they would seek an agreement with the South to end the conflict without
further attacks. We never bought that. I told them that that was fictitious, that there was
no reason for the North to make any concessions to the South because they had the
overwhelming power to impose whatever settlement they wanted. It wasn’t in their
character, in any communist country’s character, to give in when they have the upper
hand. That was my main—I talked to Polgar about that. Frank Snepp was one of the
leading advocates of this infiltration going back north and we argued with him. He came
down and every morning why he would come to our, what we called our boardwalk,
which anybody that had the clearance could go through our current intelligence vault and
talk to the analysts and review the military situation. It was a give and take. We
discussed. We were completely open with him. Of course I had a source that they didn’t
have, as well as they had some sources I didn’t have. My main sounding board of what I
thought and main contributor to our knowledge was from Colonel Lung, the J2 of the
Joint General Staff. Colonel Lung and I met at least twice a week and discussed the
situation and he would tell me what he learned from his sources, a lot of them were
human sources. Also he had some access to, more than we did, to documents and
prisoners of war. So he would fill in what I had in my information and I would pass to
him what we learned mostly from our technical sources, from our communications
intelligence. I’d pass that to him and he’d pass me the other stuff and together we drew
up this picture. Colonel Lung and I saw eye to eye on the situation almost from the first
time I had my first conference with him. I found him to be—of course he was immensely
more experienced than I was not only in intelligence but in order of battle of South
Vietnam. He knew the whole place like the back of his hand and he knew these people
and he had been at the peace talks in Paris. He knew how Communists think and how the
other side viewed their situation. So that was my main input. I know that the station
chief and his outfit had some high level sources in the South Vietnamese government but
I don’t think any of them was as valuable as mine was. Each one of those people that
they talked to I felt had an agenda of their own and Lung didn’t. His only agenda was his
desire to find out what the truth was and to report it to his superiors. I know that he went
to conferences quite frequently with the president. He kind of implied to me that he’d tell
him what he believed but he didn’t always leave the president’s office feeling that he had
made a convincing argument and that the president was going to do what he wanted to do
whether—not regardless of the information but not using the information to its fullest, not
gaining the greatest value out of it. That was just an impression I had. He never said
anything directly like that.

LC: You noted that Frank Snepp would come over fairly often to DAO.

WL: Everyday.

LC: Everyday?

WL: Yes.

WL: Every morning. Every morning about 0800 hours we’d open the—in fact we
had an open door policy for people that had the clearance. Anytime they wanted to come
in. Another person from the embassy who came everyday until he was reassigned was Al
Francis. He was the political/military attaché and he talked directly to Ambassador
Martin. He was a very astute and smart guy. We had a very good relationship with him.
We told him everything we knew. We didn’t hold back anything.

LC: When was he actually rotated out? Do you recall?

WL: Well, I think it was in the summer of ’74 he was assigned to be—and I’m
guessing on this—he was assigned to be the consul general in Military Region I. That
was his job. MR-1 was, you know, from Quang Ngai north, Quang Ngai Province.
Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Thua Tien, and Quang Tri I think were the four—from
memory I think that’s what it was. I could look at the map but not important. That was
Military Region I and he was based in Da Nang and he had also an office north of the Hai
Van Pass in Hue. In fact he invited me up—me and the wife—up to Hue around
Christmas of ’74, it seems to me. Took us out to look at the tombs out west of Hue. The
historic tombs of the Hue Dynasty out there about twenty miles—twenty kilometers west
of Hue. Kind of a spooky trip when it comes right down to it because it was a good deal
of combat activity in those hills west of Hue at that time, but it was interesting. He was a
very good man.

LC: It’s beautiful out there.
WL: Oh yeah.
LC: Bill, I would like to ask a little bit more if I can about the relationship
between the station and your office, DAO. Did you see this kind of lack of alignment in
the views between the two as essentially the difference between civilian analysts looking
at their kind of information, if you will, and military analysts like yourself looking at
primarily military information?
WL: Yeah. Probably. That’s probably a pretty good way to put it. In military
intelligence your principle effort is to find out what the enemy’s capabilities are. When
you make conclusions about that then you can draw some inferences about what his
intentions are from his capabilities. A typical—well maybe typical is not the word I’m
looking for. A characteristic of the attack, at least in the old days, was if the enemy force
was planning an attack he would move his artillery forward so it could support his
infantry as they moved forward from the line of departure. So the military intelligence
folks would be looking for the locations of enemy artillery batteries. If they were up
close to the forward edge of the battle area you could anticipate an attack. If they moved
their artillery rearward and pulled it back, then you could anticipate that they were either
going to just sit there and defend or perhaps even they were going to make a withdrawal
from that particular sector. Those sorts of indicators were always used in a classic sense
to try to determine what the enemy’s intentions were. When you look at, of course that
doesn’t have a great analogy to the situation in Vietnam because there weren’t any
forward edges of the battle area to talk about. But we still looked at indicators and our
strongest indicator as I mentioned before was the level of infiltration, the units that were
moving south. We concluded that they were not moving units south just because the weather was better down there. They were moving them south because they were going to use them. They were not defending terrain so how were they going to use them? Well, they were going to use them in an offensive. That was our conclusion. I think that the other analysts on the other side in the CIA system looked for information in writing or they had agents in high level positions, or at least they attempted to, to really listen in on what the enemy is planning to do. They tried to get information from agents in the enemy’s hierarchy to tell them what they said in their meetings and how they were going to do things and they looked at all of the political indicators. They place a great deal of emphasis—and I’m not saying this is wrong, this is part of the whole picture—but they put more emphasis than we do on the political elements of a situation. We have kind of a different aspect I guess to it because we’re looking more at tactical problems than worldwide strategic indicators, not that those high level indicators are unimportant. They certainly are but I guess we’re a little more practical.

LC: It’s a very interesting distinction; particularly you’re noting that military intelligence. One is trying to establish what is possible, what the capabilities are.

WL: That’s right because it’s up to the military commander to plan for contingencies. He looks upon his S2 or his G2 to tell him what the enemy capabilities are so that he can plan to deal with those capabilities should they be exercised. That’s the G2’s job. The military planner then in the S3, G3 shop, he has to draw up plans to deploy and employ his friendly forces to counter what the G2 says is a possible outcome of what’s going to happen. So they have to position their forces and—not that they move anything but they have a plan so that when something happens they say, “Okay we’ve got plan A. That’s the one we’re going to use for this one.” People make jokes about the Army general staff that planned for an assault, an attack, on the Untied States by Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. Well, of course it’s farfetched. But what if it happened? What if the United States Army and the Navy were not prepared to cope with something like that? Stranger things have happened and so they did have plans. I saw them when I was working in DCOPS (Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans) in the Pentagon. Plans to defend the United States against an attack by United Kingdom. Well, sounds silly but you plan for everything.
LC: I mean just as a historian, it has actually happened.

WL: Well yeah.

LC: It was a while back but I think that this kind of discussion helps illuminate why there might be differences of opinion and also the sources of the thinking behind it.

WL: Another thing I should point out is that the people in military intelligence, they’ve largely been in wars themselves. They worked at intelligence at lower levels. Almost all of my analysts in my shop had been in combat units in Vietnam. They understood what battles are like and how they develop and what happens. So they’re more attuned to that sort of thing. Whereas on the other side, with some notable exceptions, the people had no military, no significant military, experience. So they didn’t talk the same language. They had some people however in the embassy and in the station there that had some good military experience. I’m not putting them down at all but most of them didn’t.

LC: Well, that actually leads on to another question. Could you determine whether there was any difference of opinion within the station itself or did it seem that things were fairly uniform over there?

WL: I know that at least from his book Frank Snepp apparently had some differences of opinion with Mr. Polgar, but it seemed to me that they were all pretty much preaching from the same book. They believed in what they were doing. They didn’t have the ambassador convinced at all times and Snepp thinks that they were playing me off against the CIA, that Ambassador Martin was using me kind of as a foil. I never believed that myself.

LC: Why not?

WL: Well, I just don’t have the—I don’t know. I take things pretty much at face value. I don’t look for conspiracies and the nefarious conduct, although I probably should have but I didn’t.

LC: Bill let me ask you about the pipeline. I think you mentioned this just briefly in our last session, but what was the source of your information in DAO about the construction of the pipeline by NVA forces?

WL: We had at least two different indicators. One, we took photographs. We had the Buffalo Hunter and you could actually see it here and there in the Highlands from the
photos that we took up around Kontum. I think it was a little bit north of Kontum and
west of Kontum. Also the ARVN, the South Vietnamese Army, with their Special Forces
went out and found it and they took pictures on the ground. As I remember they even
took a piece of it out so we had people up on the ground out there that found it. These are
ARVN Special Forces.

LC: Sure. Bill, was this a surprising development to you? I mean we’re beyond
road construction now. We’re talking about, you know, very complicated infrastructural
developments to support—

WL: It wasn’t a surprise.

LC: Was it not?

WL: No because you could assume or conclude that if they were going to run
large convoys of trucks down the so called Ho Chi Minh Trail they were going to need
fuel for them. They couldn’t truck enough fuel down there to keep these convoys
supplied. We had pictures, we had aerial photography, of the so-called trail which they
were developing into a really well maintained road, highway. We had the Buffalo Hunter
pictures of that. We had convoys of fifty, a hundred trucks, almost bumper to bumper
moving down the trail. This of course was not only a development of their capability and
an indicator of what they were going to do. But it was also a graphic example of what
happens when you stop interdicting the trail. In the old days, you know, before the
ceasefire, United States fighter bombers and B-52s and some Special Forces operations
went in and interdicted the trail enough to make large convoys impractical because they
were vulnerable to attack. But once the ceasefire went into effect and United States was
prohibited from overflying Laos, why, there was no impediment to moving these large
forces down on trucks. In the old days the infiltrators had to walk all the way from Vinh
in North Vietnam or over the Mu Gia or the Ban Karai Pass and walk down the trail.
Stop at the binh trams here and there to rest and be fed and so on and then they’d
continue their march. It would take them weeks to get from North Vietnam down into
Nam Bo, down into the southern part. But here they were moving these vehicles. They
could make the trips down there in four or five days. Mike Hardin, my guy who was
following the infiltration, was reporting this and it was being confirmed by the Buffalo
Hunter photographs. We took all of this to be pretty serious. I’m not saying that the CIA ignored it but they didn’t see the imminence that we did of an attack.

LC: Going back to the MISTA report in the summer of 1974, I think it’s actually the June report, that you really drew attention to this very forcefully Bill. Did you get a reaction from any of the receiving posts that you recall?

WL: I can’t remember any. Nobody came back and said, “Hey this is great stuff,” or, “You’re crazy.”

LC: Or, “Hey Bill the situation is changing,” you know. “What can we do?” Nothing like that?

WL: No. Yeah it was interesting. After we started publishing the MISTAs, and I don’t know when it happened, but at this time Al Haig was NATO commander, I can’t remember the dates. Somebody must have shown him a MISTA or something so he sent us a message from wherever he was, Brussels I guess was headquarters, and asked that we put him on the distribution list for the MISTA. There he was over in—naturally he didn’t lose his interest in Vietnam just because he was watching the Fulda Gap.

LC: No. I think he was probably watching quite a bit else in addition; events Washington particularly. But yes I think you’re right. But you understood that he had made a request to get a copy?

WL: Yeah. I got a message from him. Of course we went back a long time.

LC: Well yeah. Did he say, “Hey Bill how are things?”

WL: No he never did that.

LC: Did he not?

WL: We were never very friendly.

LC: Yeah I remember you telling me that. Bill let me ask a little bit about some of the first actions—well, that’s an overstatement—some of the actions in Phuoc Long Province at the end of 1974 that seemed to confirm what you had begun to believe were the enemy’s intentions.

WL: Yeah we can do that, but I’d like to mention before I start that is that there was a major action in the Iron Triangle in the summer of ’74 that may have been—it was really a precursor to that. I covered that in my book too to some extent. It was from around the first week in May—or maybe the middle of May to the first week in June.
The North employed at least two divisions—the —which two divisions? I think the Division and the perhaps in the Iron Triangle. Now to review what the Iron Triangle was there’s this triangular piece of terrain that is formed by the confluence of the Saigon River and the other smaller river that goes past Ben Cat down towards Saigon. At the tip of that triangle—it’s an inverted triangle, picture it that way. At the tip of it, the southern tip, if you place 130 mm cannons, guns, down at the tip of that you could hit Tan Son Nhut Airbase. That’s how close it was to Saigon. Of course the North Vietnamese Army had a lot of 130 mm guns. So that was a serious incursion into the South. They moved these two divisions down there. The South had to respond with two divisions and later moved in the Division, General Do, to counter that and the battle went on for about three weeks. Quite a few casualties. When I was in the Division there we had a major engagement on the northern end of the Iron Triangle also.

LC: Right. This was an area you knew.

WL: Yeah. I knew it quite well. The northern edge of it was called the Long Nguyen Secret Zone that was by Lai Khe.

LC: Where did that name come from?

WL: Long Nguyen?

LC: Yeah. You’ve mentioned it before.

WL: That was I think a very famous, in history, a Vietnamese general. I believe his name was Long Nguyen but I’m not sure of that. I’m just guessing.

LC: Long Nguyen Secret Zone.

WL: Long, L-o-n-g, and of course Nguyen the common Vietnamese name.

LC: Sure. Was that terminology something inherited from the French or was that Viet Minh area terminology—the secret zone part—do you know?

WL: Secret zone? Those were way back into the French, yeah, the Viet Minh War in the South. We had what they called War Zone C and War Zone D. C was the large area. It included Binh Long, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh. The boundary between C and D was Route 13, which went from Saigon up into Cambodia past Loc Ninh. So War Zone C was on the west side of 13. War Zone D was on the east side. These were names given I believe by the French. They fought the Viet Minh and later the VC in those two areas.
LC: So the Long Nguyen Secret Zone was on—?
WL: It was in War Zone C, the southern part of War Zone C.
LC: Okay. Essentially it was the northern edge of the Iron Triangle?
WL: The northern edge of the Iron Triangle. Any case there was a big battle there and the South had to deploy the, or parts of the Division, in order to defeat the attack. Eventually the North Vietnamese Army withdrew back further North from where they’d started. An interesting footnote to this, we had a very good British military attaché. His name was Wattenbach. Great name for a Brit.
LC: Any idea how to spell it?
WL: Yeah. W-a-t-t-e-n-b-a-c-h. A Saxon name.
LC: I was going to say. Sort of like the House of Hanover. Anyway, go ahead.
WL: He was a great guy. Tall, good looking, he had a very nice family. He had his family there. He had two cute little kids about eight or nine years old and a very nice wife. I had dinner at his quarters one night I remember. Anyway, he took his family on a picnic one day up Route 13. He went just south of Ben Cat and they spread a blanket out beside the road under some trees and had a picnic and about two or three hundred yards south of where he had the picnic was an ARVN 105 mm Howitzer battery. He said it was kind of disturbing during lunch because the battery was firing over their heads into the Iron Triangle. He had gone up there to see what was going on in the Iron Triangle and decided to take his family along for a picnic.
LC: Make a party out of it.
WL: Yeah. I thought that was funny.
LC: It is pretty funny.
WL: Typically British, at least in my experience with British officers that’s the kind of things they would do. I wouldn’t have.
LC: That never occurred to you, huh Bill?
WL: I don’t like continuous artillery fire over my head unless I have a good relationship with the battery commander.
LC: Well you have some experience with artillery that might vary from what Mr. Wattenbach had experienced.
WL: It was a significant battle. Now see, that was in the summer of ’74. That
didn’t sound to me like they were looking for a political conclusion to the war. The other
thing, you mentioned the Phuoc Long thing. Now that was again they brought two
divisions against the little town of Phuoc Long. Sometimes on some maps it’s just called
Song Be, S-o-n-g B-e, after the river. The Song Be River begins up there and it comes on
down and joins the Quang Ngai and Saigon River there right by Saigon. Anyway, it’s a
small town and there were only two or three battalions of—there were a couple of Ranger
battalions and a regional forces unit up there and there was no way that they could
withstand the attack of two Vietnamese divisions with tanks. In fact we got reports that
the ARVN were using our M82 anti-tank rocket without any serious effect against the
North Vietnamese tanks that were running through the town of Song Be. Apparently
they were too close for the projectile to arm itself before it hit the tank. ARVN soldiers
were climbing up on the tanks and dropping grenades down the hatches if they found a
hatch open to fight. They put on a very good battle, a very good defense, but they were
overwhelmed. President Thieu decided that they would deploy the airborne Ranger
battalion, which was part of the general reserve up there. They did that and they lost
almost all of those guys. They had to go up there in helicopters and there was no way to
get there by land because the Vietnamese had it blocked off. Couldn’t get there except
by air and they squandered in my view this really gallant and well trained airborne
infantry outfit, airborne Ranger outfit, up there. There were streams of refugees that
came down. This was just before Christmas of ’74. Streams of refugees. Most of the
people up there were Rhade, I don’t know recall all the tribes that they were but these
were hill people, what the French called Montagnard. They came streaming out of there
down into Saigon.

LC: All the way to Saigon?

WL: Yeah.

LC: They just kept coming. I mean they just kept walking?

WL: A lot of them walked all the way down to Saigon. It was very sad.

LC: Bill can you talk a little bit more about first of all the R-82s? You said that
the range—

WL: Our anti-tank rocket?
LC: Yes. They were being fired at a range that was too close to them to be armed?

WL: Yeah, probably about twenty-five or thirty yards. They were right by the edge.

LC: Wow.

WL: There were a lot of complaints about it. In fact, most US Army soldiers don’t have any confidence in that and I think it’s not any longer in the inventory. It was not a very good weapon for tanks. The RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) that the Communists use were far superior. But we never adapted that particular system, the American Army.

LC: Bill can you tell a little bit about the tactics that ARVN was using to try to defend Phuoc Long City? Were they trying to save the airfield first or what was the response like?

WL: Yeah. There’s a small airfield up there. It was just a strip though. That wasn’t too important. I guess the importance was more political in one sense. It was the capital of Phuoc Long Province, it was the province capital. Thus far we hadn’t lost any province capitals. We still had—Quang Tri City? I think we still had Quang Tri City by that time. So it was more symbolic. It had symbolic value anyway. It was a province capital. The other part of it was that it was just more terrain and another place to position a division for an eventual assault on Route 14 into Saigon. So it was an important piece of terrain from that standpoint, a tactical standpoint.

LC: You talked about the airborne paratroops, the Ranger battalion that was moved in. Bill can you tell me and those who might not have access to your book a little bit about how they were meant to be deployed and what the thought was in terms of dropping them where they were dropped and what their fate was?

WL: Well, they had a capability to do anything that probably a regiment could handle because they were so well trained and so motivated. That wasn’t a good place to put them, in my view.

LC: Because of the overwhelming NVA strength?

WL: Yeah! There was no chance at this time they were going to be able to defend Song Be or Phuoc Long Province with a battalion no matter how well trained and how
motivated they were going to be lost. The ARVN didn’t have any significant strategic reserve anyway.

LC: Right. This was it in a way.

WL: Yeah. They should have really determined from the outset that they were going to lose that when you put in two divisions and the ARVN had no way of moving a division in there. They did try. They moved part of the Division north. But they immediately ran into a block probably somewhere around Chon Thanh on their way north. They were going to bring them up to reinforce An Loc because that was threatened by the attack on Song Be.

LC: But the NVA had, if I’m understanding correctly, had pre-positioned blocking forces anticipating exactly these overland moves?

WL: Yes. Right. They could do that.

LC: These blocking forces would have had to have been in some strength.

WL: Yes. They were probably regimental size.

LC: Okay. Any idea whether they also had tanks or were the tanks reserved for the main push which was at Phuoc Long?

WL: I don’t recall seeing any tanks reported south of Song Be right away. Not until later.

LC: Okay. Yes it comes later.

WL: I guess the main point that I’ve made when I talk about this is that the North Vietnamese had a significant advantage because they were on the attack and they could select where they were going to mass their force and attack and reduce and overwhelm virtually any ARVN position they wanted to. If they decided that they were going to attack they could do it because they could put an overwhelming force against a static position that was very difficult to reinforce. The ARVN didn’t have the strategic mobility or even tactical mobility to reinforce a threatened area. The last time they did it successfully to reinforce an area was up there in—what’s the name of it? Quang Duc. In Quang Duc Province. They were able to do that as I mentioned earlier. They moved elements of a division, little bit more than a regiment, to drive the enemy out of Kinh Duc and Quang Duc Province. They could move by air but by this time, by the summer and fall, winter, of ’74, they didn’t have that capability any longer. They didn’t have
airplanes that would fly. They didn’t have the fuel to put in them. The enemy could
select its targets and they did. They reduced all of the outposts in the Highlands and in
the North. Then the ARVN was driven back into enclaves that again were vulnerable, as
happened later as you remember at Ban Me Thuot. They decided to take Ban Me Thuot. ARVN had one regiment there and they attacked with two divisions I guess it was, two
divisions against a regiment.

    LC: Yeah. You know how it’s going to come out.

    WL: Of course it was possible. Had the ARVN had good air support and tactical
mobility they could have moved a division in there, but what division would they use?
They didn’t have any spare divisions. All of the divisions were occupied. In that Ban
Me Thuot situation they had a division. ARVN had a division on the coast that under
erlier circumstances would have been able to move along Route 19, I guess it is, into
Ban Me Thuot or into Pleiku. But they couldn’t do it because that division was tied down
fighting in Binh Dinh. So they just didn’t have the ability to defend the entire country.
That’s why come people advocated truncation. They wanted to give the North everything
north of the Highlands. Let them have it and regroup in the South and hold it. But it was
even too late to do that. Even if they had tried they—essentially that’s what they tried
when they pulled all of the divisions out of Quang Tri and Quang Nam and Quang Ngai.
They both pulled those divisions down to the South to try to defend—they were going to
try to defend from Nha Trang south. But by that time Nha Trang was threatened so it
kept getting smaller and smaller.

    LC: Well Bill you know very well that popularly there’s a big knock on ARVN
that they wouldn’t fight. I know from what you’ve said and from what you’ve written
that you don’t subscribe to that. But how do you counter that kind of popular
understanding of why South Vietnam was unable to defend itself and in fact by the spring
of ’75 did collapse?

    WL: The only real good way to counter it is to show them the casualty statistics.
Show them how long for instance the airborne division held out on that ridge up there in
Quang Nam, how they destroyed elements, I mean significant elements, of the North
Vietnamese Division that went against it. The only reason they had to withdraw is
because they ran out of ammunition and fuel and the casualties were so heavy that they
had to pull back and take care of the casualties too. You can show statistics on casualties.
I don’t know. Look at our reports and we detail all of the major battles that were going
on. There were some debacles. I don’t try to disguise them or to hide them. The
withdrawal from the Highlands was very poorly planned. In fact it was hardly planned at
all. The division was just given orders to pull out so pull out they did. They were
virtually destroyed. Very few of them ever got to the coast. If it weren’t for the gallant
operations of three or four Ranger battalions no one would have made it to the coast.
That withdrawal along Route 7 Bravo was one of the saddest engagements in the entire
war. I think you’ve read about that.

LC: Yes sir.
WL: That was one thing that I couldn’t see myself. I had no way of getting up
there to look at it. I was not able to fly up there. Air America wouldn’t fly up there and I
don’t blame them. But I had a man reporting to me about that. He came in to see me
everyday because he was flying up there. That was Mike Marriott. He was a television
cameraman reporter for CBS I believe then. Mike was an Australian and he was a good
friend of two or three of my analysts. They were drinking buddies I think. Anyway he
managed to—I don’t know how he got his helicopter or who he was flying with.
Probably VNAF. He might have paid them off or something; got them to fly him over
the routes and he came back and he told us all what he saw on that evacuation.

LC: On 7B?
WL: Yes.
LC: Out toward Tuy Hoa?
WL: Let’s see, where did it begin? I can’t remember the names of the places
now. But they actually got on to 7B somewhere east of Pleiku and on down from there
through the coast. I guess it ended at Tuy Hoa.
LC: I think for someone who has your book, Bill, they’ll see a very good map of
this provided in the book. But Mike was a stringer for CBS, do you think?
WL: I think he was an employee.
LC: Oh was he? Okay.
WL: Yeah. He worked for them for a long time with a very good—lot of guts—
lot of places that other people couldn’t or wouldn’t go.
LC: Just to clarify how would you spell his last name? Was it Marriott like the hotels or—?
WL: Yeah. Like the hotel.
LC: Like the hotel. Okay. Was he somebody that you had known before early '75 or he was kind of hanging around?
WL: No. I had known him before. As I say apparently—I don’t remember which one of my—probably it was Doug Durth. One of my analysts for Military Region II was Douglas Durth. I think he was the one that was the best friend of Mike Marriott and that’s why we got this good information. It was nothing I did.
LC: But he would make his reconnaissance however he was doing that and then he would come in and talk to the analysts?
WL: Yeah. He’d come in and talk to them and they’d send him up to me and I talked to him, oh, two or three times I guess during that withdrawal.
LC: What was his demeanor? Do you remember Bill?
WL: He was a tough guy. What do you mean demeanor?
LC: I wonder if he was kind of—I mean he had to be a tough guy.
WL: Oh he was very sympathetic to the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese cause.
LC: Was he kind of shaken up though by what he was seeing? I mean this was a pretty disastrous—
WL: You couldn’t shake Mike up much. He was a good troop. He married a Vietnamese.
LC: He was Australian?
WL: Yes. He was an Australian by birth. I’m pretty sure he was American citizen. He covered wars more than the Vietnam War. I believe later on he went to the Middle East. I don’t know where he was.
LC: Did you ever catch up with him again?
WL: Oh yeah. I met him when I moved back here to Virginia. He’s done very well. Lives in McLean I think. I was looking at my map here. Seven B does start in Pleiku and it goes down through—the place I couldn’t remember was Cheo Reo. Which is the Montagnard name also called Hau Bon. Hau Bon is spelled H-a-u B-as in Bravo-o-n.
LC: Is that a pass?
WL: That’s a little village and it’s where Route 487 intersects Route 7 Bravo. If
you don’t know about that road it was essentially a logging road.
LC: Now is this 487 we’re talking about or 7B?
WL: Seven B. It was in disuse for many years. There were many streams up in
that territory and the bridges were down, destroyed, or gone for some reason or another.
There were a lot of fords over those little streams. Some of them were passable. Others
were very difficult to move across. The North Vietnamese Army pursued this exodus
down 7B and the Ranger battalions got in behind the people that were trying to move
down into Tuy Hoa and defended here and there along the way.
LC: Would that be both ARVN, regular ARVN forces and—
WL: Regular ARVN.
LC: —refugees along with them?
WL: They were mixed up with refugees and some regular soldiers out of the
division up there, Division. What was it, Division I guess I it was. Yeah. Twenty-
second was on the coast and was up in the Highlands.
LC: So there’s this kind of mass movement down 7B?
WL: Pursued by the—
LC: Followed by the NVA.
WL: Yeah. The NVA Division.
LC: You said that the, I’m sorry, Rangers, ARVN Rangers, were able to get in
behind NVA, is that accurate?
WL: They didn’t get behind them. They got behind the people that were trying to
get down to Tuy Hoa.
LC: In other words in the middle.
WL: Yeah. They tried to defend and keep the Division from overrunning them.
LC: Their losses, do you have a sense of that?
WL: They were very heavy but I don’t recall now how many people were killed.
But a lot of people, a lot of civilians, were killed.
LC: That’s pretty daring work to try to get in the middle of that to defend.
WL: They give an excellent account of themselves. Over time the Ranger battalions took some pretty bad—got some pretty bad press because—from time to time they deserved it too. They were kind of a rough group and they did a lot of pillaging of their friendlies and so on along the way. But under good leadership, and they had some very good leadership from time to time. They were excellent fighting battalions. They were criticized for, you know, stealing chickens and pigs and stuff like that. They operated a lot in the Highlands and were not really well disciplined troops when they got involved with civilians.

LC: Would that be particularly the Montagnard populations?

WL: Probably yes. Yes. Mostly against the Montagnards, but overall they were, most of the time they were excellent fighters.

LC: Before I move any further along Bill I want to ask you a little bit if I can about the Central Office for South Vietnam and what the intelligence was that you had as to its likely location in late ’74, early ’75, or its complexes. This is sort of a red herring because it probably wasn’t just one place. But was identification of COSVN complexes something that you were focusing on?

WL: Well we were very interested in it and we did get, I’m sure—I can’t recall specifically now—but plenty of communications intelligence about where they were from time to time. It was almost of academic interest because we had no way to do anything about it anyway. I believe at this time that the main COSVN headquarters was just a little bit southwest of Loc Ninh City in that wooded area there near what we called Fishhook. It was kind of a, what do you call it? It was a long peninsula of Cambodia that stretches down into Tay Ninh Province alongside the Saigon River. That’s the source of the Saigon River is right in that terrain there just southwest of Loc Ninh. I think that’s where the main COSVN headquarters was. Other parts of it were in Cambodia. There’s no doubt about that, around Snuol. That’s where I think it was. Had they been there while we were there, why, they would have been subject to some pretty heavy air attacks. The VNAF tried to hit them and they tried to hit in and around Loc Ninh and they conducted a major, in their terms anyway, a major air offensive against North Vietnamese headquarters installations and logistics installations in Binh Long and Tay Ninh. I can’t remember now when that was. It was probably in the summer of ’74.
Again I talked to it about it in the book and I can’t remember now exactly when all those
air attacks, but I give it quite a bit of treatment. But the problem was that they were using
relatively light aircraft. They were using their A-1s. I say relatively light. I think they
would carry a thousand pound bombs and the A-37. Again that one maybe carried five
hundred pounds. They were releasing the bombs at fairly high altitude and we always
had great doubt that they had done any significant damage to their targets if they’d hit
them at all.

LC: Because they were at—

WL: At high altitude and the targets were heavily defended by anti-aircraft.

That’s what kept them up high. So despite the fact that they conducted what you might
call air offensive it didn’t have a great deal of effect.

LC: Bill, you mentioned earlier the British military attaché and it makes me
wonder whether you had contact with or knew of other countries that had military
attachés and were essentially doing observer work.

WL: I had very little contact with them. I think mainly because—maybe I didn’t
explain this, but we had in DAO the traditional military attaché element also. Now,
General Murray and General Smith who followed him were called the defense attaché.
They were major generals. But we had stationed at the embassy downtown the
traditional military attaché element. There was an Army colonel. I can’t recall his name
right now. He was a good man. He had a warrant officer and two or three majors or
lieutenant colonels. They got around the country quite a bit. We got some of their
reports. I guess we got all of their reports. They were reporting essentially on ARVN
activities. They were accredited as attachés to the ARVN. We also had an air attaché. I
didn’t see much of him either. But those were the people that made the contacts with the
foreign military attachés, on the diplomatic level. These are the people that put on their
dress uniforms and went to cocktail parties and things like that.

LC: That wasn’t what Bill was doing.

WL: That’s not what I was doing. There’s something wrong with that. I would
have liked to be doing some of that too.

LC: You were otherwise—
WL: That was not my mission. I remember I did meet the French attaché. He
had a party at his mission headquarters, gee, just before—it must have been in April ’75.
Had a little conversation with him. I saw those attachés up at the graduation of the
military academy up in Dalat. Incidentally I sent my slides to you. Not to you directly—
but what’s her name?

LC: Mary Saffell.


LC: Okay good.

WL: There’s a lot of photos of the graduation exercises up in Dalat.

LC: Well, Bill, while we’re talking about Dalat and you having at least been up
there in the early part of ’75 for the graduation ceremony. I wonder if I can ask you a
little bit about the TRIGA (training, research, isotopes, general atomics) reactor that the
US had given to South Vietnam way back, way back, way back in, I don’t know, 1963 I
think.

WL: Yeah. I remember something about that. I didn’t get involved in it but we
did give them I guess it was a training or a research reactor. I think that’s what we called
it.

LC: Yes it was. Yeah.

WL: I think it was for their university up there I suppose.

LC: Yeah. They had a research institute anyway. I don’t know whether it was
specifically affiliated with the university. Probably was.

WL: Yeah. I’m sorry I can’t speak to that. I heard people talking about it and I
believe they made an attempt to get it out and maybe they didn’t get it out. I don’t know.

LC: I think they did actually try to do what they called an emergency
dercommissioning, which means get the important bits out. But you didn’t hear anything
about that?

WL: I didn’t get involved in it. I didn’t keep track of it. The only thing that I had
of any significant material value that we lost was the satellite dish. This upset a lot of
people because our communication system in Vietnam was handled by a contractor.
Darn it I can’t remember the name of that outfit. There was a good—

LC: Was it a US firm?
WL: US, yeah. It was a US firm. Of course with the ceasefire we, that is, all United States logistical and signal elements had to leave. So we had to rely on contractors for all of our engineer support. That is, buildings and roads and that sort. We had Pacific Architecture and Engineers I think was the main outfit. We had this communications was handled by a contractor. When the Highlands were overrun we lost a major communications link up there. I don’t know the particulars. I can’t recall now. It seems to me we had a cable that went to Clark. But in any case in order to maintain our communications the Army brought in a state of the art, at that time, satellite dish that they put in the tennis court beside our headquarters and with that we could communicate with the States. It was very important. As I remember now, I was told that the Army had only two of these things in its entire inventory in the whole world and we had to leave it behind when we left and that upset a lot of people.

LC: I’ll bet it did. Yeah. That was a give away that they probably didn’t want to have happen. But was it destroyed? Do you know whether demolitions guys had got to it?

WL: I don’t know. They might have destroyed it before they left. I really don’t know.

LC: Interesting. Well I wanted to ask you about that TRIGA reactor to see whether you knew anything about that. Were there other specialized facilities that were of particular concern that had not already been transferred to ARVN? I’m sure the communications—

WL: No. We had transferred a lot of our facilities to the Vietnamese, of course, before we—at ceasefire. For instance, the big installation at Long Binh, which is a big logistical and military headquarters installation. That was transferred to the Vietnamese. They established their Command and General Staff College up there at Long Binh in buildings that we had built. I believed we built them for our own uses and turned them over to the Vietnamese. But I can’t remember any other significant American facilities or equipment that we lost. We got most of it out, anything that was sensitive.

LC: Bill, can I ask you about your own travel? You got up to Dalat in early ’75, something—?
WL: Yeah. It was in February or January '75. General Smith and I were invited
to go to the ceremony. I don’t know if I told you but in early—well maybe in the middle
of '73 I moved my wife over from Clark Airbase. So she lived with me in that trailer that
I had by the command mess and we gave up our quarters at Clark. There was no point in
having them there because I found out very early that I was not going to be able to travel
over to Clark every month to see her. She wasn’t able to travel over to see me. We
traveled, when we did in the first month or so, we tried it. It was a four hour flight from
Tan Son Nhut to Clark on a propeller-driven old DC-6 airplane. It was not very reliable.
It had four engines. I’m glad it had four because a lot of times only three were working.
But anyway we gave up on that so she moved over and brought our dog with her so we
lived in a trailer. Now, she went to Dalat with us with General Smith and his wife and
my wife. We drove on Route 20, which goes past Xuan Loc and on up into the
Highlands, virtually an all day drive. It’s a beautiful drive. We had a picnic lunch at a
little park by a waterfall about halfway up on the way. They gave us a nice little house
for overnight. It was cold, relatively cold that is. There was a fireplace and we had a
fire. We hadn’t seen anything like that since we left the States and went to that
ceremony. Very nice ceremony. There was some enemy activity on the edge of the
parade ground probably two or three thousand meters away. The VC unit or NVA unit
was trying to disrupt things by firing some mortars out that way but that didn’t affect the
ceremony. That was an interesting trip. I hadn’t been to Dalat before. It was the only
time I managed to get up there.

LC: It’s pretty amazing that you could drive up there.
WL: Yeah. In retrospect, thinking about it now, I think it wasn’t a really bright
thing to do.

LC: Maybe you wouldn’t do it again, same circumstances?
WL: Probably not. No. It wasn’t more than three or four weeks after we got back
home that things began to heat up there. There were some attacks along Route 20, so on.
It was generally a quite sector for most of the war however, that part for some reason or
other. Dalat wasn’t heavily contested at all as far as I can recall. It was just kind of
outside the strategic interests of the North to do anything about Dalat.
LC: Yes. Obviously it sits up in the mountains and I think probably there was some decision that they could work around it.

WL: Oh sure. Yeah. You can get to Dalat from Nha Trang. You can drive up a very steep mountain road up to Dalat that way. Route 20 is a lot easier to drive. It’s longer but the slopes, the grades, are more gradual as you drive up there. It’s a rather steep climb out of Nha Trang to get up there.

LC: What vehicle did you have? Do you remember?
WL: We were in a sedan I guess. Yeah. I probably used my sedan as I remember and Mr. Lien was my driver. I think I took him up there. Not too sure. Can’t recall. Maybe ARVN supplied the transportation. It would have been a sedan though.

LC: Did the two of you travel in your car and the general in his own car?
WL: Yes. I think so.

LC: Did you have escorts?
WL: Yes. We had a couple of jeeps along with us. But I can’t remember any kind of an armed escort. I don’t remember if I carried my pistol up there or not. It wouldn’t have made any difference.

LC: Just thinking about it now though I hope you did because it’s kind of worrying to hear about it. Did you get out of Saigon on other occasions between then and April?

WL: In April?

LC: Between January and April?

WL: Yes I did. I drove over to—very close to the end I drove over to Bien Hoa and Long Binh. I can tell you about that briefly I guess. It must have been around the first week of April. I received a phone call from General Chinh. General Chinh and I had worked together when I was on the Army Advisory Group. He was the director of training for the armed forces. He was a lieutenant general. At that time he called me he was the chief of the Army Command and General Staff College at Long Binh, director of that. So he called me and he asked me to come over and see him. So I got Mr. Lien and I drove over there. That’s about an hour’s drive out of Saigon. You cross over the Dong Nai River and on up into Long Binh. I went into his office and had the formality they usually go through in Vietnamese. In those days you’d sit down at their coffee table and
the orderly would bring in a pot of tea and a few cookies or something and we had a little
chat about old times and that sort of thing. Then he pointed to a photograph on his desk.
Did I tell you this before?

LC: No.
WL: It was a picture of his wife and I think he had six children. He said,
“Colonel LeGro, when it comes time I’m going to shoot all of them and kill myself.”
This was pretty surprising announcement I hear sitting there drinking tea and eating
cookies and here he was telling me how he was going to murder his family and kill
himself. I said, “General Chinh, you can’t possibly be serious. You can’t do that.” He
says, “Oh yes. The Communists are going to destroy my family anyway. I’m not going
to let them have them.” I said, “Look, I want you to send me your family and whenever
you’re ready I will make sure that they get taken out of the country and settled in the
United States. Then when you’re ready you can follow and I’ll get you out as well.” So
he agreed to do that. I went back to Saigon and back to my headquarters and when the
time came I got—I don’t know. It was the last day I think. It must have been about the
twenty-seventh. It was probably about the time, the day that we got bombed. You know,
the North Vietnamese had captured some airplanes, some A-37s I believe, up at Phan
Thiet or Phan Rang, I don’t recall now which. They flew down to Saigon with pilots
from the VNAF that they had impressed into this duty. Again I don’t know the details. I
don’t know why these guys flew for them. I don’t know a gun to their head or whether
they were defectors or what, but anyway that’s beside the point. They came down and
they bombed Tan Son Nhut Airbase and they bombed downtown somewhere. Tried to
hit the president’s palace I believe. Anyway, things were getting pretty nasty. The last
day though, the twenty-ninth, I got a call from a sentry saying that General Chinh was
there with his family and he wanted to see me. So I went out and got in my car. My car
had been pushed to the side by a bulldozer and it wasn’t in really great shape. My driver
wasn’t there anymore. I can tell you about my driver in a minute. Anyway, and there
was glass on the front seat because they broke the windows out on my car when they
moved it and I got cut up a little bit sitting on broken window glass. I drove over to
where General Chinh was at the entrance to the compound. I told the guard that it was
okay for him to come in, it was a Marine Corps sentry. I brought General Chinh into
where we were gathering refugees and told the people that were handling the paperwork
to grease them through the system: General Chinh and his wife and his six kids. So I
made good on my promise anyway—got them out. I got calls from quite a few people
during the last few days saying, “Go find this guy, go find that guy.” These were from
generals from the States who had counterparts that they were concerned about. They
wanted to get them out. I managed to do it two or three times. There was one fellow, I
think it was Jean Sauvagio whom I had known in the intelligence, let’s see. He was in
the Document Exploitation or IPW team when I was in the Division. He was an
excellent Vietnamese linguist, US Army colonel. I don’t know if he was colonel by this
time or not. I think he was. Anyway, he called me and asked me to get his wife. He had
a Vietnamese wife who’d come over to visit her family in March and got stuck. She
couldn’t get out because of the transportation difficulties at that time. The airlines quit
flying and so on. So I sent my driver out to find her. Gave him the address that Jean
Sauvagio gave me. He picked her up and brought her into Tan Son Nhut and we put her
on an airplane and she went home.

LC: How do you spell Jean’s last name?

WL: S-a-u-v-a-g-i-o I think. Very fine officer. He was an airborne guy.

Weighed about ninety-five pounds I think. Little guy. Excellent soldier and definitely a
fine linguist. I saw him again many years later when he was the interpreter for our trip
that I went over to Vietnam—’94 with Senator Kerry and Daschle. Sauvagio at that time
did the interpreting when we met with the prime minister and president of North Vietnam
up there in Hanoi. Sauvagio was our interpreter. It’s funny how these things keep going
around with the same people. But anyway we took care of that. There were quite a few
other things like that that we had to take care of.

LC: Well, Bill, if you don’t mind we’ll take a break for now.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the first of February 2006 and I am in Lubbock and of course Bill is in Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, I just want if I can throw out a general question that tails onto what we talked about last time—some of the events in MR-1 and northern MR-2 in 1975 with the NVA advance. I wonder whether your view of the situation was one that might have allowed for the defensibility essentially of a smaller South Vietnam. Was there ever any discussion, that you know about, of trying to hold the line at a certain point and if so did that make sense from a military point of view?

WL: Well, I have to qualify this a lot because there was definitely an attempt and some planning done to draw a line roughly from around Ban Me Thuot across to the coast at Tuy Hoa or maybe just north of Nha Trang. I know that the Joint General Staff was studying that. There was an advisor to General Vien and I don’t know how influential he was. I knew him. His name was Brigadier General Serong. You’ve probably heard of him.

LC: Yes sir.

WL: He thought that it was a defensible idea to try to defend that part of the Highlands over to the coast and block it there. There’s some good rationale for that, other things making it possible. Problem with it was it was that it was devised a little bit too late. They may have been thinking about it earlier and I don’t know about that. But once the president gave the order to withdraw the division from the Highlands, from Pleiku, and the fall of Ban Me Thuot—the destruction there of most of the division anyway or perhaps half of it—then this terrible withdrawal along Route 7B onto the coast, that didn’t make any sense any longer. There was no other defensible terrain to occupy south of Ban Me Thuot that would have made any sense, given the fact that the Communists, the North Vietnamese Army, had already invested Phuoc Long Province and had come all the way down Route 14 to Song Be. They’d already enveloped that
position anyway so that didn’t make any sense there. Then there was an idea that, “Well we’ll reconstitute all that we can from the divisions that were in the North, from Military Region I and II, bring them in to around Saigon and be able to defend Saigon and the rest of the Delta, the Mekong Delta.” The problem there again was that those divisions had left a lot of their supplies, whatever they had left, and most of their, if not all of their artillery in the North. There were no tanks left from the northern area. They had to abandon anything that they couldn’t put on an LST (landing ship, tank) in a hurry, so they didn’t have much left to fight with. That coupled with the absolute, with termination of United States support meant to me and to anybody that looked at it that there was no longer any defensible position that you could establish around Saigon, and also to tend the Delta. It was too late. If they had made a decision to do that before the offensive began, let’s say around December of ’74, it’s possible that they may have done it but it would have been a stopgap. The North was determined to carry the offensive all the way to the South. They had the where with all to do it. They still had the support of the Chinese and the whole Soviet block and South Vietnam had no support at all any longer from the United States. So it would have delayed the fall of Vietnam to try to establish a formidable defense in the Highlands there and along the coast but they still would have enveloped it by coming down through Laos and into Military Region IV anyway, III and IV anyway. So yeah, it could have been a tactical success for a short period but strategically it was not feasible. It wouldn’t have lasted.

LC: Let me ask on the other side of the equation, again from the South Vietnamese perspective though, how important psychologically, not military but psychologically, had the events at Hue a little bit earlier, maybe two weeks earlier, been to the whole thinking about defending Saigon?

WL: You mean the withdrawal from north of the Hai Van?

LC: Yes. From north of the Hai Van Pass and then the crushing flow of refugees down toward Da Nang and then the events there. How important psychologically do you think that had been to ARVN commanders, for example, with whom you were working?

WL: Yeah it was. It was a terrible psychological blow. However I didn’t see any indication that their pessimism about the future affected their combat, their willingness to
fight in other words. The divisions in the South didn’t give up their weapons and run into Saigon and so on in a great flow of desertions. No, there was nothing like that and the commanders kept control of their units in the South.

LC: Did you continue your daily routine as you’ve described it earlier for us during this period or did things begin to change?

WL: In fact I increased my daily routines of visits with Colonel Lung and with the ambassador.

LC: Can you tell us a little bit about your interactions with the ambassador at this time? I mean was Mr. Martin back from the United States at this point?

WL: Oh yes, yes. He came back.

LC: Because I know he had been away for a while I think with some medical issue or something—dental something. I can’t remember.

WL: Wolf Lehman sat in for him. He was good to deal with. He was a little bit stiff with me in the very beginning because he didn’t know me, he didn’t trust me. I mean he had no reason to. But we developed a very good rapport while Ambassador Martin was gone. When Martin got back I would see him at least once a week. Often he would call me and ask me to come down and talk about something in particular and I’d drive down to the embassy and talk to him. I should mention I guess—sometimes I forget what I’ve told you before and I don’t like to repeat myself too much. But at the end of March we wrote our MISTA, our Military Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis, for the month of March in which I predicted that we didn’t have more than a month or so to go. That South Vietnam would have to capitulate within—well, I think I put it around the first of June I might have said. I can’t recall now. You have the MISTA.

LC: We do indeed and I don’t think that we’ve discussed this particular one in any detail.

WL: Anyway, when I wrote that I should back up and say that in all of the MISTAs that I produced during the time I was there, during all of DAO, I never showed the ambassador anything before I already published it. I didn’t ask his approval for anything. I didn’t ask approval from General Murray or General Smith either. I just went ahead and wrote it and put it on the wire and gave them copies. General Smith and
General Murray were both very happy with that. They trusted me to call it as I saw it and that was good enough for them. This time, because I predicted the fall of Vietnam to come quite soon and if there was nothing I could see that could forestall that I called Ambassador Martin on the phone and I said, “I want to show you this before I send it because you may not agree with it and it may cause you some heartburn if it gets on the wire without you having an opportunity to comment on it.” So he said, “That’s fine, bring it down and let me see it.” So I drove down there of course with my driver and I showed it to him. He said, “Well, I would like to write a paragraph in kind of a reclama to this giving my opinion.” I said, “That’s perfectly fine with me. You go ahead and do it and I’ll include it as a comment from Ambassador Martin to the effect that he doesn’t agree with our assessment and this is what he believes.” So this is a real departure, but I figured it was the proper thing to do. I believe that at that time he called in Eva, Eva Kim, his secretary, and dictated this while I was there. She typed it up and gave it to me and that’s how I recall it. I’m almost positive that’s the way it worked because he wouldn’t have sent it on the wire since it was classified. Anyway, so his opinion, again you’ll have to look at the MISTA for an accurate account of this because it’s in there, he said that he thought that the North Vietnamese would wait a while and wouldn’t continue their offensive immediately. I had put in the MISTA that there would be a pause for a little while while they brought up more supplies and ammunition and resupplied because they’d taken some pretty heavy casualties during those weeks and would have to wait. I was wrong in that. They resumed their offensive much quicker than I thought they would. But in any case that’s the MISTA I put on the wire. From thereon he met with me a couple of times a week. I had another—well, I could launch into another event with him if you’d like.

LC: Yeah. Go ahead Bill, while we’re thinking about it.

WL: Well, around the middle of April, and I don’t recall the dates, my counterpart, Colonel Lung was excessively nervous. I asked him, I said, “You know Lung, you don’t seem like your old self. What’s a matter?” He said, “Well, I can’t stay in my own quarters every night. I have to move my wife and my baby just about every night because I figure they’re not safe, that we’re being trailed.” He lived in military quarters, you know, on the military compound but he didn’t figure it was really secure.
He was very nervous and I really was very sympathetic about that and I worried for him because I figured he wasn’t able to give his total concentration to the intelligence picture. So I went down and told the ambassador. I said, “If you will help me I’d like to move Mrs. Lung and the baby out now.” The evacuation of Vietnamese had not begun yet. Nobody had moved anybody yet. So he said, “Yes. That’s okay. I’ll do that.” So he called in Eva and he dictated what they call in the State Department a parole. This is for immigrant traveler who doesn’t have other legal authority to be in the country. He said, “You’re going to have to handle the getting her through customs and immigration and so on.” I said, “Well I can handle that okay.” He said, “What if I put in this parole that she’s your wife?” I said, “Yeah. I can handle that.” So he wrote the parole as if Mrs. Lung and her baby, Mimi, who was about eighteen months then, for my wife and child.

LC: Yours, yours personally?
WL: Mine. Yeah. Then I got the parole and I called my guy from MI and I told Andy Gembara, I said, “I need some documentation. I need a military ID card and a passport for Mrs. Lung saying that she’s Mrs. LeGro.” He said, “Okay.” This is an intelligence outfit that had a lot of resources like that so within a day or so he gave me the ID card, the military identification card, and the passport. He’d arranged to get her picture taken and so on to put on the ID card and the passport. I told Lung then that I was ready to move Liz out. Now, I had already sent my wife home. I sent her home the first week of April to her mother’s house in Freemont, California. So she was there and I told Lung that I would get Liz—that was what we called his wife. Her name was actually Dao but she’d adopted an English name of Elizabeth. I said, “I’ll get her and Mimi to my wife in California and then we can get reunited whenever we have to leave ourselves.” So he said, “Fine.” Andy got one of his black vans and went over to Lung’s compound and picked up Mrs. Lung and her baby and they brought her to my trailer. I got Colonel Hodges who was my deputy for operations, he was an O6 also. I asked him, I said, “Al, I want you to take Mrs. Lung over to Clark Airbase and then get her on a flight to Hawaii. I’ll contact the G2 US Army Hawaii and get him to put her on a plane to Travis in California.” So that’s what we did. Al took her down to the airport and flew with her over on a US Air Force transport over to Clark and got her on a transport to Hickham. I called the G2 in Hawaii and I asked him to meet the airplane, he was another Army
colonel, and he did that. He greased her through immigration and customs, no problem. My wife met her at the airport at the US Airbase at Travis in California by Sacramento and brought her down to Freemont and put her up there until we joined up later. That’s how we got her out. The only reason I’m telling you all that is the relationship I had with Ambassador Martin was pretty good.

LC: Well, it’s actually a very revealing story about your relationship with Colonel Lung as well.

WL: Oh yeah. Later on, if you jump ahead, when we got there, when I got home in June, Lung had turned up in Camp Pendleton at the Marine Corps base there. That’s where they had a refugee assembly center. So I flew down from Freemont, I guess I had to go to San Francisco, I flew down to Pendleton and picked up Lung. I had to sign some papers. The people were a little bit edgy about letting me have him. I don’t know. I had to pull a rank on a couple of people. But anyway I got Lung back up to Freemont and later joined with his wife and baby and then we flew to Washington D.C. where I put Lung in with—I went up to Fort Meade where Colonel Weidhas was. Weidhas had been my old buddy from the MI group commanding that outfit of Detachment K in Bangkok. Al by that time was a colonel too, intelligence, and he had some nice quarters there at Fort Meade. He had a pretty good assignment at Fort Meade and he put up Lung and his wife and baby until—incidentally Lung’s wife was about five or six months pregnant at that time. So he put them up there. When I got established I got them an apartment here in Alexandria and we went on from there. So that’s the way we handled that. I had a lot of help from people.

LC: Yes. Well it sounds like a complicated—

WL: Well it sounds more complicated than it was.

LC: I suppose while you were doing it you were just, you know, going about the business of doing it. But a lot of people were involved in helping out. That’s clear. Bill, if you don’t mind can I back up just a little and ask you about the events a little bit earlier before your talk about—well, just around the time that you were sending out that MISTA that you referred to. Just at the beginning of April there was a decision, and I’m not sure where it emerged from—probably AID (Agency for International Development)—but
maybe you could confirm that—to try to airlift, essentially, some of the orphans out of
the Saigon area. Can you talk about that at all?

WL: That was a non-governmental organization, a NGO, that started that.

LC: Oh, is that right?

WL: Yeah. I believe they’re the ones that started it.

LC: Do you know which one?

WL: No. I can’t recall now but I’m sure that you can find out.

LC: Probably. Yeah.

WL: I didn’t get involved directly in it. The way it worked, my role in it, around
the first of April, and I can’t remember the date, I went to General Smith. I said,
“General Smith, it’s time to reduce our population here. We’ve got too many people and
particularly we’ve got too many women employees. We should thin the place down
because we’re going to be hard pressed to get them out if we wait too long.” So he said,
“Yeah I guess you’re right. Let’s do it.” So he issued the orders that all department
chiefs would look at their rosters and they would select all of those that they really
couldn’t do without. They’d stay behind but the rest of them they’d begin moving them
out immediately.

LC: Now these were employees and families?

WL: Employees and families. Well, very few of the employees had families.

Some of them did but very few. They had to be very senior to have them but a few of
them did. Most of these were women secretaries and actually some higher ranking
women like our finance chief. The chief of public affairs, she was a rather senior
individual. But a lot of them were secretarial types.

LC: Now these are all within DAO?

WL: In DAO. Yes.

LC: Do you remember any of their names, Bill?

WL: I can’t bring them up right now but in any case a lot of them volunteered to
go on this flight that crashed. I think there were seven or eight of the women that worked
for me that were killed in that. Ann Bottorff, she was killed and she was the public
affairs officer for General Smith, General Murray before.

LC: How do you spell her last name?
WL: I have trouble spelling it but Ann was her first name. B-o-r-t-o-f-f?

(Editor’s note: Ann Bottorff) That doesn’t look like a name but it’s something like—

LC: But she was the public affairs—

WL: Yes. Very fine lady. She volunteered to go with the orphans. The people
that were moving the orphans wanted some chaperones. They had a hundred or so—I
don’t know how many on that flight. They needed some women to help take care of
them. A lot of them were infants. They needed changing and that sort of thing. So that’s
why almost all of our women that were going out volunteered to go on that flight. One of
my secretaries was—well, I had about three women I called my secretaries—and she was
killed on it. Her daughter was a teenager who’d come over to visit her. She was on the
upper deck of the C-5. She was one of the few that was not killed but her mother was
killed. Anyway, that was that ill-fated flight. Something in the mechanism of the clam
shell door in the rear of the airplane failed and part of the door apparently—this is the
story I get—came up and damaged the vertical and horizontal stabilizers or maybe both
or maybe one or the other. In any case it disabled the aircraft. The crew was able to get
it turned around. It was out over the South China Sea when it happened, off of Vung Tau
I believe, on its way to Clark. He managed to turn the thing around and get it headed
back to the airbase at Tan Son Nhut but he didn’t quite make the runway and crash
landed in a rice paddy short of the runway, the field. The airplane broke apart and
burned. Most of the crew survived. The airplane broke in two or three pieces and the
forward edge of the end of the fuselage wasn’t so badly damaged but the main part where
the passengers were was badly damaged. A few of my guys went out to the field and
tried to help rescue anybody that they could. In fact I think Stu Harrington went out there
and a couple of my intelligence analysts were able to get out. I wasn’t.

LC: You did not go out there?

WL: No.

LC: Bill, can you tell anything about what the response was in DAO when you
guys found out about this?

WL: Most everyone was very, very sad. Actually losing all of those people that
we’d known for so long and worked with, and of course all of the children as well. It was
quite a blow, and to carry on.
LC: Did people do you think look to you Bill since you were in charge more or less? In your sections of DAO you were the top banana. I mean did they look to you for an example, do you think, of how to just keep going?

WL: Well possibly. I manage to be pretty stoic about things like that. But having seen a lot of it, things like that happen before—not that magnitude though. I never saw that many casualties in one time. But anyway, yeah, we kept on going. About that time General Smith—well, one thing we did. At CIA the station chief in Saigon asked me to participate in a meeting with his folks to establish some priorities for the movement of Vietnamese. I told him that I had my own priorities that the MI Det K and my folks pretty well had established who we wanted to get out but I was happy to meet with him. It wasn’t a very useful meeting. I wasn’t impressed with their ability to really handle the situation. This is probably unfair because I didn’t know exactly what they were doing. In other words they weren’t really open with me about who they were going to get out or who they were so it wasn’t a very useful meeting. We handle our own list. About that time General Smith asked me if I had somebody I could send over to General Vien, Cao Van Vien, who was the chief of the Joint General Staff and see if General Vien would like to give us a list of people that—we’re talking about military officers and their families—that we would like to move out in an order of priority. I said, “Sure.” I sent Andy Gembara over there because he spoke pretty good Vietnamese to meet with General Vien.

LC: He was with Det K or which group was he with?

WL: He was with Det K. He was their liaison to me. He was a captain, US Army captain at that time. But he had the capability and the carriage and so on of at least a lieutenant colonel. He was an excellent officer. I sent him over there and General Vien gave him a list of people. Mostly this is confirming what I already knew, who we should get out. Now, the people to get out that we were going to get out were almost all staff officers in and around the Saigon area. We couldn’t tap into the divisions. They were still fighting. The division commanders and their staffs and the regimental commanders and their staff, they had to really fend for themselves. Either they would fight until they were captured or at the last minute I guess some of them were able to get down to Saigon and get out. But not a lot of them could do that. They were not in the same situation as
the Joint General Staff was, who some of them at least could leave fairly early. Very few
did leave early though. It was during the last part of the last week that most of those
people were able to leave. But the divisions that were still holding in the Delta—the
Division at Lai Khe, Division at Cu Chi, Division out at Xuan Loc—they were still
fighting so very few of those people got out.

LC: Bill I’m sure you’re aware that in Frank Snepp’s book talking about this
particular issue of who was going to be able to get out and who wasn’t that he kind of
took a swipe at DAO and your name is mentioned. I’m sure you’re aware of this.

WL: Oh, I can’t remember what he said about that though.

LC: Well let me get your response to this. In my version it’s on page 317 of
*Decent Interval*. He says that you, Colonel LeGro, called Shep Lowman, the State
Department officer who was supposed to compile lists of potential Vietnamese evacuees
and asked him for some of the names. But this Lowman, “had nothing but excuses,”
according to Frank Snepp. “So many names had been turned into him, he explained, that
there was no time to tabulate them. LeGro, impatient and discouraged, didn’t bother to
protest. Instead he seized the initiative. During the next several hours,” and I think this
is probably we’re talking about first week of April—you, according to Snepp, you seized
the initiative and during the next several hours you and your assistants divided up the
seats based on outgoing flights among the embassy’s various agencies. According to
Snepp, a little further on he says, “Most of those who benefited were not the politically
sensitive Vietnamese but rather friends and relatives of DAO officers who were simply
impatient to get out of the country.”

WL: That’s bogus.

LC: I thought you might think so. That’s kind of why I wanted you to have a
chance to reply.

WL: I had nothing to do with the assignment of seats on any airplanes or anything
else like that.

LC: Did you not?

WL: I didn’t have anything to do with the assignment of seats and deciding who
was going and who wouldn’t. I was getting out the senior officers, working closely with
Lung and with the other officers in the Vietnamese Army that I knew who would ask me
for help. But in all of those that had any bonafides at all I moved out as quickly as I
could and I had a lot of help from my own staff. I know Shep Lowman but I don’t
remember that incident. It’s very possible it’s true, that I did talk to Shep Lowman about
it. But I don’t remember being impatient with Shep Lowman or anybody else. I went
ahead and did what I thought was appropriate.

LC: That’s kind of what I figured. I just wanted to give you a chance to reply to

WL: General Baughn, who had replaced Brigadier General Maglione as the Air
Force brigadier—I think I mentioned him before. He’s the one who told General Smith
that he didn’t want to handle operations any longer and that’s why I became chief of
operations as well as intelligence. General Baughn was a good officer and he was taking
the initiative too. I don’t know if Snepp talks about him in his book or not.

LC: I believe not actually. I was just checking the index.

WL: Baughn started moving Vietnamese Air Force people. Most of them I
believe were Vietnamese Air Force and he started trying to get some of those people out.
Ambassador Martin found out about it and he insisted that General Baughn be relieved of
his duties and sent home. He told General Smith to do that and General Smith had to
comply and General Baughn was shipped out. I don’t know about what time of the
month that was. It was early in the month of April. I think it was a bad deal. I think he
got a—I don’t think that was a fair thing to do. But again General Smith didn’t have
much of an option. I don’t know whether he could have fought it or not and I don’t know
whether it damaged General Baughn’s position in the Air Force or not. I rather doubt it.

LC: Was he a general at that time?

WL: He was a brigadier general.

LC: He is actually mentioned briefly I think in Snepp’s book. But the situation
that gave rise to his being relieved, was it contained to the issue of moving people in and
out or were there broader considerations?

WL: No. I think it was basically the fact that he was moving people out of the
country and without the authority that the ambassador felt that he personally had. That is,
it was the ambassador’s call about whether or not any Vietnamese officers or others
would be moved out in advance of his specific authority to do so. I think that was the problem.

LC: How did you resolve that problem? I know that you’ve told us with regard to Colonel Lung’s wife how that happened but when other folks came to mind or were brought to your attention and you were trying to facilitate their exodus how did you work with the State Department to get that handled?

WL: Well, by the time I started moving people Ambassador Martin had given the authority. So we were not violating anything from the State Department. The State Department, that is the consul general for office in Saigon, I believe most of the people that were involved in it were in the consul’s office. I mean that’s their business. So they established a little headquarters that they put out at our gymnasium at Tan Son Nhut and they processed Vietnamese people who were coming in to join this exodus. They processed some through, gave them the documentation they needed and they’re the ones that put them on the airplanes. There was a State Department—well, embassy. I wouldn’t say State Department.

LC: Right.

WL: Embassy operation.

LC: Right. They had a sub office out at Tan Son Nhut.

WL: Yeah. They put some people out there and they did an excellent job. They worked practically round the clock moving these people.

LC: How long were they able to remain out there and to be processing things in this orderly fashion? Do you remember?

WL: I would say until we got bombed on the night of the, what was it? The twenty-eighth, the twenty-ninth, when VNAF airplanes were captured by the Communists up there? I can’t recall now whether it was Phan Thiet or Phan Rang and they flew over Saigon. They bombed the airfield. They bombed downtown also using former, well, Vietnamese Air Force pilots flying these A-37 airplanes. They dropped a few bombs. They didn’t do any extensive damage, but it was enough to get our attention. Then when the rockets started coming in to the airbase one of them hit the roof. That was on the night of the twenty-eighth. One of them hit the roof of the gymnasium. It didn’t cause any casualties there but it certainly got our attention and we decided it was no
longer safe to concentrate any people into that building. So we moved any refugees that
were still there into our main headquarters building. We processed them through there
from then on. But I believe the State Department guys stayed there until some time on
the twenty-ninth. They were still processing people through. We were getting people
from the embassies through. I remember the French Embassy was clearing out and they
came through our center to be put on helicopters to fly out because by that time the
airbase had been shut down.

LC: Bill, can I ask you since you were out at Tan Son Nhut essentially, your
headquarters were near there, the crash that had occurred, did it interfere with traffic in
and out on the runways? Did they have to do something to—?

WL: You mean on the C-5?

LC: Yes.

WL: Oh, the C-5 was at least two kilometers away from the airbase.

LC: So it wasn’t close enough to have—?

WL: It didn’t interfere with traffic.

LC: What aircrafts were moving in and out of Tan Son Nhut at this point?

WL: There were some civilian contract airplanes that were flying out of there and
of course Air Force C-5s and C-130s. Mostly C-130s, I expect. Most of them were that
and they were flying from there over to Clark Airbase in Luzon.

LC: Were they essentially flying a loop? I mean were they going to the
Philippines and then right back?

WL: Yeah. They’d go over—on one of those airplanes it was only about a two
hour flight over to Clark and then they’d dump their passengers and then they’d pick up
another load. Well we don’t want to jump ahead too far, but the airbase was eventually
shut down and Ambassador Martin came out to see me and so on. I’ll get to that later. In
the middle of April General Smith made me the manager of the command mess, in
addition to my other duties. I was already what they called president of the board, of the
mess. I was kind of supervising the general operations of the mess, the dining room. But
now I was a manager because our manager, in the middle of the night, he got an airplane
and flew away. The next morning the lady who was in charge of the dining room, Tiger,
Vietnamese lady, nice gal. She came and told me that Mr. Mayhue was gone. Mayhue
was his name. He’s dead now. But anyway I said, “What do you mean he’s gone?” She said, “Well, he flew away.” Well, this was pretty serious. I mean here we have the guy responsible for a pretty major operation, head of maybe sixty employees, all had to be paid, et cetera, big liquor warehouse and so on. I said, ‘Jesus, that’s pretty bad’, so I told General Smith and he said, “Well then you be the manager.” So he wrote a letter, put it into my records, and gave me the responsibility for the whole operation as if I didn’t have enough to do.

LC: Yeah, just what you needed.

WL: Yeah. But anyway, so I knew things were going to go down pretty fast. So I went to the finance officer and I said, “Look. I want to pay these people in US currency.” “Oh you can’t do that.” I said, “Well, those that are leaving, we’re going to begin to ship some of them out if they want to go. So at least I want to pay them in US currency. If they stay behind we’ll pay them in piasters but otherwise I want to give them dollars.” So she agreed to that. Then I announced to the employees that, “Any of the ones that wanted to go out with their children and their immediate family, let me know, and we’ll get you out.” So a lot of them started leaving. We didn’t need them anyway because our own force was cut down to the bone so we didn’t have a lot of people in the mess.

LC: I mean Bill this would be surprising. This is a real interesting story. It would be surprising to people probably to hear that among the people you were offering the option of assistance to getting to the Philippines were the folks who were working in the mess.

WL: Yeah well they were afraid, some with good reason.

LC: Yeah. I could believe that.

WL: The Communists wouldn’t be too kind to them for working for the Americans. Turned out we had one cook that was a VC. We didn’t know that.

LC: He wasn’t one of the ones then that took up your offer.

WL: No. He stayed behind. But a lot of them got away before I could pay them and when I found that out I had a roster and checked off those that had been paid. I had maybe twenty or thirty of them had already gone and they were over at Clark or somewhere between Clark and Guam or the United States. I said, “Gee, we’ve got to pay these folks. They didn’t even get their last pay.” Whatever few bucks we could give
them they needed. So my chief of current intelligence was Lieutenant Colonel Witter. I said, “Dean,” I think it’s Dean. Yeah. You know, the Witter Investment Firm and
Brokers?

LC: Yes.

WL: He was in that family. Dean Witter.

LC: Dean Witter. Yeah.

WL: He was in that family. He was a nice guy.

LC: What was his position?

WL: He was my chief of current intelligence branch. He was a lieutenant colonel. He was one of my two lieutenant colonels and I said, “Dean, I want you to take this. I got more money from the finance officer,” and I gave Witter this bag of cash. I said, “This is the payroll. Here’s the list of people that got away from here before they got their final pay, their severance pay, and so on. I want you to go over to Clark and then to Guam. Find these folks and pay them.” I didn’t need him anymore. We weren’t getting much information to put in reports anyway and I had a couple civilians that knew more about it than he did. So I sent him. He went over to Guam. He went first to Clark. He found a couple there. He found a whole bunch of them in this tent camp in Guam and he paid them off, which was really good.

LC: Yes. Yeah. That must have felt pretty good.

WL: Yeah. Later on when I finally got to the United States and here to this area I called—the Navy was responsible for all administration for the DAO. That is, that kind of stuff, the logistics for DAO. So I contacted the Navy here and got in touch with the fellow that had the money to pay those we missed. Great cooperation I got from them.

LC: Really?

WL: Yeah. This fellow tracked down all of those that hadn’t been paid, I don’t know how he did it, and he sent them checks. Actually, we paid everybody else that I was responsible for. They all got paid. I don’t know what the other departments and divisions did but I certainly got all my folks paid.

LC: I think that’s really remarkable, actually, given the situation and what other things were pressing on your attention. I think that’s just incredible, really. You had, you said, something like sixty people working in the dining mess.
WL: Bar and the kitchen, and a couple of maintenance, grounds keeper—there was a lot of real good folks.

LC: Bill, was there concern at this time that there were, let me put it this way, physical assets of some kind, whether they be military materiel or other things in the way of equipment and so on that had also to be gotten out of Saigon immediately?

WL: Oh yes. This was an entirely different and separate activity. Defense Department and the Army and the Navy were all interested in getting everything out that they could and they did quite a bit of that work.

LC: There’s so much emphasis on, in most of the secondary literature and films that we see and so on, on people. But clearly this other effort was something that probably took some of your attention as well?

WL: It didn’t take mine because I wasn’t really in the logistics business. That was somebody else’s responsibility. The Army division, Navy division, and Air Force division. The Defense Department sent out a fellow named Erich von Marbod. He’ll show up in your literature there sometimes, some place. Have you ever heard of that name?

LC: Of Erich Von Marbod. Yes. It’s v-o-n M-a-r-b-o-d. Yes.

WL: You’ve heard of him?

LC: I have, but for those who haven’t why don’t you go ahead and fill in his background.

WL: Well, I don’t know an awful lot about him because again I had my own things to do. I didn’t pay a great deal of attention to what they were doing. But Erich von Marbod was involved in the recovery of US equipment and materiel, military stuff, and to get it shipped out before the Communists could get it. Apparently he did a good job of it. A lot of it involved the Navy. One of our Navy—one of the individuals in the Navy division stationed in the Delta was involved in it too. He later went on to greater things. He became an assistant secretary or deputy secretary of State. What’s his name now?

LC: Was this the consul general down there?

WL: No. He was in DAO. Who was the deputy for the last secretary of state before Condoleezza Rice?
LC: For Colin Powell?
WL: Yes.
LC: Someone who worked for him?
WL: Yes. Who was that?
LC: I don’t know.
WL: Well, I’ll probably remember.
LC: This is the problem of studying the ’60s and ’70s. You have no idea what’s going on today.
WL: My memory for names sometimes hits a real stonewall and I can’t remember it. Anyway—
LC: Anyway, this fellow—
WL: Yeah, whoever he was, he worked with Marbod and they got a lot of stuff out. But again that’s an entirely different area.
LC: Can you venture a guess as to the kinds of things that would have been prioritized for removal?
WL: Well, I think there were some ships. There might have been some LSTs. I don’t know what else they were dealing with. They couldn’t take equipment away from the ARVN divisions. They were still fighting, obviously. The Air Force managed to fly quite a few of the airplanes out using VNAF. Of course VNAF had to do the flying. They were VNAF airplanes and a lot of them flew over to Sattahip or to U-Tapao, U-Tapao in Thailand. In fact, the J2, Colonel Le Minh Huang, had a Cessna airplane and he flew it all the way from Saigon to U-Tapao. I said, “Well that’s beyond the range of your airplane.” He said, “Oh yeah, yeah, it is.” But he said, “Got as high as I could get and turned it on the leanest mixture that the engine would still turn over and I managed to get in there and I landed. The needle was on zero when I landed at U-Tapao.”
LC: Kind of sailed over there in a way.
WL: Yeah. A lot of them—they did recover quite a few airplanes over at U-Tapao. Some of them I believe landed in Cambodia and refueled. I’ve heard stories like that but I can’t verify that. But there was an attempt to get those high value things out.
LC: Bill, do you have a sense maybe a little bit before this final period of the state of relations between the South Vietnamese government and the Thai government or what
the US might have been doing with Thailand in order to facilitate escape to their territory
by anti-Communist Vietnamese?

WL: I’m sorry. I can’t speak to that. I don’t know. That sounds more like a State
Department issue and I—

LC: Yeah. I’m sure that it is.

WL: Although, you know, we had a very close relationship with the Thais over
there. We had a Thai unit in the war you know. So there was all this good cooperation.
The fact that the United States was still using the airbases in Thailand, of course we had
the big facility up there at Nakhon Phanom, NKP, with the USAG Air Force. We had
the airbase at U-Tapao. We had a Navy base or Navy installations at Sattahip. The Thais
were cooperative. There was no checking in and out of the border and so on. I recall
flying over—Al Weidhas every once in a while he’d ask me to come over to Bangkok to
discuss stuff with him and he’d send his own airplane over, a little Beechcraft C-7 I guess
they call them. I can’t recall now. Anyway, twin engine turbo prop and I’d fly over to
Bangkok. Did that three or four times I guess to meet with him. We had to go through
customs but it was just a wink and a handshake. They were very liberal with moving in
and out.

LC: They weren’t scrubbing you guys down for whatever you might be carrying?

WL: We had what was tantamount of diplomatic immunity anyway, although I
think that was a stretch. But the Thais were cooperative anyway.

LC: Well, maybe one final question this morning. Bill, as you were monitoring
events during April were you also paying attention to and receiving, reporting on the
changing situation in Cambodia?

WL: I wasn’t paying a lot of attention to it. It was important. Of course, we—I
don’t know. When did that incident happen with the ship? Maybe that was after the
ceasefire, after we left.

LC: I think so. Yeah. Just a little bit later when they took the US ship. Yeah.

WL: Yeah. One thing I haven’t mentioned much and it’s somebody else’s bag for
this too. But I may have mentioned in passing that we were running convoys regularly
up to Phnom Penh, up the Mekong River from Vung Tau, with ammunition and rice up to
supply the Khmer Army.
LC: Did that continue even into April?
WL: That continued until very late in the game. I don’t remember when we stopped it but somebody else would have to speak to that, probably somebody from Navy division. They were involved in it I believe and the people in the logistics side.
LC: What about the defense for those convoys? Would they have to be accompanied by a pretty stiff force that would be going along with them?
WL: They put gunboats with them and they also armored the sides of the boats and the tugs. They put pure steel planking along the edges, along the sides of the boats to try to cause an RPG to detonate before it hit the ship itself, things like that.
LC: What about mines?
WL: Mines? I can’t recall much about mines. There maybe have been attempts to stop them. The whole activity was handled by a contractor, a Vietnamese contractor for that matter. His name was—I can’t remember. I’ve seen him recently. He lives here. He ran the convoys for DAO up to Phnom Penh.
LC: But this was a private business that was being paid?
WL: Yeah. It was a business. He owned the tugboats and the barges.
LC: But the contract was run through DAO?
WL: Yes. It was run through DAO.
LC: Well, anyone who wants to chase up that paperwork can look at the DAO records at College Park if they’d like to.
WL: If you’re interested in it send me an email or something and I’ll see what I can found out about it. I can give you his name and I can give you his address.
LC: Okay. Well we’ll try to chase that up.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the second of February 2006 and I am in Lubbock as usual. Bill is speaking from his home in Virginia. Bill we have reached the point in our narrative handling of your career where a number of events are kind of squeezed into just a few days. I wonder if you can take us through this period and I gather you have a sense of how you would like to do that.

WL: Yeah. Well I have a list of things that happened roughly in sequence, chronologically, but it’s a little hard at this stage of the game to remember exactly what came first. It really doesn’t matter too much anyway.

LC: Yes sir.

WL: Did I mention that I sent Andy Gembara over to see General Vien for a list of people?

LC: Yes you did. We talked a little bit about Andy and you mentioned yesterday—let me very quickly check my notes—that you had dispatched him to get a list. But if you could Bill, before we start, it might be helpful to just fill in a little bit, again, about Andy’s assignment and his background if you could.

WL: Yes. Andrew Gembara. He was a captain at that time in the military intelligence branch. He had been in airborne in the as I recall now and wounded severely in the early, perhaps around 1970, ’71, something like that up in Phan Thiet as I recall. He was reclassified to military intelligence. He had been infantry, airborne, and then he was—when I met him in Vietnam early in ’73, soon as I took charge of the intelligence branch, he was sent over to me from Bangkok where his headquarters was. That was Detachment K, as in “king,” of the Military Intelligence group. His commander was Colonel Albert Weidhas, W-e-i-d-h-a-s. Al Weidhas and I had worked together earlier in the Pentagon when Al was with the assistant chief of staff for intelligence and I was in DCSOPS, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, both working Vietnam. When Al sent me Andy as his liaison officer I of course immediately knew that I would have a good fellow there because Al was such a fine officer and he wouldn’t
send me anybody that wasn’t well qualified. I found out that Andy was not only well
qualified he was really highly qualified. He had plenty of experience in Vietnam. He
had been to language school. He spoke fair Vietnamese and he understood it pretty well.
So that was a real benefit in the job he had. His principle duties were liaison to
Vietnamese Army and Navy human intelligence organizations. They had about three of
them that he worked with. Well, they call it liaison. It joint collection operations that he
worked on. His organization would translate the raw intelligence reports that these
agencies picked up in the field, these Vietnamese agencies, translate them into English so
we could use them, and I got a steady flow of human intelligence. Usually most of it was
pretty low level and not really extremely valuable, but they had one or two agents at
fairly high levels in the VC infrastructure that furnished some pretty good reporting from
time to time. The drawback to most of it was that we didn’t get it in a timely fashion. A
report would come out of COSVN for example, Central Office South Vietnam, the VC
headquarters in the South, that would be—by the time we got it it might be three or four
weeks late. If it was of immediate tactical importance when it was written it had pretty
much lost its value by the time we got it. But that limitation aside, a lot of the stuff was
quite useful. So I saw Andy perhaps once a week. He would come visit me and we’d
discuss our priorities and what we should be looking for and so on. That was a very good
relationship. In fact, as a footnote, I see Andy now about once a week. He’s here and
we’re working together on some projects.

LC: Terrific.

WL: Anyway, so he’s a good guy. That’s the background on Andy Gembara. So
when I had anything that I really needed done in a hurry that required some initiative and
perhaps a bending of the rules here or there Andy was able to take care of it. He was the
one that got me the passport and ID card and did the transportation for Mrs. Lung.

LC: Were those cards, just to ask you Bill, were those cards manufactured by a
Det K unit that was in Saigon or was it over in Bangkok and then they were brought
over?

WL: I’m pretty sure he had to go to Bangkok for them. Yeah. We didn’t have
that much capability right in Saigon. I think in the old days when 525 MI group was
there before came in they probably had it right there in Saigon. I don’t doubt it at all that
we had that capability. But Andy’s operation and the—I had two or three other people
that I worked with, with Det K also. But they didn’t have that capability right in Saigon,
I don’t believe. I never questioned them about it anyway.

LC: Well right. I just want the cards.
WL: Yeah. So that’s about Andy Gembara. He later, after Vietnam he retired as
a lieutenant colonel. He should have been a colonel or a brigadier general. But he never
made it. He’s always specialized after that in some very sensitive intelligence work in
the Pentagon and in special operations. Good career.

LC: Yes. It sounds like a very interesting guy, real interesting. You were going
to I think tell about perhaps your asking him to go and pick up some lists. Was that
right?
WL: Yes. He did. He went over there and reported to General Vien and told
General Vien that General Smith wanted a list of the officers and their families that
General Vien wanted to be taken out of the country when we began our evacuation of our
Vietnamese allies. When that happened why we wanted to have a list of who General
Vien wanted us to—in priority so we didn’t miss anybody important.

LC: This is General Cao Van Vien?
WL: Yes. Cao Van Vien. His title was chief of the Joint General Staff. So he
gave that to Andy and Andy delivered it to me and I gave it to General Smith so that they
could work out the plans to collect these people and get them out when we were given
authority to do that; which happened a few days later.

LC: On the, let’s see, on the day before we left General Smith told me to go get
General Vien. I still had my driver there and I still had my sedan. So I got in the sedan
and we drove over to the Joint General Staff headquarters compound, which was only
about a mile away from where we were located. I went up and reported to General Vien
and told him it was time to go and that General Smith had asked me to bring him out to
the fleet. So it was quite an emotional meeting I might say. Hard on both of us. His aide
came in and his aide was visibly upset. But in any case we got in my sedan and we drove
back to our compound. It was a little difficult getting back in. By that time there were
great crowds of people jamming around the gates to the entrances to Tan Son Nhut
Airbase and the police were having a difficult time in controlling them and keeping a
roadway clear so we could get through the crowds into the airbase. A lot of people
wanted to get in there and get on airplanes and get out. But anyway we got in and got an
Air America—you’re familiar with Air America aren’t you?

LC: Yes.

WL: Air America was a CIA proprietary aviation unit. They had quite a few
Huey helicopters and they had some fixed wing also. But anyway we got into an Air
America Huey and flew out to the ship, the Navy command ship. I can’t think of the
name of it. I’ll think of it in a minute. Anyway, we flew out to that ship, landed on the
deck. I took General Vien below to the command room, kind of an operations center
below decks, and introduced him to the admiral that was there. I can’t remember his
name. Told him who General Vien was and to take care of him. Be sure he was taken
out on his way back to the United States and then I went back. The name of the ship was
Blue Ridge. It’s what they call a command ship for the US Navy—full of
communications capabilities.

LC: It must have had a helicopter deck on it.

WL: It had a helicopter pad on the fantail on the aft of the ship.

LC: Bill, what was General Vien’s demeanor? How was he fairing at this point?

WL: He was very solemn. We didn’t talk hardly at all, nothing to talk about. I’m
sure we’d already sent his wife and children out.

LC: I would imagine. Yes.

WL: I’ve seen General Vien quite a few times since then. We worked together on
the Vietnam monographs later on. General Potts—in fact, I saw him just about two
months ago. He was severely ill and I went to the hospital to see him and he looked
pretty bad but I think he recovered and is living in a rest home now. His wife has passed
away. One of his daughters is a professor of law at William and Mary. Anyway—

LC: That’s very impressive. But as far as you know he’s still with us.

WL: Yes. He is. As I say, he looked very weak. He’d had what I believe was a
stroke. I think that was it, although he could still speak pretty well. He was of course
being fed by tubes and so on and looked very wane and very, very thin. He was
always—I probably told you that he gave me acupuncture treatments.

LC: No. You didn’t mention that.
WL: Well, is that part of our story?
LC: Sure!
WL: Well, years later, when was this? When I started working on the Vietnam monographs was 1977, ’77 I guess it was with General Potts, General Vien wrote a very good account of the last days. You probably have it in your collection.
LC: I think we do. Yes.
WL: I had a rather severe attack of sciatica. My right leg was giving me a lot of pain and my foot wasn’t working properly and I was limping around. He asked me what was the matter and I told him. He said, “Well, I think I can help you.” So I said, “What are you going to do?” He said, “I can give you acupuncture.” I said, “Well sure. I’m game. I’ll try it.”
LC: Good for you.
WL: So he was living in Annandale, which is a suburb of—well, small community here in Arlington County, or rather in Fairfax County. Went to his house and he had his garage, which was attached to the house, converted into a bedroom and I went in there and laid down on his bed there and he proceeded to stick needles in me from my heel up to my back of my neck. It must have been about fifteen or twenty of these needles. He had a little mannequin there that they issued to people who wanted to do acupuncture with little spots on it that show where to put in the needles when you’re trying to cure some specific complaint so he did that. It was very uncomfortable. He went through about three or four sessions and at the last session he said, “Well now we’re going to attach the wires.” Have you ever seen this done?
LC: I have seen it done. I have never subjected myself to it but—
WL: It’s interesting. Have a try someday.
LC: Did it help you?
WL: I got better. There’s no control. Maybe I would have got better anyway. I don’t know. But it was funny because at that time he gave me this treatment with the rheostat way to turn up the current and these things give you a small dose of electricity in every needle. General Khuyen was there. Khuyen had been the chief of staff for the Joint General Staff and also the chief of logistics. He was the J4 for the Vietnamese
Army. I knew him fairly well but his real counterpart was General Murray and General
Smith, and Khuyen was a real nice guy.

LC: How do you spell General Khuyen’s last name?
LC: He was there?
WL: He was there in the garage. He was watching. When Vien turned up the
current Khuyen couldn’t restrain his humor; for the whole thing he laughed his head off.
I was there sweating and gripping the mattress with both hands. Vien noticed that I was
in some discomfort so he turned down the current after awhile. But it was funny,
anyway. Khuyen also wrote the monograph on logistics of the Vietnam War. You
probably have that. Well, I know you have it now because I sent it to you.

LC: That’s right, in that box.
WL: My collection. I sent you all of it.
LC: Yes. It did arrive safely and so those are now in the collection.
WL: So anyway that’s—and so I’ve seen General Vien now and then ever since
then. Although I haven’t seen him since—he doesn’t want to see anybody anymore. I
went to see him with Colonel Lung and Lung told me that. He said, “You know we can’t
go to see him anymore. He doesn’t want to see anybody anymore. He doesn’t like to be
seen in that shape.”

LC: Understood.

WL: Khuyen has become kind of a recluse also. He’s a Buddhist and he just
spends a lot of time meditating. He lives down in Williamsburg or—yeah. If not
Williamsburg close to Williamsburg. His first job he kept for a long time was maitre d’
in a restaurant down there.

LC: No kidding.
WL: Can you imagine that? You go from the chief of logistics for an army to
becoming a maitre d’ in a restaurant.

LC: It is a little tough to imagine and I can only—

WL: Well, General Nghiem of the Division, his first job when he came here—he
was major general commanding an infantry division—his first job was cleaning toilets in
a motel. He didn’t keep that job very long. He went on to better things.
LC: Bill, do you have a sense for some of these gentlemen that there’s some sadness attached now as they’re in declining health to the fact that they cannot return to Vietnam?

WL: Oh yes. Yeah. It’s very evident. They have a right to be bitter, as I am. But they don’t let it show much and they’ve always been cordial with me.

LC: Well that speaks volumes I think really about your relationship with them because I’m sure that your reference to bitterness has to do with the treatment that the United States gave to South Vietnam during this period that we’re talking about, ’73 to ’75.

WL: Yeah. Exactly! We betrayed them and as a sworn officer of the US Army I felt that I was in a way part of that betrayal. But anyway—

LC: Well, Bill, let’s go back to Saigon and tell us how things, how the situation was changing as you returned. Now, it took some stuffing I would say to get back on the helicopter and go back to Tan Son Nhut but I gather that’s what you did.

WL: Oh of course. Yeah. I would have been a deserter if I’d a gone on the Blue Ridge. They would have sent the military police after me.

LC: Uh-oh. Well we can’t have that, not after the career that you’ve told us about.

WL: Oh. We didn’t have any military police anyway so it didn’t matter, but anyway—

LC: So, do you remember flying back in to Tan Son Nhut? Do you remember the scene from the air? What could you see around the base?

WL: Well, it looked normal. It looked quiet. It wasn’t particularly quiet. We got rockets in there every once in a while. That particular day—I think it was the day. I don’t think much happened on the twenty-eighth. It was that evening that they bombed the place. My driver, Mr. Lien, came up to my office and he said, “Colonel LeGro, I have to go home now.” He had a little motor bike that he rode and I said, “Lien, I want you to go get your family and bring them back here because the Communists are not going to treat you very well. You’ve escaped. This will be the third time. So bring your family back and I’ll get them out of here—you and them together.” He said, “Well I would like to do that but I can’t because one of my sons is in the hospital sick so we have
to stay.” So that was that. I didn’t see him again. He did call me many years later from San Francisco. So after about ten years I think he got out finally and he called me from San Francisco just to say hello. I haven’t seen him since then though. So I didn’t have a driver from then on, of course I didn’t really need one because I wasn’t going anywhere anyway. I sent all my employees home except I kept about—I think about four or five people in the current intelligence section. I had about three people from Detachment K including Andy Gembara, Mike Gill, Frank Aurelio, and one of the guys in one of those pictures I sent. I can’t remember his name now. Oh! Oh well, it doesn’t matter. Anyway, I had those and I had my personal secretary. She was still there and so—her quarters were in Saigon and that last night I said, “Look, I don’t think you better go into Saigon. You’re going to have a hard time getting back into the airbase if you do. You better stay in my trailer tonight.” I had two bedrooms in my trailer and so she came to my trailer. Interestingly enough, her boyfriend was Mr. Vietnam. He was a weightlifter and he was in the Vietnamese Army. I think he was a sergeant. But he was Mr. Vietnam.

LC: No kidding.

WL: Yeah.

LC: What was her name?

WL: I’ll think of it again. You know these things are on the tip of my tongue and then they disappear somewhere.

LC: Well Bill was she a civilian employee of DAO?

WL: Yes. She was a civilian employee. She’s an American. She’d been with me since the beginning. She had worked for MACV and she didn’t want to go home. So she stayed and she came to me and asked me if I would hire her. I interviewed about three secretaries I guess and I picked her out. She had the longest legs of the whole group so she qualified, and so I hired her.

LC: Very good.

WL: Yeah. She was good. She took dictation very well. That’s what I needed. These were the days, you know, before word processors and when I wanted to write a letter it was either write it on long hand by myself, which was tedious, or I could call her in and dictate it and then she’d type it up. We’d send it off to the—
LC: The fact that she had not left before this is really quite remarkable as well.
WL: Yeah. She could have. She should have said she wanted to leave but she stuck by. Pretty good troop. So that night we went to the trailer probably around ten o’clock because there was plenty to do. One thing she did during that day for me was to assist in burning that truckload of twenty dollar bills we had. Did I tell you about that?
LC: No. Tell me about that. That sounds interesting.
WL: Well, the finance officer, she was leaving. It was a female. I can’t remember her name. So we shipped her out and she said, “Before I go I want to be sure that you destroy these boxes of twenty dollar bills.” It was about a million dollars worth I think on a hand truck. They were in wooden boxes. They were brand new twenties in bundles and General Smith told me that that was my responsibility to burn those. So I took my secretary and one other person—I can’t remember who it was—and we went out. There was a courtyard in the center of the DAO building with some burn barrels where we burned shredded documents. I told the lady and her assistant to go ahead and start burning those bills. It took them hours to burn all of these bills.
LC: Really? Were they also burning documents at this point?
WL: No. Actually, flash back a little bit, I anticipated—not I but we all anticipated I would say and I agreed, that we didn’t have much time left. So that was in December, December ’74. I don’t know if I told you this or not. I called the G2 in Hawaii and asked him to send me a microfilm machine and an operator so that I could begin destroying my intelligence files. Did I tell you about that?
LC: No. Not at all.
WL: Well, this was in December. I discussed this with my chief of current intelligence and we agreed that we better get rid of this stuff because when push came to shove and we had to get out in a hurry we didn’t want a mountain of documents to leave behind or to shred at the last minute. So we began shredding all of our intelligence files. The raw documents, the MISTAs, the weekly intelligence reports, everything we had in the file. As soon as we filled up a reel—actually they sent me a PFC or a SPC-4 or something from Hawaii. I didn’t tell General Smith about this because I didn’t want him to know that I had exceeded the limit of fifty military uniformed personnel in the theater. You know we had a limit and I didn’t want him to be culpable. I wanted to take the
responsibility myself for violating this rule so I didn’t tell him about it. Anyway, I had this fellow and brought him down [to the vault]. Of course he had to be cleared for all of this stuff. That’s why I had to get him from Hawaii G2.

LC: His job was to run the microfilm machine?

WL: Yeah. So he did all the photographing of all of these documents and putting them on a microfilm. As soon as he had a reel completed we mailed it to the G2 in Hawaii for safekeeping. So when we were there at the last days we had practically no paper at all in the current intelligence. I wasn’t smart enough to tell the people in the operations side to do the same thing so they had quite a mountain of stuff. The only difference was theirs was not of nearly as high classification as mine was. Their highest classification they had in that room was secret and I had top secret codeword stuff. So it wasn’t as nearly as serious. So on that last day, on the twenty-ninth, I think there’s a picture that I’ve sent you that shows us standing by a shredder, a mountain of shredded stuff on the floor shredding those documents. We got it done all right. They didn’t have nearly as much as I did on the intelligence side. But anyway, to continue that, those reels that I sent over to Hawaii, when I got back to the States and was assigned to write the history of the last two years I called the G2 in Hawaii and I said, “Send me those reels.” So I had at my disposal everything that we had produced and all of the raw documents that we had in the intelligence section. They had formed the basis for the book I wrote on the last two years of the war. That’s how that turned out.

LC: I’m sure they were invaluable.

WL: Yeah. I wonder where they are right now.

LC: I do to.

WL: I think Center of Military History must have them. The problem with them was most of them contained codeword classified materials and when I used them—that’s why I couldn’t footnote anything in my book because if I had footnoted it to a particular document that I was using DIA and the rest of the folks would have classified my book. The whole thing would have been classified secret or top secret, and of course that wouldn’t have made any sense. There’s no reason to write it and have it classified. So that’s why I didn’t footnote anything. I just gave a general summary at the end of each chapter of where the information came from.
LC: To your mind would that material be subject to declassification at this
remove now?

WL: Certainly should be. Yes. There may be some of it that they would have to
redact because of the source, but the material itself, the information contained in those
documents, there’s no reason at all that that should continue to be classified. It’s the
source of the information that could be still sensitive, but I think not. Not after all these
years. The fact that so much we would never talk about in those days about NSA and its
capabilities, it’s in the press everyday now. It’s a doggone shame. It’s a terrible event
that’s happened. In other words the cat’s out of the bag. Too bad. But that’s another
story.

LC: Sure.

WL: Anyway, you ask about documents and shredding. No, we didn’t have to
burn anything. We burned all those bills.

LC: But that was quite an undertaking it sounds like trying to—

WL: It was my job. So then about that time, sometime during that week, the
Navy established a small command post in our vault down at DAO. They had I think a
captain and maybe a rear admiral and a few swabbies running a little communications
center there because—they also deployed two or three companies of Marines. I can’t
remember how many they brought in but it was part of a battalion landing force to give
close end security around the DAO compound. As you know I believe there were two
Marines killed when the rockets started coming in that night.

LC: The night of the twenty-eighth?

WL: Twenty-eighth I believe it was. They hit—probably a 122 mm rocket hit on
a road junction, crossroads, right by our gate and there were two Marines there and they
were killed. They were the last, I guess the last casualties of the war.

LC: How many companies were at the DAO complex?

WL: I’m guessing—I’m sorry I can’t—I think there were two.

LC: Did anyone have to check off with you or did they come and say, “Bill, look,
here’s our plan. This is what’s going to happen.” What kind of communications did you
have with the Navy about their deployment of the Marines?
WL: I didn’t. I wasn’t involved in that. I guess they were dealing directly with
General Smith.

LC: I see. Okay.

WL: I don’t recall. I remember having to feed them. I got them over to the
command mess and we still had a very small operation going there and we issued some
rations to them. That’s all I can remember about that part of it. They did prepare the
buildings for demolitions. They ran what we called detonating cord all the way through
the hallways with charges of—I don’t know what they were using—TNT or plastic
explosive all through the building. So they detonated all of that stuff long after we left,
just before they left themselves, they detonated that. The building was effectively
destroyed as you can see from the photos I sent you. See how the roof is kind of caved in
here and there?

LC: Yes. It’s kind of like a wave effect. In between the weight bearing walls I
would guess the roof just collapsed or something.

WL: Anyway, that night, as I’d said—Ellen Tanner. That’s her name. Ellen
Tanner. That was my secretary’s name. She and I, we went to the trailer. Sometime
around three or four in the morning is when the rockets started coming in and that’s when
one of them hit the roof of the gym. Another one hit the side of General Smith’s house
and knocked the wall off.

LC: Was he there at the time?

WL: Yes he was there, and also a visiting general—I don’t remember who it
was—was there too and they were a little bit shaken up by that, naturally. Bulldozers had
come in. I don’t remember who brought us bulldozer but somebody brought a bulldozer
and knocked down the stanchions for the tennis courts, which were between our
headquarters building and General Smith’s quarters so that that area could be used as a
helipad. They knocked down the posts. They also pushed my car around and broke the
windows in it.

LC: You mentioned that somebody took after your car.

WL: Yeah. They pushed it sideways and well it just broke the windows and I
could still drive it. That’s when I went over and picked up General Chinh I think it was.
LC: Bill, can I ask a question about the situation over at JGS, over at the JGS compound? How closely were the analysts there, including Colonel Lung I would imagine, able to follow events in the field?

WL: They were probably following pretty well but I had Colonel Lung with me in my headquarters along with Brigadier General Tho, T-h-o. Tho was the J3, the chief of operations for the Joint General Staff. I also had with me lieutenant colonel of the Vietnamese Air Force who was the chief of security for Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The three of them we had them right with me in my command post and they were monitoring the situation. They had a radio—we had a radio in there—and they were talking to their headquarters over at JGS and also getting reports from the field about what was going on. I kept them there until it was late afternoon when it was no longer useful. There were no more reports coming in. There was nothing for them to do, so I put them on an aircraft, on a helicopter, and sent them off to the fleet. I believe they flew out to the carrier Midway first. They may have gone to Blue Ridge. I don’t remember now. From there on to Clark and to Guam and eventually to the United States.

LC: That’s the point at which I gather from your notes that you sent to us that you were handed the map?

WL: Yes. That’s when Lung was keeping track of the situation on that map in the command post and when I loaded them on the helicopter he handed me the map and he said, “You can take this and keep it.” He also handed me some little containers. You know what Chap Stick looks like?

LC: Sure.

WL: About that size only they were aluminum tubes and inside these tubes were rolled up large bills, large US currency. I don’t remember now how many he gave me, four or five of them. He said, “I’ll pick these up later.” Something like that, which he did. I kept them for him so that he’d have a little bit of a stake when he needed it in the United States.

LC: Something to start out with anyway.

WL: So they left. Also in that afternoon we had another interesting event. It was a group of about fifteen or twenty Vietnamese Air Force officers that were all armed. They were all carrying pistols or M-16s. They came to the door of the DAO office and
demanded to be brought in and flown out of there. So I think I had two Air Force officers in DCSOPS, in my operation section, and Major Hilgenburg and another one. I don’t remember who that was. I said, “Go down and talk to these fellows and tell them that we’ll move them out. Bring them in and sit them down in the conference room.” We had a little theater actually. It was not a conference room but rather a theater where we gave the briefings. It would hold about a hundred people I guess. So we brought them in there, sat them down, and calmed them down. Told them to give us their weapons, surrender their weapons. One of them gave me his movie camera, an 8 mm motion picture camera. I don’t know why he did that but anyway he gave it to me. He didn’t want to carry it with him. I went back and broke into the coke machine—I didn’t have any nickels—and brought them all cokes. Then we arranged—as soon as we could we loaded them on a bus and brought them over to the helicopter and shipped them out. It was a little bit tense for a while because they were very nervous and that made us nervous because they were armed and we weren’t. Well, we were but you wouldn’t want to have a firefight with a group of your allies at that time. Anyway, but Hilgenburg and his buddy defused the situation pretty well and he took care of them and got them out of there.

LC: If they hadn’t been armed Bill would the situation have unfolded differently?
WL: No. We would have moved them out anyway. They didn’t need their weapons. We didn’t have to be threatened to take care of them. We moved out people as long as we had the ability to do that.

LC: Well, I wanted to ask you about that. When you put Colonel Lung on the helicopter that came to the tennis court area how did you signal a helicopter to come there?
WL: As soon as they’d bring somebody over to the fleet they’d come on back and get more. Air America shut down its operation sometime later that afternoon or that evening. They just quit doing it and I don’t know what they did with it. They may have flown their helicopters over to Thailand. I really don’t know what happened to them. But from then on—all this while we were also getting helicopters from the fleet. That is, Marine Corps helicopters were providing most of our airlift by that time. I should back up and tell you about Ambassador Martin’s visit to the headquarters and what happened
there because it had an effect on our evacuation. In the morning—it must have been around nine o’clock—Ambassador Martin called me at my command post and asked me what the situation was. I told him, “Well it’s not good.” I said, “We’ve had to shut down all fixed wing aircraft flights out of Tan Son Nhut because of the rocket fire that’s been coming in on the runway and on the airbase itself. There was C-119 shot down. I said, “We can’t fly out of here anymore. We having to go to hundred percent helicopter lift.” He said, “Well I want to come out and see for myself.” So I said, “Fine. Hope you make it.” Something like that because things were really hard to get into—it wasn’t the danger of the fire, there wasn’t that much of it. Every once in a while a rocket can get your attention when it explodes close to you, but still it wasn’t an intense barrage or concentration of them. But anyway case, he drove out and he came into the command post. He talked to me and to General Smith for a while and he said, “Well I want to go down to the flight line.” I said, “Well that’s not really a good idea.” He said, “Well I want to go down there and see what’s going on.” So he did. He got in his sedan again and he rode right down to the flight line and that confirmed for him that he had done all he could. He actually saw the buildings that had been hit by fire and airplanes that were broken by the rockets that came in and things like that. So he came back and he said, “Yeah I agree. We have to shut down the flights.” Well, we’d already shut them down anyway because no aviator is going to fly in there anyway when he sees that going on. So I had the only secure telephone. The only encrypting telephone left in the headquarters was in my office. Incidentally, the chief of communications had tried to take that away from me early on and I said, “You’re not going to do that. We still have to be able to talk to NKP and we have to be able to talk to CINCPAC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington and I still need that phone.” So General Smith backed me up and said, “Sure, we still need that.” It was one of the first or second generations of these telephones and they’re hard to talk on but at least they’re secure.

LC: What do you mean they were hard to talk on?

WL: Well you get kind of a garbled funny tone out of them. It sounds like somebody’s talking into a number ten tin can, but anyway they worked. They’re much better these days. But anyway Ambassador Martin says, “I want to use your phone.” So I brought him back into where I had that—in the vault area where I had that secure phone
and I said, “Go ahead.” So he called Brent Scowcroft and I guess Scowcroft was deputy national security advisor, wasn’t he? Yeah, I think he was at that time. He might have been the national security advisor. I can’t recall. Anyway, he talked to Brent Scowcroft and he told Scowcroft that he had to shut down the flights out of here and they had a conversation. I believe Martin—I’m not sure of this—but I believe he told Scowcroft that he, Martin, was going to stay. Scowcroft gave firm orders from the president that he wasn’t going to stay, that he was going to leave right away as soon as he could get out of there and that we were all going to leave. We thought at the time, at least I thought, that we had every right to stay. We were not at war with anybody. We were only there to assist the South Vietnamese and there was no legal reason why the United States had to leave Vietnam. Under the peace agreement, why, we were allowed to be there. I think in hindsight it might have been a good idea for the United States to make that very clear that we were not leaving, but we didn’t. I can understand why they didn’t want to do it. It’s interesting question though. Why did we have to leave?

LC: Were you of the mind even on the twenty-ninth, let’s say, or the twenty-eight, twenty-ninth, that you yourself were going to remain there?

WL: No. I knew that I would do what I was told to do and I could see that the attitude was we were going to leave so we were prepared. To backtrack a little bit, we were in a very difficult situation so far as our own belongings were concerned. I didn’t want to ship a lot of stuff out and create the impression to my Vietnamese compatriots that I was prepared to leave. I had to do this very carefully and I did make one shipment of my own personal belongings out. I did that probably around the first of April or so. I cut down my stuff and later on I had the rest of my things crated and they were in crates in my trailer and I had to leave them there. I didn’t have a chance to move that stuff. That was things like my library and other personal things, my uniforms and so on. I just had to abandon those things. Incidentally, my other stuff that I did ship out was all destroyed in a warehouse fire in California anyway. It didn’t matter whether I shipped them or not. I think somebody set fire to the warehouse and after stealing everything of value. All of us that shipped our stuff out in that early part of April lost everything in that warehouse fire in California. So we ended up with nothing out of it. But that’s another—
LC: Well, you did very well to get the things out that you did, for example, the map and some of the other things that you’ve deposited here.

WL: One of the Vietnamese friends of mine gave me two elephant tusks. For some reason or other I still have those. I had them in my handbag. I don’t know what I’m going to do with them. I think it’s illegal to have them.

LC: I think you’re right. Well, we’ll keep it on the down low.

WL: Well anyway, Martin made that phone call to Scowcroft and that kind of sealed the situation. We were going to leave and we were going to leave on helicopters and no more fixed wings so that was it. We shook hands and he went back to the embassy and that’s the last I saw of him until—well, until later, you know. He came to my retirement ceremony or when they gave me that—

LC: Medal.

WL: I saw him. I don’t know what it was. Then I saw him at his home down in North Carolina later.

LC: What was his demeanor both before he went out to sort of do his visual recon on the airstrip and so on, and when he returned and was on the phone? Were you watching him?

WL: Yes. I was with him all the while. I didn’t go down to the flight line with him. I stayed in headquarters.

LC: Right. You already knew pretty much what he was going to see.

WL: Yeah. I’d been down there so I knew what it looked like.

LC: How was he fairing?

WL: He looked very ill. He was ill. I guess he had flu or bronchitis or something and he looked sick. But he was—well, he was in charge. He was his old self. He’s a pretty strong guy but he did look sick. We were all a little bit solemn I would say. I guess that’s one word to put about what we were facing there.

LC: Oh, I can absolutely imagine. Who was with him? Did he have a guard with him of some kind?

WL: I don’t remember any. He may have had an aide with him, I don’t remember now.

LC: Were you at all concerned for his safety or the safety of his party?
WL: Well yes I was but there wasn’t anything I could do with my concern. He was going to go back anyway. I suppose we could have tried to get him to fly back but still the situation at the embassy was probably worse, and we didn’t know that. I didn’t know how bad things were down at the embassy and whether they had—I suppose at that time in the morning it hadn’t gotten to be too dicey down there. I’m sure they had quite a few crowds around the place by that time though.

LC: I’m sure. Yeah. Let me ask about your own setup. Had most of your folks left you? You told us that you were down to a skeleton staff.

WL: Ellen Tanner, I sent her out in the morning after she finished burning the bills and then we—I had I guess two or three analysts from current intelligence. I’d already sent out the chief, that is, Lieutenant Colonel Witter. I sent him out earlier as I’d mentioned before to pay the employees. I didn’t have very many people left.

LC: Were you trying to provide continual reporting at this point? Were you doing any reporting?

WL: No. We weren’t reporting anything. We’re keeping track of it but there was nobody to report to. We didn’t have the communications setup. We’d destroyed our communications center. See, all of our reports went out through one center. It was called the SSO—I think I mentioned that before, didn’t I?

LC: Yes.

WL: They had taken all of the classified material out. I had gone back there later with a sledge and broken everything I could with a sledgehammer.

LC: You broke all the equipment?

WL: Yes. Although that was probably not very important to do that because they’d taken all the classified stuff out. Anyway, what I was breaking was typewriters and things like that. I remember I went upstairs to my office. See, I had two offices. I had an office upstairs. It was in an unclassified area and I remember tossing my electric typewriter out the window. I had some very nice general officer style furniture up there and I cut it up. It was all leather—standard issue for general officers and I had inherited the office of the old MACV chief of staff, who was a lieutenant general. He had very nice furniture up there. I destroyed all of that. I didn’t want the Communists to get a hold of that in its original condition. It was just something to do.
LC: I mean did it make you feel better?
WL: I guess it did, yeah. At least they weren’t going to inherit it. My deputy chief of current intelligence left a large python snake in his trailer. It was his pet. He was kind of a strange guy. Wally Moore. He was a civilian. Had been military. A good military intelligence analyst, but man he had a pet python in his trailer. He left that for the Communists to find. It was about an eight foot long snake.

LC: Wow.
WL: What else happened there? I don’t know. Oh, well, we had one incident. The chief of logistics for Det K in Saigon, they had a couple of safe houses and some vehicles and his name is Mike Gill. He was an Army veteran from Korea. Had been ex-master sergeant. Wounded very badly in Korea but had come back as a civilian in intelligence. He was infantry before. He got stuck outside the perimeter of the airbase. Couldn’t get in because of the crowds around the gates. On the edge of Tan Son Nhut Airbase there’s a golf course so he walked through the golf course and he got to another gate and it was locked. It had a big padlock on it, and he called us on his—he had a little handheld radio—and he called Andy Gembara in our command post and I was standing next to Andy when the call came in. He said, “This is Mike. I’m locked out. I can’t get in.” Of course it was time for him to get in so they could leave. Andy said, “Well, do you have your .45 with you?” Mike said, “Oh yeah.” He said, “Well, then what’s the matter with you? All you have to do is shoot off the lock.” So that’s what Mike did. He shot the lock off the gate and he came in the back way to Tan Son Nhut and eventually he showed up at the headquarters. It’s just a footnote that’s not of importance but—

LC: Well, I mean it’s quite interesting because it shows, you know, the state of people’s minds and people were clearly concerned and he was trying to figure out how to get in.
WL: There was still in the Vietnamese Army unit of a—probably most of one of the airborne regiments was providing external security around the airbase and they were still there. But they were getting a little bit edgy too. So the whole situation I would say was pretty tense. You didn’t want to stray too far from Tan Son Nhut because you wouldn’t get back in, at least it would be difficult. As soon as we, as I mentioned before, we had moved the evacuation center of civilians and all the other people that we were
moving out from the gymnasium because it had been hit by a rocket and we moved the
people into our headquarters there at DAO. As soon as we went through the building and
found nobody else there to leave then General Smith and I, we talked it over and we
decided, “Well, there’s not much more for us to do here. We’ve taken care of all of the
refugees that wanted to get out and we might as well shut it down and turn out the lights
and leave.” Of course, we still had a couple companies of Marines there. We weren’t the
last people out. Some people think we were. But the Marines were the last out because
they had to secure the base until we all left. It was around 8 PM I guess or maybe a little
later—it was dark—that we walked out to the pad and got on I guess it was an HH3
Marine Corps helicopter and flew out. There was only about ten of us I think from DAO
still there and there were about fifteen or twenty Vietnamese, the last lift, on the aircraft.
That was one of those large helicopters and we flew out to the carrier Midway, flying up
over Saigon. You could look down and see the city was pretty dark. But you could see
little bit of flashes here and there. Apparently some artillery firing off to the edge of the
city, but not much else going on. The only hazard that we recognized in flying out was
that the Communists at that time had heat-seeking rockets. It was called the SA-7 I think.
I’m not sure. I forgot the designation. But they had already shot down at least one
Vietnamese C—it was an AC-119 that afternoon. But that was the only hazard that we
faced in flying out and we didn’t get shot at so we landed on the carrier. The Vietnamese
in the aircraft were immediately flown off to another ship. They were not kept on
Midway. We were guided over to the sergeant of arms office first and told to surrender
our sidearms. I had my old Army .45 and a little short barreled .38 I think that Andy
Gembara had given me out of his stock of weapons, .38 revolver, and turned that in to the
sergeant of arms, got a receipt.

LC: Were you still with the general at this point?

WL: With General Smith, yeah. General Smith had to turn over his little pistol.
Generals are issued a little .32 caliber automatic Colt and he had to surrender that. Of
course we got receipts and when we left Midway why, we could recover them. I never
bothered to take mine. I didn’t want to be bothered with a couple of pistols and have to
fly on commercial airlines home and so on. So I didn’t need that weapon anymore. I
don’t know what the Navy did with it but that’s another issue. So then we were shown
the staterooms. I shared a little cabin with a Navy aviator—nice quarters. We were all pretty dirty. Hadn’t been able to get cleaned up for a couple of days. Uniform was really filthy and I didn’t have an extra uniform. It was in khakis.

LC: Pretty much all you had was—?

WL: Well, I had a handbag and a briefcase. That’s all I had. I had my last—I think I was carrying the last MISTA with me and a couple of other documents and that’s about it.

LC: You must have had that map with you.

WL: Yeah. I had the map and I had the two elephant tusks because the guy gave it to me at the last minute. You know? I didn’t want to leave them behind. I think he was the chief of the Combined Intelligence Center.

LC: Bill were you in need of getting some rest at this point or were you anxious to try to stay on top of developments and find out what was happening?

WL: There was nothing for me to do with developments. I was interested in getting some rest and in looking over *Midway*. It was the first time I’d been on a carrier. It was interesting. The captain allowed me to come up on the bridge with him from time to time and when he wasn’t there I could sit in his chair. Had a great view of the South China Sea and the other ships in the fleet out there. Aircraft were—that is helicopters from the Vietnamese Air Force were flying out there and landing on the deck. As you probably have heard, the deck of *Midway* got cluttered with VNAF helicopters to the point that they presented a hazard. If *Midway* had to launch any fighters they wouldn’t have been able to do it. Well, they might have been able to launch them but they wouldn’t be able to recover them so I watched them push helicopters off the fantail of *Midway*, even big helicopters like CH-47s. A few sailors would get in the front end of it and push and the thing would roll off the back end of *Midway* into the sea. I watched another Vietnamese helicopter come out and apparently he was on his last fuel and he crashed off the bow of *Midway*. I believe they were able to recover him. Another Vietnamese, a little what they called a Bird Dog, little O-1 single engine airplane landed on the deck. He came in and he circled *Midway* and I was up on the deck, up on the bridge with the captain, when he came in and the captain directed full steam ahead to get the carrier moving fast so this guy would be able to land and not roll too far.
LC: Right. Gosh.
WL: In the right direction, which he did. The carrier was moving against the wind and that little Cessna came in and landed and it only rolled about fifteen or twenty feet and it came to a stop.
LC: You were moving pretty good then.
WL: The ship was going probably about thirty knots by that time. It was very interesting because the pilot climbed out, then his wife climbed out, and then there were about six kids that came out of that airplane. This is a two seat airplane but it was jammed up, the fuselage was, with this lieutenant or captain, whatever he was, and all his kids were in the airplane. All the sailors were so pleased with that. They gathered the family together and took them down and gave them something to eat. Of course they had to move them off too to another ship.
LC: Any idea what happened to the plane? Did they push it over?
WL: Oh yeah they pushed it over the side. There wasn’t any room for it. They had—let’s see, Air Marshall Ky, Nguyen Cao Ky, had flown out to the Midway a few hours before and they had taken his Huey and put it on the elevator and brought it down to the hangar deck. I saw it down there. Somebody brought me down there and showed me the hangar deck and there was Ky’s Huey. Ky wasn’t there anymore. They’d moved him off too.
LC: Any idea why they kept that helicopter?
WL: Probably because it was so pretty. It belonged to the chief of the Vietnamese Air Force. I don’t know what happened to it. Actually I guess the Navy might have considered it Navy property by then. I don’t know.
LC: But Ky himself had left the aircraft carrier?
WL: Yes. Yes. He wasn’t there any longer.
LC: They were moving—it sounds like the plan was to move Vietnamese nationals to a different ship?
WL: Yes. They moved them to a different ship and I don’t know what ship that was. But it was probably a Navy logistical ship of some kind or it might have been a Navy troop ship. I really don’t know. They did take them from there. They took them into Subic Bay. From Subic they moved them to Clark and then from Clark they flew
them over to Guam where the Navy had established a very large tent camp for temporary staging facility. As soon as they got the system going and had enough aircraft coming in they moved them out of there to the United States through Hickam in Hawaii. They flew them from there into different parts of the United States. I don’t know if they all went into California first or not. They may have flown them directly. By that time—I don’t know who was in charge of this, I think it was State Department—established camps all over the United States at military bases to receive the Vietnamese refugees, process them, and get them established with sponsors, American sponsors, and so on. It was a very neat operation that they established for that purpose. I know quite a few came through Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. As I mentioned before down in Marine Corps base in California where Lung went—

LC: Pendleton?

WL: Pendleton. Yeah. Pendleton. I think some of them went with Lung. Some of them went into Arkansas and even today you’ll find little communities of Vietnamese that stayed near those Army bases. Quite a few of them stayed around Indiantown Gap there in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the Amish country there. There are quite a few Vietnamese families still there.

LC: Bill, let me ask about your next several days. Did you spend them on Midway or did you move along too?

WL: No. We were on Midway for I would say about two days, maybe three. While the Vietnamese were still flying aircraft out there, helicopters, Midway stayed out there so it could receive them. But when that died off, I mean by that time the Communists were in control and there were no more flights coming out, why Midway then turned and headed for Thailand. We went into Thailand close to the port; I believe the port is Sattahip. We were lifted off the carrier and flown into Bangkok, into the airfield at Bangkok. I think we went into Bangkok. I don’t think we went to U-Tapao. We might have flown into the airbase. Perhaps that’s what we did. I think that’s what we did—into the U.S. airbase at U-Tapao, which is near Bangkok—and put on buses or a bus, there was only a few of us, and driven into the hotel. I think it was the Indura Hotel in Bangkok. There was an opportunity to buy some clothes. I bought a little tailor, a little clothing shop in the basement of the hotel, and bought a leisure suit. That’s what I wore
from then until we got to Hawaii. We were schedule to fly out the next day to Hawaii but the Pan Am airplane broke down so we didn’t get to do that. We had to wait another day. Then we flew through Hong Kong to Hickam in Honolulu, Hickam Airbase. We were driven from there over to Fort Shafter, which is the Army base, headquarters of the US Army Pacific was at Fort Shafter. I guess it still is. We were given some office space there and we were put up in a motel very close to Shafter. We were given rental cars. They gave me a rental car and General Smith and a few others. The rest of them had to use Army transportation but the senior folks got rental cars. Our mission was to close out our accounts. The logisticians had a lot to do, to write up their final reports, what they lost, and what they recovered, and to balance the books more or less. I guess you could call it that. I had to write our final report, our final monthly intelligence summary, and I had a small team there. I had about, as I say, about three or four analysts, and we started writing the final report. We didn’t emphasize very much the evacuation of it. The other people worried about that. That wasn’t really my job. I had a few people from the operations sanction and they wrote that part of it. What we wrote about was the final military operations that ended in the capitulation. So that was about it. We stayed there until—it took us until the sixth of June. I guess we got there about third or fourth of May, probably about that time. It took us about a month to finish it off. We enjoyed the relaxation and the sights of Honolulu.

LC: What was the mood, Bill, amongst that group of guys that you had come out with and that apparently you stayed with for the next month or so in doing these kinds of shutting down activities?

WL: All just about the same mood. We were disgusted with our own government. I had even thought about it almost seriously I say about not coming back to the United States and living there anymore. I thought, “Well, maybe I could find something to do in Malaysia or Bangkok and I wouldn’t have to go home.” That was kind of an emotional reaction. Didn’t have a great deal of sense to it so I gave that up. What I did do though, I wrote a letter or rather a message to General Weyand, who was then the chief of staff of the Army. I think I mentioned I had two meetings with Weyand before I left when he came over to Vietnam?

LC: Let’s go ahead and put them in here if you don’t mind.
WL: Well anyway, the last month before we left President Ford sent General Weyand over to see what the situation was because he wanted a first hand report. So naturally we gave General Weyand a formal briefing about the military situation and General Smith told him about the logistical situation. He went to the embassy and they gave him their take on it. Then General Weyand pulled me aside and he said, “I want to talk to you privately.” Now, I had known General Weyand when he was commanding his Infantry Division while I was in the Infantry Division.

LC: Back in Vietnam—

WL: Back in 1966, ’67. Fine officer. He was a graduate of University of California as I was and he had served in intelligence assignments during World War II. He was in the China-Burma-India Theater, as I remember. Any case, he was a very fine officer, infantry officer, and he pulled me aside. We went into my office and he said, “Tell me what you think.” I had two meetings with him like that. Essentially what I told him was that the resumption of the United States military assistance to Vietnam is not an issue any longer. Even if you were to start it now, by the time it would have any effect the Communists would already be in Saigon. It takes a while to start that pipeline going again.

LC: Was this in about December ’74 or later?

WL: This was I would say in March. I’m sure it’s in my book. You’ll have to look that up for me.

LC: Will do.

WL: But I think it was in mid-March and I said, “It’s too late for that.” I said, “There are two things that will be required right now if you’re going to forestall the collapse of South Vietnam. One is you have to authorize the use of US air power again and US Naval power against the North Vietnamese. That has to be done right away, and that is the only way you can stop the Communist offensive.” When I said two things I think that’s what I told him. It was only one thing. That was the only thing that was going to save them now. “You still have to reinstate the military assistance program. Congress has to appropriate the funds to buy the equipment and the materiel to replace all of the losses that the South Vietnamese have suffered over the last few months. All that has to be replaced. But that’s not going to do it now because by the time you get it it’ll
be too late.” So that’s it. That’s what I told him. I didn’t pull any punches, and I don’t
know what he told the president, naturally. President Ford at the time, as I remember,
was vacationing. In the last days, at least, during the period of the last few weeks when
Weyand was out there he was in Palm Springs playing golf. Then so, anyway, that’s my
visit with General Weyand and he clearly understood the situation. He’s no dummy. I
had meetings with other senior officers before Weyand came out. General Don Bennett
was by that time at least a lieutenant general. He was the Army planner when I was
working in DCSOPS, when he was a brigadier. He came out to see me, and that was
sometime in the fall I think of ’74. He came to my trailer and we had a private talk.

LC: Along these same lines?
WL: Yeah. Along the same lines. Of course things weren’t in extremes by that
time. Things weren’t that bad. That was before Ban Me Thuot. In fact it was probably
before the fall of Phuoc Long when Don Bennett came out. He just died here a couple
weeks ago. Very smart, very fine officer. He retired as a four star. I think General Potts
came out. I told them all what the situation really was. So there was no doubt in my
mind that the highest levels of the Army at least they knew what I thought. I’d known
most of these people before and they knew me. They had to probably believe what I said,
and I think they probably did. There was nothing they could do about it. Anyway, there
when we got back at Fort Shafter I wrote this message for General Weyand. I asked
General Smith to send it and of course that was more protocol than anything else. I was
not really authorized to communicate directly with the chief of staff of the Army, even
though I knew him. So General Smith signed off on it and sent it to General Weyand.
What it said was—I think I may have sent a copy to you. I don’t know. Anyway, it said
someone should write down what really happened in the last two years in Vietnam. I
think that unless I do it and do it now nobody will. Nobody will really understand the
combat that took place after the so-called ceasefire. Most people in the United States still
believed that the war was over when the ceasefire was signed at the end of January ’73. I
said that I had the capability to do that and I would like in my next assignment to do that
for the Army. He wrote back immediately a message that said, “That’s a good idea.” He
offered me my choice of where I wanted to do this. He said that I could do it at Carlisle,
Carlisle Barracks, the Army War College, where they have a military history institute or I
could go to the Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. and do it. I chose the
latter because the Center of Military History had a better facility for that. They had more
archives; they had more professional historians working there. I thought that would be a
better choice. So that’s where I told him and so that’s how I got assigned to write that
monograph and work on the last two years.

LC: How quickly, Bill, did these arrangements fall into place?
WL: Oh within forty-eight hours. I mean he answered right away.
LC: Really? You made your choice to go to Washington right away?
WL: Yeah. So within a few days I had orders to report to the Center of Military
History with General Collins, so that’s what happened. Of course I had quite a few days
of leave accrued. I hadn’t taken any leave, any extensive leave for a long time. So I took
I don’t know how many days leave. Then I had to collect Lung from Camp Pendleton
and take Lung and his little family off to Washington.

LC: How was it to meet up with him again? Can you describe that?
WL: Lung?
LC: Yes.
WL: That was pretty emotional too to pull him out of that tent camp he was in.
Here he was the Chief of Intelligence for the Vietnamese Armed Forces and he was being
treated just like any other refugee. Now, I’m not saying that’s wrong but any refugee, no
matter what his rank, is still a refugee and have to be accorded the courtesies and the care
that anyone should deserve. But still it was a little bit demeaning, I felt, for him to be in
that situation. But the Marines didn’t know any better. They didn’t know who he was
and I’m not faulting them for that.

LC: How was he bearing up?
WL: Fine. He was happy because he knew that his wife was in good hands and
his baby was in good hands. He didn’t have any worries.

LC: As you mentioned she was pregnant at this point and you got them settled in
the Washington, D.C. area?
WL: Well, she was still at my wife’s mother’s house.
LC: In Fremont?
WL: In Fremont, California. That’s near San Jose.
LC: So how did it happen? Did you gather her and little Mimi—was that her name?

WL: Yeah. Little Mimi. Lung and I flew back to Fremont and I think we stayed there at her house for another few days. They treated her very well. I mean my wife’s family was just so nice to them. Then I believe we all flew, yeah, we all flew back together—Lung and I and Mimi and Liz. I took them up to Fort Meade and turned them over to Colonel Weidhas in his quarters there in Fort Meade. He took care of them for several days and I don’t remember now how long. Colonel Weidhas and his wife Kay, they treated them awfully nice. I didn’t even have a car. I bought a little used car somewhere around Fort Meade somewhere and drove down to Washington and I found an apartment.

LC: For yourself or—?

WL: For myself. Yeah. My wife was still back in—

LC: California.

WL: —in Fremont until I got something established there. Shortly after I got here, why, I found an apartment for Lung and Liz in Alexandria. Got them established; got some of Lung’s friends and so on established. Colonel Huang showed up, Le Minh Huang. I got the kids registered in school. I had a lot of things to do to get them started. Colonel Le Minh Huang had it pretty good because—who’s that fellow who started EDA? Ross Perot. Ross Perot took a lot of Vietnamese Air Force officers under his wing and he gave Huang a real good job, at I think they called it EDA.

LC: EDS?

WL: EDS.

LC: Electronic Data Systems I think.

WL: Yeah. EDS. That was it. So Huang got a job there. It turned out into a great job. He became their representative in France later on. He was fluent in French, as Lung is, and he got a good job there. Lung went to Northern Virginia Community College and studied computer programming and General Murray hired him over at the Association of American Railroads. I think I told you. I don’t know. He got a job as a programmer in their large computer system at AAR. When he retired a couple years ago
he was the chief programmer for Association of American Railroads. So he’s got
railroad retirement.

LC: That’s pretty good.

WL: Yeah.

LC: That was a pretty good way to end up. Very lucky.

WL: So there was a lot to do. Then I reported in to General Collins and got
started there writing the book. He told—by that time MacDonald, what’s his first name?

Charles MacDonald! You may have heard of him. I don’t know.

LC: I don’t think I have.

WL: Charles MacDonald wrote an excellent book about World War II. He was a
company commander I believe in the Infantry Division in Europe and he wrote a book
called *Company Commander*. If you’re ever interested in looking at a good book on what
it was like to be an infantry company commander in World War II in Europe, why,
Charles MacDonald did a masterful job of putting that down.

LC: He was there at the center?

WL: Yeah. He was then one of the senior editors at the Center of Military
History, one of the senior writers and editors at the Center of Military History.

Everything I wrote I gave to him to look at and he fixed a lot of stuff that I had—you
know, helped me a lot in making it make sense and writing it well. I had an official
editor too but he wasn’t nearly as helpful as Charlie MacDonald was. Unfortunately, he
died a few years ago too. Everybody seems to be dropping off.

LC: Yeah. That’s kind of the unfortunate piece of some of these—

WL: But again keep that in mind. Charles MacDonald, *Company Commander*.

LC: So he helped with—?

WL: He helped me with my book. Not that he did any writing. But I showed him
everything I wrote and he would tell me what needed fixing and so on.

LC: Right, and some of the organizational things. I mean writing a book is a big
undertaking so it does help to have an external eye kind of look at things and help you
along.

WL: Again this was before word processors. They had just introduced word
processors into the Center of Military History. They were brand new to them. The
typists that were there writing manuscripts, typing manuscripts, were green. They were having a difficult time moving from their Remingtons over to word processors. I wrote everything long hand and they would have to decipher it and rewrite it and type it. It was hard job for them, harder for them than it was for me.

LC: Bill, how did you feel about going over the material that you had at hand, the things that had been microfilmed and everything else? I mean did you try to stay distant and be an objective author? That’s how it comes out in the book.

WL: Yeah. I did. I did my best to do that. It was emotional; a lot of it was because everything would trigger a memory of something or other. Some of the people involved, and it still is. It’s still hard sometimes to talk about. I thought I’d get over it but I never have.

LC: Well it’s an extremely important book and I hope that it sees wider distribution because I think it still remains the most important book written about that period, in my mind.

WL: Thank you. Incidentally one of my friends asked me for a copy and I said, “I don’t have any to give away anymore.” I’ve given away everything—all that the center gave me. I have only two copies left, but I looked on Amazon.com. They had two copies. They’re selling them for around sixteen or eighteen dollars and—

LC: That’s a bargain actually.

WL: Really? They were published for about six dollars or something like that.

LC: I’m very surprised that they don’t—

WL: Yeah, but there are only two of them left and I bought one of them.

LC: You did? Good for you!

WL: Because I wanted to give it to this guy.

LC: Good for you.
WL: Well, at the Center of Military History I was assigned there on orders
directly from the chief of staff of the Army and kind of outside of the general flow of
things at military history. The people that were normally assigned there were
professional historians of one kind or another, at least they’d had some advanced
education in history. So I was kind of an odd man out although I was treated very nicely.
Gen. Jimmy Collins, Brig. Gen. Jimmy Collins, was the chief of military history there, a
very fine officer. He told Charles MacDonald—Charles MacDonald was a senior
historian there, a civilian, who had served as a company commander in Europe in the 2nd
Infantry Division in his tour there. He wrote a very fine book called *Company
Commander* about what it was like to be an infantry rifle company commander in the war
against Germany. He gave me a lot of help in looking over what I wrote and correcting
syntax and other things that I had not much skill in. I had another, Colonel Ransom, R-a-
n-s-o-m, was an engineer officer and also a historian at the center and he was my official
editor in the first go around of it. But I relied more on Charles MacDonald for help in
formatting the thing. The offices were in L’Enfant Plaza downtown in Washington, D.C.
After a while it became apparent that it wasn’t necessary for me to be in the office down
there everyday so a lot of the writing I did at my home in Vienna, Virginia on a
typewriter and brought it in. The typists in the Center of Military History were being
introduced at that time to a new invention called the word processor on a computer. They
hadn’t been familiar with how to do that before. All of the manuscripts were typed on
electric typewriters. It was a learning process for them although they picked it up rather
fast. That’s how the manuscript was printed. They offered me a room in the basement of
the Forestall Building, which was a secure area in which to use the microfilms on which
all of my documents had been placed. I think I went over this earlier.

LC: You did mention the microfilms, yes.

WL: In the last few weeks in Vietnam we put all of our intelligence documents on
microfilm. They were sent to the Army G2 for the Pacific in Hawaii and when I began
writing this book I had those microfilms shipped over to me at the Center of Military
History. But because of the classification on them a lot of them were codeword
documents. I had to use a secure area in the basement of the building there and work on
the microfilm machine. It was kind of hard on my eyes for a while.

LC: Yes. For those of us who’ve done it we know.

WL: Tedious going through all of the documents because they were not well
indexed. I had to make my own index as I went along to find what was there.

LC: Do you still have your index Bill?

WL: No. I turned it over to Military History.

LC: Because it would have been essentially a classified document also?

WL: Yeah. It referred to classified documents and I have no idea what happened
to it. When I wrote a chapter, because of the classification of the material I did not make
footnotes in the book because they would refer to documents that weren’t available
anyway to anybody. It would have caused problems I’m sure when the document or
manuscript went over to Defense Intelligence Agency for screening and clearance. If I
had referred to classified documents by name they would not have cleared the
manuscript. It would have been a classified publication and I didn’t want that so I just
made what I called reference notes at the end of each chapter just describing in general
terms what the sources were for that chapter. That’s why that was done that way.

LC: Bill do you know whether those documents have now been declassified?

WL: No I don’t. I don’t know where they are or whether any attempt has been
made to have them declassified. It would be a nice task for you to try to find that out.

LC: Yeah, I think I might.
WL: All it would take I guess would be a call to Center of Military History and ask them if, one, if they know where they are and two, are they’re available. If they’ve been declassified they would be an excellent resource for your collection.

LC: What title might they travel under, do you know?

WL: Well, no I don’t know. The thing to do is to tell them that I wrote—I don’t know if there’s anybody still in that office that was there when I was there. I kind of doubt it.

LC: Probably not.

WL: But just tell them that I wrote that monograph—well, I think they call it a monograph. I don’t know. You know the title.

LC: I do, yes.

WL: Tell them that I wrote it there at Center of Military History in 1975 and ’76 and that I used classified documents that were on microfilm and those microfilms should still be in their collection somewhere.

LC: Okay, I will. I’ll write them a letter and I’ll CC (carbon copy) you, how about that?

WL: Yeah. Tell them if they want to talk to me you can give them my phone number and I’ll be happy to verify that.

LC: We’ll see what happens.

WL: Yeah. Do what I can to do it. Another suggestion I have that you might want to make to them and that is that they do another printing of the book. I get requests from time to time from people and I say, “Well, I just don’t have anymore and it’s out of print.” Somebody asked me for it the other day and I went on to the internet, found it on—my daughter found it for me actually—what do they call it?

LC: Amazon or eBay or something?

WL: Yeah. It was on—I can’t remember the name of it.

LC: Amazon?

WL: Amazon! It was on Amazon. Amazon had two copies and I bought one of them.

LC: What’d they want for it?

WL: It was about fifteen dollars.
LC: Wow, that’s a deal.

WL: Yeah, in that neighborhood. Of course the government printing office was only getting $6.50 for it.

LC: I have a feeling if they do a reissue it’s going to be about—

WL: But they had two copies and the one I got had been in a library somewhere.

LC: Oh so somebody had pulled it out of the—

WL: It was withdrawn from the library collection I guess.

LC: I can’t stand it! Don’t tell me where, what library would pull this out! It’s unbelievable.

WL: But it was in mint condition. I don’t think anybody had—the reason they got rid of it was—

LC: Nobody used it. Yeah. Oh shit, well, I’ll take this part out of the interview Bill but I think it would be a good exercise in something I’ll do. I’ll write a letter to them and put it on letterhead and we’ll see what happens and I’ll send you a copy.

WL: Okay. That’s that. Well, I’ve given you all—is there any other question you want to ask about writing the book?

LC: Well, you mentioned that you had to move around a lot. Well, you told me that the headquarters for the Center for Military History was kind of moved around during the period you were there.

WL: While I was there the Department of Energy took over that building. It was called the Forestall Building in the L’Enfant Plaza and the Department of Energy took it over and we moved to a building up near Union Station. Another thing that happened to me at that time, I was having again trouble with sciatica so they gave me a standing desk so I didn’t have to sit down. So I stood up and did a lot of writing at my desk when I worked at the center.

LC: Oh is that right?

WL: Yeah. I was relatively comfortable standing up but sitting down was difficult so I did a lot of writing standing up. They furnished me maps—in fact I had to go over to an Army map depot in Arlington, Virginia and collect the maps that I needed in order to write the book. They had a very fine cartographer and illustrator working for
the center. I can’t recall his name right now, but he did all of the illustrations, all of the
map illustrations, in the book and those are the only illustrations in the book.

LC: Well, and they’re so crucial too to the understanding.

WL: They’re important because unless you have a very detailed understanding of
the geography there you couldn’t get an idea of what I was talking about when I’m
describing the formations and the units and how battles developed.

LC: Yes, exactly. Where the movements were and why they had to go in a certain
direction following main roads and so on. Bill, let me ask about this as an assignment.
Were you thinking at the time that this would probably be your last posting?

WL: Yes. I thought it might be. While I was there writing the book I received a
call from a brigadier general I knew over in the Pentagon who asked me if I would
consider coming over and taking the China desk in the Defense Intelligence Agency,
being in charge of China desk. I said, “Well, I’m absolutely unqualified to do that. I
have never made a serious study of China, I don’t know the language. I’m sure there’s
somebody in the Army that you can find that would be suited to that task and I certainly
don’t want it.” The other thing I had in my mind, I said, “I don’t want a staff job. If the
Army would assign me as a division chief of staff I’d stay on gladly but that’s about the
only thing I would accept as an assignment. I don’t want to be a staff officer any longer.”

LC: When you say a staff job what kinds of jobs are we talking about?

WL: Well, like that one, chief of a China desk in the Pentagon or anything that
did not involve troops. A chief of staff of an infantry division is with troops with a
tactical unit and is involved in combat operations and that’s the only thing I would be
interested in continuing. I still had a couple of more years that I could stay on. I was a
colonel on the regular Army list, a permanent colonel. I wasn’t temporary. So I had,
because of three of my years of service were as an enlisted man, I still had at least two
more years after I’d finished that book that I could stay on. I think you have to retire
after twenty-eight years, something like that, as a regular colonel if you’re not selected to
be a general.

LC: Did you fish around for a command of some kind?

WL: I told the colonel’s branch that manages the careers of colonels that I would
like to continue on but the only assignment I would accept would be something with
troops. I figured that I was too old for them to assign me as a brigade commander, they
want somebody younger than that than I was, but that I was about the age, at least I was
within the scope of the age group that would be suitable for chief of staff and that’s the
only thing I’d take but they didn’t offer that to me so that was that.

LC: Was this disappointing to you? I mean in the sense—I think you retired in,
what, in 1976, is that right?

WL: Yes. The first day of ’77 or last day of ’76—thirty-first of December ’76 I
guess it is. Yeah.

LC: I mean were you kind of disappointed or were you like, “Yahoo, I’m retired!”
WL: No. I didn’t want to leave the Army. I love the Army.

LC: Yeah. I sense that about you Bill.

WL: But that aside I mean it was inevitable. There’s no point in getting upset
about it. It was one of those things that if I’d done a few other things differently during
my career I may have been able to stay on but it didn’t work out.

LC: Right and I think along the way you’ve noted a couple of points where that
might have happened.

WL: Yeah. But no, I didn’t really expect them to give me an assignment as a
division chief of staff so I can’t say I was disappointed that they didn’t because I didn’t
expect them to, although I wanted it.

LC: Well, I don’t want to embarrass you but I do think it’s important that we
include in the record the fact that you were awarded a very valorous degree really, the
DSM (Distinguished Service Medal). Can you tell me how that happened?

WL: Why I got the DSM?

LC: Yes. Who put the paperwork in?

WL: General Smith did that, and to make one thing clear it’s not an award for
valor. It’s an award for service. There’s a Distinguished Service Cross that is an award
for valor. DSM is for distinguished service. It is normally given to general officers. It’s
very rare that it is awarded to anybody below general officer. So I was very pleased with
that and I was pleased because General Smith had that much confidence in me and that
much respect for me that he would do that. I don’t know whether it was difficult for him
to push that through or not, we never discussed it. It’s one of those things I don’t like to
talk about.

LC: Yes, sir, I understand, but the force behind it was the service that you had
performed while in Saigon, is that right?

WL: Yes. It was for my service as the chief of intelligence and chief of
operations for General Smith. I believe that I’m right. I was there longer than any other
colonel on his staff. People that served with General Murray had been there for a year or
so and when he left a lot of them left. Some of them left right in midstream when their
tours were up. Most colonels were there on a one year tour. I was there specifically on a
two year tour, but I extended it until the end. I wasn’t going to leave. I could have left in
other words in December of ’74 but I told them I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to see
this thing through. I didn’t know how long it would be but I would stay there until the
end. I think he respected that decision too that I wasn’t going to leave him in the position
where he’d have to find another G2.

LC: Right, someone to step in there in that situation.

WL: Yeah.

LC: Well, Bill, at retirement what, and separation from active duty, what did you
see before you? What was your plan?

WL: The immediate plan was pretty well set for me because during the time,
during the last six months or so while I was still on active duty, General Potts—I think
you know of Lieutenant General Potts—he came over and he asked me for some help in
locating some of the senior Vietnamese officers that we both knew and worked with in
Vietnam. I gave him all the information I had on some. He had a lot of information he’d
already collected. His plan was to collect as many of these senior officers as possible to
write their impressions, their stories, of the Vietnam War and General Potts—he was
retired at this time. He had a contract with, what was it called, I think it was called
General Research Corporation, which was a company that had some defense contracts in
Washington. It was located in office in McLean, Virginia. They had agreed to propose
to the Army Center of Military History that these general officers, most of them generals,
from the Vietnamese Army be gathered together to write monographs on the Vietnam
War. General Potts wrote the proposal and presented it to the Center of Military History
for funding. I believe RAND Corporation, although I’m not sure of this, also made a
similar proposal that they would do that for the Center of Military History. They
convened about this time—this is in the fall of ’76 I guess—they convened at board at
Center of Military History to review these proposals and to determine which of these
companies would be given the award/contract to write these histories. General Collins
wanted me to sit on the board to make this determination and I told him, “Well, General
Potts has already told me that he’s going to hire me to help him edit these things if GRC
gets the award. I can’t possibly sit on a board to determine who’s going to get the award
and then get hired to do it. I don’t know if it’s illegal or not but certainly unethical.” So
he said, “Well I want you to sit on it anyway. You can just not vote.”

LC: Now, just to clarify, this is Gen. J. Lawton Collins?
a cousin or something.

LC: Okay so they were related?
WL: Yeah, I think they were related. Jimmy was a brigadier general. It was
customary then—I don’t know if it’s still true—to bring back a retired general officer
who had some experience or training in military history to head up the Center of Military
History and that’s what happened to General Collins. He had retired. His career was in
artillery as I remember. But they called him back because he was a very distinguished
man. He had a lot of degrees and very good guy, and they brought him back to head up
the Center of Military History. Jimmy Collins.

LC: So he recognized your position?
WL: Yes. I told him, General Potts has already approached me to work on these
after I retired. He said, “Okay, well you can go ahead and sit on the board and give us
your impressions but you don’t have to vote on the selection.” So I did. They brought in
General Goodpaster—you’ve heard of Goodpaster?

LC: I have but for those who wouldn’t know who he is can you just—?
WL: I think he was chief of staff for General Eisenhower during World War II.

LC: This is Andrew Goodpaster.
WL: Andrew Goodpaster. Yeah. He was a retired general. They brought him in
to be the chairman of this board that would review these proposals. I read both of them
and we had one or two meetings. I can’t recall now how many, and we discussed these
proposals, pros and cons, and this committee or board agreed that GRC, General Potts,
had the best proposal and the best resources to do the job. He had more contacts with the
Vietnamese generals and closer contacts than anybody else. As you know, I think
General Potts was the chief of intelligence for general—the one that followed
Westmoreland.

LC: Abrams? General Abrams?
WL: Abrams. Yes. He was Abrams’ J2 for two or three years and knew Vietnam
very well so he had the best team to do this. So your initial question was what was I
going to do when I retired? General Potts had already told me that he was going to hire
me to help him edit these monographs that the Vietnamese would write. I don’t recall
now when it was started. It was sometime in the spring of ’77 though and we worked on
that.

LC: What was the initial number of people that you thought were going to
participate in this? Did you have a plan of twelve people or fifteen?
WL: Vietnamese?
LC: Yes.
WL: I don’t recall now. General Potts, I’m sure he told me who was going to do
it. There was only about seven or eight I believe. Let’s see, I can name almost all of
them. I think General Vien, General Khuyen, the G4 and he was also chief of staff to
General Khuyen, General Truong from I Corps, Colonel Lung the G2, [Brigadier
General] Tho the J3, the J1—I can’t recall his name right now but that’s personnel—
General Hien who was 3rd Division commander.

LC: Were there some Laotians involved too?
WL: Yeah. Two Laotians. In fact I think I told you I wrote those books.

LC: You pretty much helped them out most of the way.
WL: Pretty much wrote them myself for them to look over and at least I did all of
the formatting and scope of what they were going to write.

LC: Now, on those Bill what kind of communication system did you use with
them? Was their English good enough to follow?
WL: Yes. They both spoke pretty good English. It was not difficult. The hard part was that neither one of them had any experience in writing. They were both very intelligent fellows and they knew what they were doing and they were good officers and experienced so it worked out all right. It was just a matter of putting their experiences down on paper. But when the paper is blank you’ve got a job of getting started.

LC: Absolutely. Did you essentially draw a consultancy fee or something for your work on this?

WL: I was paid a salary. I was employed. I was an employee of GRC.

LC: Okay. Where would you meet with these individuals?

WL: With them out at the GRC offices not very far from Tysons Corner if you’re familiar with this area. On occasions they came out to my house and sat around the table there in Vienna, Virginia and talked about what we’re going to write about. I not only did the Laotian things but I did quite a bit of editing of the other books, particularly the ones by, as I recall now, General Tho’s book on operations and Colonel Lung’s book on intelligence. I went through them very carefully for syntax and construction, English construction, because they wrote them in Vietnamese and they were translated by a translator who put them in English but some of the English was a little bit tortured because of translation problems. It didn’t flow very well so we had to fix that. General Potts was very good at that. He was very careful and meticulous in getting the things right.

LC: How long did you spend with GRC doing this?

WL: I think it was about a year and a half.

LC: Really? Is that all? In that time period you and each of these commanders were able to peruse all of those monographs?

WL: Yes. It might have been a little longer than that.

LC: That’s pretty impressive because it’s a pretty amazing collection really.

WL: Yes. I think they’re excellent. General Potts, he and I and there were only one or two other people that did any editing—I can’t even remember who else was there. There was a Vietnamese lieutenant colonel who was fluent in English. His name coincidentally was Vien also, V-i-e-n, like Cao Van Vien. Of course not the same family. That’s the first name. There was a woman, Major Bong, or maybe she was a
captain. She was a captain in the Vietnamese Army and she was also fluent in English and she did a lot of the typing.

LC: Now, this is actually quite interesting. Bill, did you come across or know much about the—and I don’t know the proper title—but essentially the Women’s Army Corps within ARVN? Did you know much about them or their activities?

WL: No I didn’t. I didn’t know hardly anything about them. I keep saying major but I’m thinking of the US Marine Corps I think. There was a Major Bong in World War II who was a Marine Corps pilot. That’s beside the point. Captain Bong was very, very nice lady. I think she had worked for General Vien on his staff and that’s the connection there. That’s why she was picked to do this and then she was fluent in English so it’s a good resource for us.

LC: Do you know what happened to her?

WL: I know that while we were there she was diagnosed with cancer. I think that she recovered from it but I don’t know what’s happened to her since then.

LC: Now, would the different contributors have also been paid a fee by GRC, do you know?

WL: Yes. They were paid. I don’t know how much but they were paid while they were working there. Yes.

LC: So I’m sure that was quite helpful to them.

WL: Oh yeah. It was helpful for them. Not all of them had really settled down to good jobs yet. I think at the time Lung was still going to community college learning computer programming and I think maybe General Truong was doing the same thing. They both, as I told you, ended up working for General Murray in this Association of American Railroads in computers. Truong on the mechanical side of it and Lung in the programming side of it.

LC: What was the mood amongst these different leaders? I mean is there anything you can convey about that during this period in the years just following the fall of South Vietnam?

WL: Well, like all of us we were all dismayed by what happened. They of course had it more difficult than we did because they had to relocate and they lost everything in Vietnam. So that was that but beyond that we had a very solid camaraderie with them.
We met them socially from time to time. Had little meetings here and there at their homes and so on. Helped them with any personal problems involving—not problems but issues that would come up that they weren’t familiar with: driver’s licenses and—

LC: Right. Red tape and just living in America kind of thing.

WL: So we were able to communicate very closely with them and be sure that they were being taken care of. Most of these things we had ironed out in the months before when they first got here so most of them were fairly well established by this time.

LC: Did any of them share with you any experiences they might have had being in the US and being around Americans that were negative or that had to do with their being Vietnamese?


LC: You didn’t hear about anything like that?

WL: These were mature, intelligent people and most of them had pretty good knowledge of English and of course French. Nearly all of them also spoke French so they didn’t have any problems.

LC: But as far as you knew they didn’t get any kickback from Americans who might not have been quite as erudite and aware and worldly.

 WL: No. I can’t speak to that. I never heard them talk about—Vietnamese don’t normally talk about things like that with anybody. They keep that to themselves. If they were affronted or embarrassed or in any way feel that they were being trod upon they wouldn’t tell me anyway.

LC: Because just for cultural reasons?

WL: Yeah.

LC: Bill, how long did your contract then last with GRC?

WL: That lasted until, let’s see, I’m trying to think now. After GRC experience I left the area and that was about, I’m trying to think now, about 1978 or nine I moved to Washington State and I left the area and I didn’t have any more contact with General Potts until I returned here in 1987.

LC: What did you do up in Washington?

WL: In Washington I built a house up on a ridge overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca near Port Angeles, Washington, on the Olympic Peninsula. I had a view of the
strait on one side and a view of the Olympic Mountains on the other side. A lot of
woods. I had about two and a half acres of hemlock, fir, and Western Red Cedar, most of
it, and a lot of undergrowth.

LC: It sounds glorious.

WL: Oh it was beautiful. I think I had already told you—I don’t know—that I
had been studying the tuba after I retired and when I got to Port Angeles it had a pretty
good community orchestra there. I looked in on that and discovered that their tuba player
was leaving town. In fact he was forced to leave town. He had some sort of an affair
with a married woman and I think she was married to a deputy sheriff and he left town in
a hurry. So they were without a tuba player and so they told me that I could be their
principal tuba so I began playing the tuba with the Port Angeles Symphony Orchestra.

Then I organized a brass quintet with a trombone and the French horn and two trumpets
and so we played around the Olympic Peninsula here and there. I had a great time with
them. I was elected to the symphony board. In fact, when I finally left there I was the
president of the symphony board. I did the programming for the orchestra and I could
select things to play that had tuba parts in them. Of course you had to avoid Beethoven.

Of course we weren’t up to playing a lot of Beethoven anyway.

LC: But these were the perks of power.

WL: Yeah, that’s right. I learned to fell trees. We had our own firewood. The
house was heated by a circular fireplace and I cut all the wood for that. I had a tractor, a
four wheel drive tractor, that I built a trail down to the bottom. I built a pond, filled it
with trout. I had a well dug to provide the water for the pond and built a little causeway
to carry the water down the hill. It was a great place to live. I loved the Olympic
Peninsula, hiking up in the Olympic Mountains and so on.

LC: Bill, somebody listening to this would wonder how did you get attracted to
that area and I mean were you just looking for a complete change?

WL: I was looking for a complete change, yes. I wanted to live kind of away
from the city and in the country. I’ve always enjoyed the outdoors and enjoyed physical
work and this was an opportunity to do it. We looked around and discovered that there
was what they called a rain shadow created by the high ridge on the Olympic Peninsula.

You didn’t get a lot of rain just east of Port Angeles, between Port Angeles and a place
called Sequim. The rainfall was about half of that that fell in and around Seattle. So it
looked like a nice place and the weather was really beautiful there. It never got hot and it
never got really too cold either.

LC: Could you get into Seattle in a reasonable amount of time?
WL: Once in a while. Also the ferry over to Victoria, British Columbia.
LC: Yeah, and that’s not too bad either.
WL: No. As I said, they had a good symphony there and when I was with the
symphony if we needed a contrabassoon, we didn’t have one, so I borrowed a
contrabassoon player from their orchestra and some other things like that. We could
bring in a ringer now and then if we needed somebody really good like I programmed the
tuba—Vaughn Williams wrote a tuba concerto and I programmed that. I knew I couldn’t
play it but I knew the tuba player over there with the Victoria Symphony and he was an
outstanding player and he came over and played the Vaughn Williams concerto for us. I
had a lot of fun with that.

LC: Yeah, it sounds like it.
WL: We played Tuba Christmas too over there.
LC: It sounds like a blast.
WL: Know what Tuba Christmas is? Ever heard of that?
LC: No.
WL: Well, tuba players being kind of a strange lot they get together at Christmas
all over the country here and put on what they call Tuba Christmas in which the only
players in the ensemble are tuba players and euphonium players, euphonium being a
tenor tuba. We play Christmas carols out in the shopping malls and so on all over the
country. I’m sure you have them down there in Lubbock.

LC: Well, maybe not in Lubbock but probably Dallas or somewhere.
WL: Yeah, so I played Tuba Christmas every Christmas over there in Victoria.
LC: Well, Bill, it sounds like a great setup and a very relaxing and fun place so
now of course you know the next question is why would you come back to D.C.?
WL: Well, this was a personal family matter. I divorced and came out here to
marry my Vietnamese wife.

LC: You moved back to the D.C. area I think you said in 1987.
WL: Yes. General Potts, as soon as I got back there, he had a job for me. He had by that time moved to another corporation and he wanted me to do some writing over there for him in—they had a special operations contract with the Defense Department and there were some intelligence work and some writing on some classified projects for Defense Department.

LC: I see. So you were contributing as an analyst and editor on these things?

WL: Yeah, and writer. I think they called me senior operations analyst, something like that. I was hired by this company and I worked there for a couple years. Unfortunately I had to leave them because my Vietnamese family was still in Vietnam and the classification requirements for the particular project that they came up with later—I couldn’t get the clearance that was required to work on it because my wife’s mother, who was then ninety years old, was still in Vietnam in a communist country.

LC: Yeah, I was going to ask you about the clearance issue because—

WL: Yeah. It wasn’t a problem when I was just working on top secret stuff. But when it got beyond that they had some rules that their—they cannot apply what I would call reasonable judgment in these things.

LC: Right. There are rules and they have to apply those.

WL: Pretty rigid.

LC: Yes.

WL: My ninety year old mother-in-law was in no way a threat but that didn’t matter so I had to leave that job. Then I picked up a few other things to keep busy and food on the table. For the last ten years I’ve been working for the Department of Justice on a contract on law enforcement issues. Also, as I think I told you, I’m the executive director of a national association so I have two jobs now. I think the justice thing has about run its course. I doubt I’m going to get a contract this year. I’ll just have the contract with this association.

LC: Now, does some of this involve disposition of surplus property?

WL: Yes, it all does.

LC: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about that?

WL: Well yeah. In the first place the justice job—I’ll make this as brief as I can—involves being the attorney general’s representative at the Defense Logistics
Agency on a program that Congress passed about fifteen years ago that tells the Secretary of Defense that he may transfer, without charge, personal property, that’s everything except real estate essentially. He may transfer his personal property that is suitable for law enforcement activities to federal and state agencies. We call this excess property. That is property that the Defense Department determines it no longer needs. So they can transfer this to law enforcement activities. In that particular law there’s a sentence that says the Secretary of Defense shall consult with the Attorney General in carrying out this program. We told—the company I worked for—told the Justice Department that, “That’s in the law but you’re not doing it.” They said, “Okay you can do it.” So they assigned me the job because of my military experience and they figured I could talk to the Defense Department in their own language. They selected me to be their representative. So I’ve been doing that for ten years, assisting and trying to shape the policies that are involved in doing what is authorized, technically trying to see that law enforcement gets the best possible deal out of this. So this property is transferred to law enforcement, everything from helicopters on one end of the scale to boots and camouflage uniforms and rifles and so on to law enforcement agencies without charge. That’s that program. That developed into another program they passed a few years later. It tells the Secretary of Defense to establish procedures through which states and units of local government may purchase law enforcement equipment suitable for counter drug activities from Defense Department sources. I became the Justice Department representative on what they called a steering group that establishes the procedures and policies and how that is done. So I’ve been doing that for about nine years.

LC: So these would not necessarily always be, the recipients would not always be law enforcement agencies? They might be other agencies involved in—?

WL: If they’re involved in counter drug—

LC: Right. What we call the drug war.

WL: The requirement that it be equipment you could reasonably call law enforcement equipment. This could be drug test kits. It could be highway cruisers. It’s almost anything that a law enforcement or even a forensic laboratory that is technically not a law enforcement agency could qualify.

LC: Sure. This is for purchase rather than—?
WL: For purchase, yes, but they can purchase—the advantage is they can
purchase at defense prices. Whatever the Defense Department pays for it that’s what
they’ll be charged for it. These prices are customarily twenty or thirty percent below the
retail price that they’d have to pay for on the open market.

LC: Because of volume, because it’s negotiated prices?
WL: Yes, because of the volume. Also because of the contracts they can also
purchase off what they call GSA, General Service Administration schedules. These
schedules are lists of vendors who have executed contracts with GSA stating in essence
that this is my product, these are the specifications, and this is what I will sell it for. In
other words it’s already been bid. This is my lowest price. So they can also buy law
enforcement equipment from those schedules and they save a lot. So I’ve been doing that
and I act as kind of a conduit between law enforcement agencies and the department of
the Army that is the executive agent for that program. That’s one job. That was full time
until a couple years ago and our budget was cut. Then the National Association of State
Agencies for Surplus Property hired me as their executive director and most of my duties
here are in maintaining some contact with representatives on the hill and keeping track of
legislation that affects the program. The State Agencies for Surplus Property are state
officials and they act as what they call a bailee or really a conduit for federal surplus
property from all sources, including the Defense Department, that federal agencies
declare surplus. It becomes available for donation to county governments, not for profit
hospitals, for road construction units of the states or counties and so on. Most of these
agencies are public agencies. A few of them might be private so long as they’re not for
profit and performing a public service. Anyway, they have access to this surplus
property—

LC: It can be anything?
WL: It could be anything and again—well, anything except food, they restrict
that, or battle ships. But there are some limits.

LC: But as you say it might range from—
WL: Yeah. A lot of the most valuable equipment, the most significant, is earth
moving equipment—heavy machinery, cranes, dozers, scrapers, front loaders, and those
sorts of things. The fire trucks, vans, some other wheeled vehicles, four wheel drive
vehicles, that sheriff offices and county engineers and so on can use.

LC: What federal agencies might purchase that kind of equipment besides DoD?
WL: Well, all of the federal agencies have equipment of that kind. Most of the
equipment still comes from the Defense Department. About eighty-five percent of
surplus property moved through this system is generated by the Defense Department and
it’s, you know, Army, Navy, Marine Corps. A lot of it—this association, National
Association of State Agencies has an overseas facilitator who finds property at defense
reutilization and marketing offices overseas and arranges for shipment to the United
States. The state that gets the property pays for the shipping and passes that cost on to
whoever they donate the property to. These state agencies, with one minor exception, are
not state funded. They’re funded by the fees they charge for doing the service. They
charge, generally speaking, a percentage of the original acquisition cost of whatever
property they transfer. They’ll charge that to whoever gets the property. If they’re
transferring, let’s see an example, a sedan that cost twenty thousand dollars they may
charge two hundred dollars to transfer that sedan, something like that, which is still a
bargain.

LC: Uh, yeah. Bill, I remember reading that after World War II for example there
was so much US military equipment overseas that their was almost a mini-Marshall Plan
in transferring surplus property to allied governments. Does that not go on quite so much
anymore?
WL: That still goes on. It’s called Humanitarian Assistance Program, H-A-P.
HAP they call it for short. It’s managed jointly by the State Department and Defense
Department. Property that the Defense Department is going to declare surplus is first
made available to the HAP program before it becomes surplus and available to states.
This property is then transferred to friendly foreign governments in the general vicinity
usually because they don’t want to pay a lot of transportation costs. But a lot of property
that we used over in Bosnia and Serbia, Czechoslovakia, and so on is left in place and
transferred to foreign governments. This is anathema to the state agencies. They don’t
like that. They think that the first choice of making use of taxpayer-funded property is to
keep it in the United States. But here they’re fighting with the so-called eight hundred
pound gorilla there. They don’t make much headway in objecting to that. A lot of this is
wasted unfortunately too. It’s earmarked for these foreign governments and then it sits
out there in open storage for a year or so. By the time it’s finally put to use it’s
deteriorated to the point where it’s no longer useful, unfortunately. But that’s a matter of
execution; it’s not a matter of foreign principle.

LC: I mean I don’t know if you know this Bill but it might interesting if you did,
what are some of the largest recipient governments? Do you know?

WL: Of the HAP program? No, I’m sorry I don’t have that information.

LC: But it’s an interesting situation and one that is a big part of US foreign policy,
if not an always efficient part of US foreign policy.

WL: Well that’s right. The entire USAID (United States Agency for International
Development) program has been going on since World War II has been very beneficial
with great intentions but there’s been a lot of waste and mismanagement along with it.

It’s so huge.

LC: Well, Bill can I ask whether you were able or have been able to get other
members of your wife’s family out of Vietnam?

WL: Yes. In fact we brought her mother over. She was allowed to come over
and she stayed with us for about a year and she got so homesick that we took her home
again. Of course she didn’t speak English. The good thing that came out of her visit here
why we got her cataract repaired so she could see. She was going blind. One eye had
been operated on in Vietnam and they botched that and blinded her in that one eye. Then
the second one we were able to get her into a good surgeon here and got that fixed so that
was a good outcome of her visit here.

LC: What year was she with you? Do you roughly remember?

WL: It must have been 1989 and ’90.

LC: Bill, you may have been back and forth a number of times in the intervening
period, but about the time of her visit what was the climate like inside Vietnam as far as
she was able to tell you or as far as you could pick up at that time?

WL: Well, of course let’s see—that was 1989? I’m trying to think. I didn’t get
back there until ’94 I guess. My first visit back was I guess it must have been 1994. But
she didn’t talk about it. Of course I couldn’t talk to her anyway so I really don’t know what it was like then in 1988 or—

LC: Do you mean that your Vietnamese wasn’t that good or what do you mean?

WL: I don’t speak any Vietnamese.

LC: You don’t speak at all?

WL: No. Well—

LC: You’ve picked up some, yes?

WL: One or two words, not enough to make a complete sentence. No, I don’t know. When I got back in ’94 they were still a lot of poverty and I guess there still is. But the family, since we’d been supporting them with thousands and thousands of dollars since then, they’re doing fine.

LC: Where do they live?

WL: They live in Saigon on the northern edge of Saigon.

LC: Just to clarify they’re ethnically Vietnamese rather than sort of ethnically Chinese or—

WL: Oh no, they’re a hundred percent Vietnamese. The family is from Long An Province from a little village near Tan An. They came to Saigon during the Viet Minh War when their village was destroyed during the battle down there.

LC: Meaning back in the ’50s?

WL: Yeah. I think my wife was born there in Long An in 1947 and she was very small when they walked to Saigon so they got established there.

LC: Was she, what, about two or three?

WL: I think she might have been a little older than that. She might have been about seven or eight by the time they got to Saigon. I’m not too sure.

LC: Wow. That’s pretty incredible.

WL: They lost all of their family records so her mother is not even sure of when all the kids were born. She has ten siblings. The records in the courthouse, wherever they kept their records, they were all destroyed so they just made up what their birthdays were. My wife keeps saying, “You know I’m a year older than you knew about because I was not really forty-seven. That’s what my mother says but that’s not right.”

LC: Well, are any of her brothers and sisters also in America now?
WL: Oh yes. Her oldest brother is in California. Her younger brother is in Pennsylvania. She has a sister in Delaware. She has two sisters in Colorado and, let’s see, a sister in California. I think that’s it. Then there are one, two, three sisters still in Saigon and then a whole gaggle of nephews and nieces all over the place.

LC: All over the place, yeah. Does she have a chance to see them?

WL: Yes, particularly the sister in Delaware and the brother in Pennsylvania. We see them. Of course we’ve been back, with her I’ve been back I guess three times to see the family.

LC: Most recently when did you go?

WL: That was two years ago at Christmas.

LC: Are you thinking of going again soon?

WL: Oh yeah, definitely! We’ve reconstructed the house and actually rebuilt it. They knocked the whole thing down in Saigon and we rebuilt a very modern four story home there and we have an apartment ready for us on the second floor so we’ll be back there. We may move there almost semi-permanently once our daughter gets out of college.

LC: Your daughter is in, what, high school now?

WL: Yes. She’s graduating this summer.

LC: Where is she going to go to school?

WL: She wants to go to school in New York. She’s been accepted to one of her choices in New York City. But she wants to go to Florida but I don’t know whether she’s going to get in or not. She hasn’t been accepted yet.

LC: Well, good luck to you and to her with that. Well Bill let’s take a break there.
LC: This is Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the twentieth of March 2006. I’m in Lubbock and Bill is speaking from Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill thanks for your time again this morning. Please tell me a little bit, if you can, about how you came involved with the POW issue to begin with.

WL: Okay. Of course when I was chief of intelligence for DAO Saigon I did have—one of my responsibilities was monitoring the POW situation, although it wasn’t really very bright on my radar screen. There were so many other things that were to me more important and more culpable. I mean they were happening. The POW issue, although we did have a requirement to report on anything that we could pick up on it, wasn’t on the top of my priorities. After I retired and moved out to Port Angeles, Washington on the Olympic Peninsula, I became involved in a local community mostly through the symphony orchestra where I was a member of the orchestra. Made quite a few friends. The president of the community college was on the board as was the publisher and editor of the Port Angeles newspaper. With those contacts they became aware of my background. The editor, Frank Ducheski, asked me to write an article on one of the anniversaries of the fall of Saigon. He asked me to write—actually it was a four part series on the events leading up to the collapse of South Vietnam. I did that for the paper. The community college asked me to give a class—well, really kind of a seminar on Vietnam, mainly on the last few months of the war.

LC: Which community college?

WL: That was the Northern Peninsula Community College. No, the Olympic Peninsula Community College is I guess was the name of it. It was part of the Washington State Community College system.

LC: How did that go?

WL: It was very interesting. Most of the students, well not most, perhaps a lot of them were older people, middle aged folks, just taking classes for their own amusement
more than anything else. They had a student body of recent high school graduates as well
but most of the people that were interested in this were older folks. Anyway I gave that
class and one of the people in the audience came up to see me after the conference and
introduced himself. His name was John M.G. Brown. Have you turned up that name in
your—?

LC: I believe we have not. No. Not that I remember.
WL: Yeah. John M.G. Brown was a Vietnam veteran, infantry veteran, and
actually served in the 1st Infantry Division. I believe he came in after I had left the
division. He served in the 16th Infantry Regiment, one of the battalions of the 16th. He
was severely wounded in action in his second tour. He volunteered for his second tour in
Vietnam and he was—I guess he was a SPC4 or something. He never reached the rank of
an NCO. In any case, his second tour he served down in the Delta and that’s where he
was hit badly in the arm and evacuated to United States. Long story short, he wrote a
story of his experiences in Vietnam, and it was published by Regnery. You’ve probably
heard Regnery Press?

LC: Yes.
WL: Anyway, they published the book. It’s called *Rice Paddy Grunt*. It ought to
be in your collection.

LC: In fact I think that book is. I just hadn’t connected the two.
WL: Anyway, he wrote that book and later on, for reasons I’m not sure how, he
became very interested in the prisoner of war matter. John Brown didn’t have much
education past high school I don’t believe but very, very bright and intense. One of the
most intense people I’ve ever known. He was completely committed to this enterprise
once he became aware of the possibility that American prisoners of war had been left
behind in Vietnam. That bothered him very, very deeply. He became what I would call
one of the true believers in the whole process. John later recovered at Valley Forge
Army Hospital in Pennsylvania and during that time he met his future bride. Her name
was Josephine Duke of the famous Duke families.

LC: Oh, is that right?
WL: Duke University and so on. Immensely wealthy. At the time she was
connected with the Weatherman. She was a real radical.
LC: What was her first name again?
WL: Josephine. Short: Josie. Very interesting lady. In any case, they fell in love and married. Her father is Tony Biddle Duke, Anthony Biddle Duke. I’ve met him a few times since then. Duke had connections with Regnery, the publisher, and I believe that’s really how John got his book published, not that it’s a bad book. In fact it’s one of the better memoirs of its kind, in my opinion. It should have been published anyway. There are a lot of books that should be published that never see the light of day and a lot that get published that shouldn’t. In any case, that’s his background and as I say I’m not too sure how he got so interested in POW. It might have been through John LeBoutillier. Does that name ring a bell to you?
LC: No. Can you spell that? Do you know?
WL: LeBoutillier. I’m going to make a stab at it anyway. Let’s see. L-e-and then with a capital B as in bravo-B-o-u-t-l-i-e-r, I think. That’s close. John LeBoutillier was a one term congressman from a district in New York, one of the districts on Long Island. John LeBoutillier. He teamed up with a congressman, Billy Hendon, also a one term congressman, they’re both Republicans. Hendon was from North Carolina I think. After they served their first term they were kind of gerrymandered out of office and that’s probably true. In any case, those two became very interested in the POW matter. I think that John LeBoutillier had some connections with Tony Biddle Duke and that connection brought them to John Brown and that’s how John got interested in it. That’s the way I sum it up anyway. In any case John Brown approached me after this class that I gave at the community college and he said, “Why didn’t you talk about POWs?” I said, “Well, that wasn’t really on my agenda.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He gave me a long discussion of the crimes of the United States in leaving prisoners of war behind. I said, “I didn’t realize that. I didn’t know much about that.” He educated me about it and he told me that he was writing a book about it. I said, “That’s very interesting.” Well from then on—he lived about ten miles from where I did and he came over to see me frequently. I learned about his background, how after they got married they went down and lived in the Mato Grosso in Brazil for a while. Then they emigrated up to Canada. He told me that the FBI had them on the list because of his wife’s background with the Weatherman. She had severed a relationship with them but that was pretty hard to do.
They followed them and that’s why they went to Canada. It’s kind of a bizarre story and
I’m not sure if I believe all of it but I believe almost all of it at least. The FBI tracked
them into Canada and the Mounted Police got on their tail and they finally had to come
back to the United States. They wound up in Alaska for a while. He did crab fishing off
of Kodiak and had his own boat. Then he moved down to Port Angeles. A very
peripatetic group they were and they had about four or five kids by this time.

LC: Wow. Can’t imagine.
WL: One of the more interesting people I’ve ever met in my life.
LC: Yeah. He sounds like it.
WL: I liked him a lot but he was difficult to deal with because he was so intense
about this thing.
LC: Is he still around Bill?
WL: Pardon?
LC: Is he still around?
WL: Oh yeah. He lives in Humboldt County, California. He has a ranch that sits
right on the Pacific Ocean there at a place called Petrolia, is the name of the village but
he doesn’t live in Petrolia. He lives out on this ranch and raises cattle and has a school
for disadvantaged children that they bring in from New York City and other slums and so
on and give them a summer—it’s kind of a summer camp that they run for the kids. Got
some very successful children. They’re all scattered around the world. In any case he
wrote a book called *Moscow Bound*. *Moscow Bound*. Do you have that?
LC: I will check. I don’t know.
WL: It was self-published. He published it himself I think in 1991. He gave me a
number of copies to distribute. I made two or three trips with him back here to
Washington. He asked me to come back with him and he had connections that got him in
to see among others Mike Deaver. You remember Michael Deaver? He was an advisor
to President Reagan.
LC: I think he was the chief of staff or something?
WL: Well, yeah, he may have been the chief of staff. The day we went to meet
with Michael Deaver that—well, the motive was to get people at the highest level of the
government interested in the POW issue. That’s what John was working on. We met
with the president’s domestic policy advisor in the Whitehouse. When we went to see
Michael Deaver it was the day that he was delivered his indictment. I think he actually
went to prison for a couple years.

LC: I think he did too.

WL: I can’t remember now what it was about. It was some malfeasance of some
kind. I don’t know what it was. In any case it was an interesting meeting because he had
just been delivered the papers from the federal court.

LC: Oh yeah? What kind of mood was he in?

WL: Well, he was remarkably calm and collected. I know he has recovered from
this event. He’s been in the press in the last few years. Still doing his thing. One time
we were in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington and the secretary of state came in,
Secretary Schulz. John followed him downstairs to the barbershop where Schulz was
getting a haircut and confronted him as Schulz was sitting in the barber chair. Told him
that the State Department was derelict in its duties and, I don’t know. It was quite a
scene.

LC: I’ll bet, uh-huh.

WL: Anyway, so that’s how I got familiar with the POW issue. Later on, fast
forward a number of years, John was having difficulty getting his book—he tried to get it
published commercially but never made it. I told him, I said, “Your book is too long and
it is also not well organized and there’s a lot of repetition in it. It needs a thorough
cleaning up. It’s overwhelming in the amount of details that you’ve put into the thing.”
He said, “Well will you edit it for me?” I did. I worked on it for a couple of years and
gave him a completely revised copy. The problem was, and this is my fault, in doing this
I really did great damage to his footnotes, to his references. Nothing tracked anymore
because I didn’t know how to do that. I said, “Well, you’re just going to have to reorder
all of your footnotes, all of your references, and that’s going to have to be done.” He
said, “I don’t have time to do all of that.” So nothing ever came of it. He didn’t
republish it.

LC: Now what was the gist of that book?

WL: Well, his main thesis is that the Communists from the very beginning
adopted a policy of using prisoners of war as political capital. That they have no
intention of treating them in accordance with the accepted practice, legal practice; that is
the Geneva Convention or anything else. That immediately upon capture they become
property and are used for whatever political purpose that they see fit. He traced it back to
the Archangel Expedition, 1919, in Russia where the United States deployed a regiment
of infantry—I think it was 317th, something like that. It was a reserve regiment that went
over to France and it arrived just after the armistice was signed and it was just sitting
there and the British asked for some support to move down into Moscow. The revolution
had already taken over and—white Russians were still fighting however. The British had
sent down an awful lot of military equipment to support the white Russians in their fight
against the reds and the British wanted to recover it. The axis of advance would be from
Archangel down into Moscow. They asked the United States for some help. The United
States gave them this infantry regiment that joined the British in the attack out of
Archangel and in the process this regiment suffered some significant casualties, quite a
few were captured, and never returned. That was John’s kind of the benchmark of his
view of how Communists treat prisoners of war. Later on in the mid-’20s, I think it was
the Veterans of Foreign Wars, teamed up with State Department and sent a mission over
there and they recovered some of the graves of some of the men who had been captured
or killed and then their bodies never recovered. They recovered quite a few and
disinterred them and brought them home. But they could never get the Soviets to agree
that they still had some live ones, although John’s thesis said they did and they had a
couple of them in a prison out in the White Sea on an island out there. Well, that started
it. Then he followed it up to World War II in which—let’s see, Major General Dean, US
Army, was responsible for trying to recover American prisoners of war who were in
prison camps in eastern Europe, mostly in Poland, and in maybe even a little further east
than that. These camps had been overrun by the Red Army as they pushed the Germans
westward. The Russians in most cases refused to repatriate these prisoners over the Oder
to bring them west. Instead they put them on trains and took them down to Vladivostok
and put them on ships and sent them home that way across the Black Sea.

LC: What was thought to be the purpose of that?

WL: Well, I really don’t know. It was a matter of logistics primarily in trying to
move prisoners right behind the Red Army as they were advancing against the Germans
and the way the trains and transportation problems it was easier for the Russians I think, the Soviets, to move them south across Ukraine into there. But in the process, according to John Brown and a couple of other researchers, not all of them made it all the way to Vladivostok. No, what am I talking about? I don’t mean that. It’s Odessa I guess is the port.

LC: Okay and then so down through the Middle East?
WL: Yeah. Down to the Crimea actually. We’re talking about the Crimea.
LC: Through the Black Sea then and out.
WL: Black Sea. I kept saying Vladivostok. That’s way off. I’m talking about—really I think the port is Odessa. In any case not all of them made it and some of them according to Brown, and according to another researcher, John Ashworth of Arkansas, they disappeared and they went into the Gulag. That was their conclusion. So that’s the second case of Communists using prisoners in that way. In this case they may have been US prisoners with German names or Jewish names or for whatever reason they were called out of the group and kept. Then he goes on to the Korean War and there the case of prisoners of war is much more clearly documented that American prisoners, mostly aviators who crashed or parachuted and were captured by the Soviets, were brought into Russia mostly for exploiting their knowledge of American, our jet airplanes. Then he goes on to the Vietnam situation and here we have the same thing is continued that the Communists treated American prisoners of war again as some kind of political capital. When Nixon was forced to resign and the promises that he and Kissinger had made to the North Vietnamese that we were going to pay what they viewed as reparations we were going to help rebuild the North and that sort of thing and we failed to do that, why, they just kept the prisoners. They really didn’t need a reason however, according to John. I kind of agree with him on this. They just did it just because that’s the way they are, perhaps vengeance and so on. So that is the central thread that ties that book together.

LC: Now, this is the book that as far as you know he was not able to actually see into publication whether commercially or not?
WL: Not commercially, at his own expense something like about, he told me about $35,000. He published a large number of copies of it.

LC: So this is the one Moscow Bound? This is what is in Moscow Bound?
WL: Excuse me?

LC: What you’ve just been telling us is essentially the outline of what appears in the book *Moscow Bound*.

WL: That’s right. That’s it. I have one copy left.

LC: Well we’ll see whether we have one.

WL: If you don’t—

LC: Well we’ll find out if we can get one.

WL: Yeah. If you look for John Brown he’s probably got some. Again his address—actually I can give you his street address.

LC: Okay. Maybe we should do that off tape later on. I’ll ask you at the end of the session.

WL: So anyway that’s how I got started in the system and in the visits I came back here with him I believe I met John LeBoutillier at that time and maybe Billy Hendon and Red McDaniels who was one of the prisoners of war, he had written a book about his experiences in prison camp. Have you ever heard of him?

LC: Yes.

WL: Yeah, he’s a very fine guy. He was brutalized more than most of them by the North Vietnamese—terrible time up there. But any case that’s how I got started. Then of course in 1987 I left the Olympic Peninsula and I came to Washington, D.C. Made contact again with Andy Gembara, whom I’ve mentioned in earlier discussions. Andy had worked for me as a captain when I was in DAO Saigon. Andy was back here. He was still on active duty as a lieutenant colonel in Special Ops. He had a friend who worked for Senator Grassley of Iowa. His name was Chris Kolesnik. Chris Kolesnik was a senior staffer for Senator Grassley and in 1990, I guess it was ’92 or ’93—you have my collection of books on reports from the POW committee so you’ve got to verify these dates. It seemed to me in 1993 they passed the act that established the Senate Select Committee on Prisoners of War.

LC: I think that might have been just a little bit earlier.

WL: Might have been ’92.

LC: Right, and this is a Senate select committee.

WL: Senate Select Committee on Prisoners of War and Missing in Action.
LC: Yes. They were certainly active—I’m sitting with a copy of some hearings that were held by that committee in November 1992.

WL: Yeah. That’s I guess about the time it started. Well, about that time, a little bit later, I got a call from I think it was from Andy. He said that his friend Chris wanted to talk to me. I went over to see Chris Kolesnik, met him, and he said that I was being considered to be a member of the staff of this committee and that I would be interviewed by somebody. It turned out his name was Al Ptak, P-t-a-k I think is the way he spells his last name. He may be mentioned in those hearings somewhere. I think he was involved in it at that time. But he was interviewing me and I would be sponsored on this committee by Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire. Now, this committee was, although it was supposedly non-partisan it had a minority member, Bob Smith, who was—on paper he was co-chairman along with Senator Kerry of Massachusetts. Also on the committee was Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, Daschle of South Dakota, Brown of Colorado, Harry Reid of Nevada. Those are the ones I can remember but you’ve got a whole list of it.

LC: Sure, and that’s in the public directory.

WL: Yeah.

LC: Well, there are a couple of others. Maybe I’ll just read them. Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, John McCain—

WL: Oh yeah! McCain. He was very important.


WL: Yeah, that’s the one I couldn’t remember. I knew there was a woman on it but I couldn’t remember. In any case, I was interviewed to be on that and I guess it was about January or February that I was brought aboard, I was brought into the thing.

LC: What sense did you have of what this would entail for you in terms of work?

WL: Well, it would last for as long as the committee lasted, for a year. I would work everyday as a regular employee of the Senate. This was an interesting thing because in those days there was a public law that prohibited—not prohibited, that’s the wrong word—it required any retired regular officer who took a job with the federal government to surrender part of his retired Army pay, military pay. This law didn’t apply
to reserve officers or to non-commissioned officers or to warrant officers. It only applied to regular officers. Interesting. They called it double dipping and you were no longer entitled to your full retired pay if you got paid again by the government. But there was a possibility of a waiver and fortunately the chairman of the rules committee of the Senate, Kentucky—I don’t remember now, doesn’t matter—anyway he obtained a waiver for us so we who were retired officers still got our regular retired pay.

LC: So you didn’t have to take a hit.

WL: I didn’t take a hit. I took a hit later when I worked for Taskforce Russia but this job I didn’t. We had an office in the basement of the Russell Building. Was it the Russell? Yeah. In fact we had two offices down there. They had another office for the main office of the Senate Select Committee was up in the Hart Building I believe. I worked with—there was a man named John Holstein. You may have run across him somewhere. John was a PhD in history I believe. A real good guy and a good researcher. John McCrary from Defense Intelligence Agency—from now on I think I’ll just say DIA because you know who it is. John was a senior public official with DIA, an analyst, and also happened to be a lawyer, a member of the bar. Harold Nicklas, spelled that N-i-c-k-l-a-s, Nicklas, was a retired colonel, military intelligence. I had not known him before but Andy Gembara had known him and a few of my other contacts. He had worked in human intelligence in the Far East. He was hired on. John Erickson. He was a lawyer and a member of Bob Dole’s group. Bob Dole had put him on the committee. John had worked in some of Dole’s election campaigns. He was from Kansas. Bill Codinha was a lawyer from Massachusetts. He was brought on by John Kerry. He had been a public prosecutor in Boston I believe. Bill Codinha was the committee council. Francis Zwenig was the director of the staff. She was a lawyer from Washington, D.C.

LC: How do you spell her last name?

WL: Zwenig. Z-w-e-n-i-g.

LC: Her background was—?

WL: She was a lawyer in politics, a Democrat. Of course so was Codinha. He was Democrat. John was of course Republican. Dino Carlucio was important in the committee. He wasn’t a member of it but he was Bob Smith’s main contact to the committee from Smith’s office. Dino Carlucio. C-a-r-l-u-c-i-o, I believe. Billy Hendon
was still active. He was very good friends with Bob Smith and was in Smith’s office all
the time on this. Although he was not a member of the committee he influenced us a lot.
Again he’d been convinced from his review of DIA documents that a lot of prisoners had
been left behind. I think he’s the one that convinced Bob Smith to get involved in this
affair. Who else? Neil Kravitz was a lawyer, Democrat from Washington, D.C. K-r-a-v-
i-t-z I believe. Neil was a public defender, D.C. He was brought in. See we had quite a
few lawyers. Wick Tourison was hired on.

LC: Yeah. Sedgwick.

WL: Yeah. Sedgwick Tourison and a man named Barry Valentine. Another
lawyer. Another Democrat. Valentine just like it sounds.

LC: Now, on Wick you had known Wick—?

WL: I had known Wick back when I was in the 1st Division I believe. I believe
he was in the POW interrogation team that I used in the 1st Division. Yeah. He was a
very fine Vietnamese linguist and a lot of experience in Vietnam. He knew his stuff so
he was good to have on board, although Wick and I didn’t see eye to eye on POW issues.

LC: Which senator would have brought him on board or which staff?

WL: Probably Kerry, but I’m not sure of that.

LC: So this is quite a group working on this.

WL: Yeah, and the senators you can see by those names—except that Bob Smith
shot himself in the foot a few years ago—

LC: I don’t remember his exit. What happened? Can you say really quickly?

WL: I don’t know why but he got disaffected with the Republican Party and
decided to run as an Independent and that finished him.

LC: That’ll do it.

WL: I believe he moved to Florida, which a lot of people in New Hampshire get
tired of the winters and they move to Florida. But anyway Bob is no longer on the screen
as far as I know. If one wants a brief rundown of the senators, those who took a real
interest in it were actually only about four. Bob Smith, very intensely interested. Of
course John Kerry because he was responsible for the whole operation. Chuck Grassley
of Iowa was very interested and a very honest man. He was one of the few members of
the Senate who’s not a lawyer, as you probably know. He was a farmer from Iowa and a
real down to earth fellow and not any—he tells it as it is as he sees it at least. There’s no
trying to figure out what he’s talking about. He says it very directly. I backed him up a
lot on the hearings when Chris Kolesnik couldn’t be there. I sat behind Grassley a lot and
passed him notes. If he had questions he’d ask me and I supported him in the hearings.
Tom Daschle didn’t have much interest in it, in my opinion. I mean I’m giving you my
observations. Brown of Colorado, he wasn’t very active in it either. Reid didn’t show up
for very many of the hearings. McCain was very interested in it having been a POW
himself I would expect that. He was of course a Republican but we had problems with
him. My group, my little clique you might say on the committee, had some real serious
problems with McCain. Helms didn’t show up very much. I think he was sick most of
the time. Kassebaum was there once in a while, didn’t contribute to hardly anything. So
the real drivers and contributors among the senators was Smith, Kerry, Grassley, and
McCain.

LC: Bill, can you say something more about the clique that you’re describing?
WL: Well, there were two points of view. I can try to explain it. We—we being
Holstein, McCrary, Nicklas, and I—we were convinced that there were some left behind.
We, largely with McCrary’s lead, decided that we would work on what we called last
seen alive reports. There were hundreds of these reports made from a number of different
sources, mostly out of Laos, of Americans or people who looked like Americans in
captivity in Laos and a few in Vietnam. We wanted to know what happened to these and
the problem was the reports—these reports all wound up in DIA and if you looked at the
chart, a spreadsheet, of the reports you would see that each report was given an
evaluation by DIA and the evaluations were, number one, mistaken identity. That is, the
report said it was an American but it wasn’t. It was a Czech, it was a Russian, it was
some other Caucasian but it wasn’t an American. That’s one evaluation that they gave to
a report. The second evaluation was it was Bobby Garwood. This American that was
seen in captivity was Bobby Garwood and in many cases we discovered that Bobby
Garwood was seen in places that we knew he never was. He wasn’t in Sam Neua. He
wasn’t in other places in Vietnam. We knew exactly where he had been and so for DIA
to categorize a report as saying, “Well you’re mistaken. That was probably Garwood.”
That was not true, so that was another problem. The third category was, “This is a
fabrication. This reporter is an agent or a source made this up.” It wasn’t true. There
was no category for possibly true, likely true, might be true, or anything like that. In
other words they rejected every one of these reports.

LC: In other words, there was no way that they could classify any report as having
any validity at all and therefore ought to be further investigated.

WL: That’s right. That gave us a real problem because we said that couldn’t
possibly be true. We constructed a map on which we posted a little dot in different colors
for every report of an American seen alive in captivity and we posted that on a map of
Indochina. The reports clustered in several places. The largest clutter was around Sam
Neua in Laos up there and a few other major places down on the Plaine des Jarres and
down on the Plateau des Bolovens there were quite a few postings down there. They
were scattered around. We developed our own thesis is that the people that were
captured in Laos, none of them—none is a little too strong—only about seven or eight
were actually transported from their captivity in Laos into Vietnam and wound up in the
camps in North Vietnam. Americans that were captured on the ground in South Vietnam,
they didn’t get home either. Quite a few, we documented quite a few cases like that. The
other side said, “No, we believe DIA.” So that were their two sides. When we made our
final reports—you’ll see in the reports that we’ve made that our viewpoint was published
in the final report. But it was never given the credibility that we think it deserved.

LC: Bill there are a couple things I’d like to ask you about. You mentioned that
your group, the group that was actually trying to evaluate these sighting reports on their
own, had you said some trouble with McCain. Can you talk a little bit about what the
dynamic was?

WL: Well what happened, I’ll tell you what happened there. We, McCrary and I,
primarily wrote a paper preparing for a briefing that we were going to give to the entire
committee on our particular findings, last seen alive, and evaluations of a number of the
reports that had been rejected by DIA and giving our analysis of these reports and why
we believe there was some credibility that should be attached to them. We wrote up this
report—we had to classify it secret because even at that time DIA refused to declassify
any of the reports of live sightings. They were all still classified.

LC: How were you getting access to them?
WL: Well, we had to drive over to DIA office, actually this involved somewhere not in the Pentagon but they have an office and actually it’s in Clarendon, Virginia right very close to here. We’d go up there and they let us look at the documents. They’d drag them out of the safes and bring them over to our desks in Clarendon and we’d review them, make notes, and that’s how we did it.

LC: So you could look and make notes but you couldn’t make copies and—?

WL: We did have some copies of other documents in our safes and that’s another story. We had some safes, some classified material in our safes in the Russell Building. That’s how we had to do it. We did that for a month or so. They wouldn’t declassify it and another problem with the documents a lot of them had been pretty severely redacted so you didn’t get to see the whole picture. Anyway, we wrote this report and in this report we summarized what we were going to discuss, what we were going to present, to the committee the following morning. The meeting would be in the Capitol Building itself. There’s a room that belongs to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. It is a room in which you can discuss classified information. You can’t do that in a regular hearing room in the office buildings.

LC: And where is this room?

WL: This is in the Capitol itself where the Senate Intelligence Committee has its office. They have it there for obvious reasons. They have to use classified materials so much. So that’s where our classified briefings were held. That’s where any classified hearing was held too for that matter. That’s where the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has its classified hearings, and there were safes up there that they’d let us use in that room. Well anyway we pass this paper. We delivered it to the Senate offices of the senators on the committee. We gave each one of them a copy of this document. Well, we didn’t know this but McCain sent his document over to DIA, his contacts at DIA, and invited them to come over to the briefing the next morning to rebut what we were going to present. Now, he didn’t tell us this. We didn’t know this and the next morning we all went over to this briefing room in the Capitol and went into the room and we noticed in the hallway there, there was this group of people from DIA. We knew them. We had met them and they had been there once in a while before. “What are you doing here?” “Oh Senator McCain invited us.” Well, McCrary started the briefing and
we had slides and we had the big map with what we call the measle map with all the spots on it. McCrary started and immediately as soon as he went in to his first explanation of our analysis of the first report this fellow from DIA jumped up and said, “Oh no, no. That’s not right,” this and that. That developed into an argument between McCrary and this fellow. Kerry slammed the gavel down for order and told McCrary to sit down. It really developed into a real shambles. It was a mess. After a while every time McCrary would try to explain something somebody from DIA would jump up and tell him he was wrong so most of the senators left. Eventually the only people left were Smith, Kerry, and Grassley and McCain. That was it. We determined then it was very clear that McCain did not want any conclusion made that prisoners of war were left behind. I can’t ascribe a motive for that but it became very clear that he was convinced that everything that we had explained, our conclusion that some were left behind was absolutely wrong and this idea shouldn’t see the light of day. So that was that.

LC: Essentially you were shouted down?

WL: That’s really what happened, yeah. I don’t know if John Kerry knew what McCain had done or not ahead of time. I kind of suspect he did. We got into some serious trouble with it. They accused us of distributing a classified document without proper safeguards and so on. Later on—I don’t know if it was that night or the next night—Senate security came down and took our safes away and brought them up to the classified area in the Capitol. So we no longer had access to our own safes in our own office. They said we weren’t trustworthy. McCrary responded by drafting up a document addressed to the bar association of the State of Virginia—I believe that’s how he addressed it—demanding that John Kerry’s license to practice law be revoked and that he be disbarred for tampering with evidence. It was a very unhappy situation that developed there during this whole process.

LC: Bill, were you able to keep your own notes from this period or did you have to turn them in?

WL: Everything I kept was—well, no, I wasn’t able to keep them all. I sent you my whole files and everything that I kept that was more or less personal. The rest of the files had to go to the National Archives. That’s where they are because I mean the official files are there in the National Archives and a lot of people have used them. I get
calls every once in a while with questions about things. But that’s where they are. Later
on, jumping ahead a little bit, in ’93 I guess John Kerry made a couple of trips to Vietnam
and he didn’t invite me to go along. I don’t know who went with him. But later on I
guess it was in November just before the end of the committee he invited me to go along
with him on this next trip. So I went with him and Daschle and Brown, those three went,
and I went along with Neil Kravitz and Francis Zwenig. I think those are the only ones
that went. We had a special mission aircraft flying out of Andrews. We went into
Bangkok first and our way on the flight I really didn’t know what to expect but John
Kerry came back from the first class section of this aircraft and he said, “Bill—” No I
guess he called me colonel. I’m sure he did. He said, “Colonel, where do you think we
ought to look at on this trip?” Now, I should have been surprised with a question like
that because I should have expected that he had already planned this and knew exactly
what he wanted to look at. But I wasn’t surprised because I figured he was going to try to
sandbag me. I had my maps along with me and I said, “Well here’s a list,” and I told him
and gave him several areas that I thought were justified to look.

LC: Now, you were talking about only inside Vietnam?
WL: Inside Vietnam, yes, in South Vietnam. So they had already looked at the
prisons in North a couple of times and so I told them what we should do. We flew first to
Hanoi. There the Communists took us to their museum and they presented to Senator
Kerry John McCain’s flight suit and his helmet, the one that he was wearing when he
landed in that lake in Hanoi.

LC: Now they presented it to him for him to keep?
WL: To take home and give back to Senator McCain. We had a meeting with the
prime minister and a meeting with the president. Jean Sauvagio was our interpreter. Did
I ever mention Jean Sauvagio? I think I did.

LC: Just a little bit ago.
WL: He was again an excellent Vietnamese linguist. He had been a colonel in
Army intelligence. Anyway I was surprised to see him there but he did his usual
excellent job of interpreting for us. I helped get his wife out of Vietnam in the last days
of our, you know, last days of April.

LC: I think you mentioned that when we talked about that.
WL: I mentioned that. Then running into him again in Hanoi was quite a surprise and a pleasant one.

LC: Bill can I just ask what were your impressions of—and obviously there’s a lot of PR attached to this—what were your impressions at Hao Lo Prison because this had to be the first time you had been there?

WL: Yeah, this was the first time I’d seen it. It was pretty grim, very grim place to be. Hanoi itself was pretty rundown and tawdry looking, hadn’t been painted, nothing had been cleaned up—well, I shouldn’t say cleaned up but it looked old and kind of decrepit and kind of falling apart in contrast to Saigon for that matter which was still pretty nice. The Communists seem to be a pretty humorless bunch. They were hospitable enough I guess but not overly. Kerry seemed to get along with them fine. I didn’t get much out of that meeting up there. It was, like you said, it was a PR sort of thing.

LC: Well, and obviously the timing of this was related not only to the committee but also to the, probably the incoming new president who might restore diplomatic relations between Hanoi and the United States which is of course what happened.

WL: Yeah. That was clearly on the table. We flew from Hanoi—we stayed there about four days I think and then we flew down to Saigon. No! First to Vientiane in Laos. We spent only about four or five hours in Laos. We had a meeting with the prime minister there sitting around in his conference room and nothing came of that. It was again just a—

LC: Courtesy call?

WL: Yeah, yeah. Kind of a courtesy call.

LC: Photo op or something.

WL: Then from there we flew into Saigon. We were put into the Rex Hotel, which I had been in several times before in my earlier tours there. Nice place. Then we started our investigations. We were given a team from our own missing in action team that was based in Hanoi. They provided us with interpreters and people who had already been investigating crash sites.

LC: Now this would be DoD personnel?
WL: Yes. These were Defense Department activities. Good group of people, very knowledgeable. Most of them were good with the language. They knew what was going on. Flanagan. They gave me a man named Flanagan I think his name was. He’d been there for two or three years and knew his way around. Let’s see, what happened next? Well, we went to the main prison in Saigon and talked to a couple of people who were in prison there. I can’t remember why. There were some indications that some American prisoners had been through there but not very many. It wasn’t high on my list of places to look at because the prisoners in there were largely political types. They were Vietnamese, not Americans. Of course every place we went they insisted that there had never been any Americans here. Senator Kerry went down to look at a place that I pointed out to him down in the Delta by Chau Doc. He flew down there and I flew with Senator Daschle and Francis Zwenig up to Da Nang to look at a prison that had been reported out west of Da Nang, a place called An Dien. D-i-e-n, A-n D-i-e-n. We got a four wheel drive Toyota vehicle, a couple of them, and drove out that way using my maps. I told them where to go and how to get there. I went there with Daschle and Francis Zwenig. Of course every place we stopped why they’d say, “No there’s never been any Americans here.” Along with us was a Vietnamese, the chief of the POW group from North Vietnam. His name was Dich. D-i-c-h. Mr. Dich. He was with us and of course—

LC: Now was he a PAVN official?

WL: Yes, yes. Well, I don’t know if he was Army. He probably was. I think more properly he’s probably intelligence, probably counterintelligence. But they said he was with the POW Bureau. That’s what they called it. Any case, with him standing by it was not likely that we would get candid responses from anybody that we talked to.

LC: You surely all were aware of this. I mean on a trip like this was it more useful to simply be able to kind of eyeball the landscape and see what was happening?

WL: Probably. Yes. Although in this trip out to An Dien that had to be cut short because the road was so bad that we couldn’t make the last, the final, two or three kilometers to the place that I really wanted to go. We never got there. We had to turn around and come back because they told us that the airport at Da Nang would be closed
at sunset. Something like that, so we had to turn around and come back. We never really
did complete that mission.

LC: Where was it that you wanted to go and why?

WL: It was a prison camp in which we had had a number of reports that American
prisoners had been held. It was built along a river that flows into the South China Sea
there just south of Da Nang and a number of prisoners had been sighted there by two or
three different sources.

LC: How old were those reports?

WL: These reports, these prisoners had been there probably in 1968, ’69, ’70,
maybe some of them even after the end of the war. We were told that those weren’t
Americans that were seen there, those were Czech engineers and they were up there to
survey putting a dam on that river and maybe that was true, I don’t know. I thought it
was worth looking into. We did get to one active prison. There was a prison there but
the point is that there were two prisons. We were allowed to go only as far as the first
one. The second one up the river, another two or three kilometers, was the one I really
wanted to look at. They claimed that that had been shut down and again it was getting
late and it would take us another two hours to get back to Da Nang and we had to turn
around and go. The active prison was kind of interesting. The prisoners were all
Vietnamese. They were criminals. They were not in there because of political things
they were people who had been picked up for felonies. Rather pleasant place. Kind of
looked like a park. They were in the sheet metal roof buildings. It was rather interesting.
But again, we weren’t getting—well, we weren’t getting the unvarnished truth about
anything is what my conclusion was.

LC: Was that also the conclusion of, for example, Senator Daschle? Do you
remember?

WL: I don’t know what he thought. He didn’t confide in me much. He let me
take his picture standing in the mud beside the guy in the carryall we were in. But we
didn’t socialize much. Francis Zwenig, again, she didn’t believe in us either, in our point
of view. We got back to Saigon and it was about over and Senator Kerry asked me, he
said, “Are you satisfied? Did you see everything that we ought to look at?” I said, “Well
no.” I said, “There’s another case up in Pleiku that I think deserves some attention.” He
said, “Well, would you like to stay back and look at that one?” I said, “Sure, I’ll stay
back.” He said, “Well we’re going back then and you can stay and make this
investigation up in Pleiku.” I said, “Well, I’d like to do that but I’d like you to do me a
favor. When you get back to Washington call my wife and tell her that you told me to
stay back and make this investigation otherwise she’s not going to really understand why
everybody came back except me.” He said, “Yeah, I’ll do that.” So that’s one thing—
when he got back he didn’t turn this over to his staff, to his secretaries, I mean called her
personally and she was very, very pleased with that one. This is Senator Kerry and she
couldn’t quite believe her ears.

LC: Well that’s pretty remarkable actually. That’s pretty remarkable. So how
long did you stay then Bill?

WL: It was another almost a week I guess because I had to—Flanagan and I and
Mr. Dich interviewed a couple of people from Xuan Loc. A fellow who said that there
were some American names in Xuan Loc that we ought to look at and that person in
Xuan Loc had a contact up on the Man Yang Pass on Route 19 that goes up to Pleiku, and
we ought to talk to him too because he knows about some remains and he knows about
American prisoners up in the Pleiku area. So this was—we interviewed this one fellow in
the hotel in Saigon. He was not very credible. Then we drove to Xuan Loc and we went
to his house in Xuan Loc and they brought in several bags, well actually pillow cases,
with bones in them, bones and skulls. Put them out on the table and said, “These are
American prisoners of war and here are their dog tags. They died out here and we
recovered their remains and here are the dog tags.” Well, it was all bogus. We looked at
the bones and Flanagan looked at them and he measured them and he said, “Well, this is
not the tibia of a Caucasian. This is a tibia of a little mountain man from Vietnam.” It
was all phony. I have pictures of those. I don’t know if you want them or not.

LC: Well yeah, sure! Absolutely! Yes. If you can place them here we’ll make a
copy and give it back to you.

WL: I’ll send them to you.

LC: Okay. Yeah.

WL: We went on from there. We drove up through—we stayed at a government
guest house, the Communist guest house, in Qui Nhon that night and then we drove on to
Man Yang over the pass. Up there was kind of interesting and I have pictures of this one too. We went into this little hovel beside the road and talked to this man that allegedly knew about American prisoners up there. While we were there I went across the road on the other side there was a PAVN military camp and I took a picture of the gate and almost got arrested. Someone came running out of the camp with a rifle and wanted to seize my camera and so on because this was a great military secret that they had a camp up on the highway. Well, that got diffused. Mr. Dich helped diffuse that one a little bit and I didn’t have to surrender my camera. We went on to Pleiku and had a meeting with the province officials up there and they insisted that there were never any American prisoners of war in that area. I had a picture that someone had given us of a person who looked like he might be an American dressed in a loin cloth in a little village and he was supposed to be the American who had been seen now and then up in the Highlands. They said, “Oh that’s not and American. That’s a Montagnard.” “Well where is he?” “Well, he’s out here,” and they showed a place on the map that was about a mile from the Cambodian border. “How do you get there?” “Well you have to walk. There’s no road. There’s a trail that goes there.” “Well how long will that take?” “Well about two days.” So that’s not in the cards. I was convinced at that time that this guy wasn’t—in fact I was kind of suspicious of the thing to start. I have a picture of that too. Maybe I’ll send that to you.

LC: That’d be great. That would be wonderful.

WL: Anyway, the whole thing was largely a bust. Flanagan and I and Mr. Dich then, I guess we were there about two or three days at Pleiku talking to the province officials. They have a museum; they have a war museum up there with artifacts from the war.

LC: Did you go through it?

WL: Yes, I went through that.

LC: Can you say something about your impression of that?

WL: It was a small building with American helmets and bayonets and maps and very heavy propaganda about how they conquered the Americans at Pleiku and Kontum. Interesting. It’s something like the very small replica of the one, the big one that they
have in Saigon. We flew from there on a Russian airplane up to Da Nang, just there I think for refueling, and then on into Hanoi and then I flew home.

LC: Bill, was this your first trip back?

WL: Yes, it was. It was my first trip back to Vietnam since I left there in ’75. I didn’t get to do any sightseeing except that very nice road trip from Saigon up to Pleiku. I’d never done that by road before. I always had to fly when I was going any distance like that but it was a nice trip.

LC: I know that this was a strange trip because of the controllers that you had with you, the Vietnamese officials and also the American officials. But what was it like for you to actually be back in country and to see what had happened?

WL: It was very nostalgic, put it that way. I was very pleased to be back to see how everything had—well, a lot of things had changed a great deal but other things they were just the same. It was kind of emotional seeing the whole place again because so many places I had been and been through so many things, to see them all again in a peaceful setting was really very pleasant. The people, the Vietnamese that I met on the street and the hotels and so on, were very happy to see Americans again.

LC: Really? Even in 1992?

WL: Yeah. Sure. Can’t say that for the Communist side of it, but people in Saigon weren’t Communists, the ones that we saw at least. Those in the prison that were running the prisons, yeah they were hard liners but the other folks were very pleasant.

LC: Now, did you come across any evidence other than that they were trying to keep you out of certain places that there were at that time political camps for Vietnamese who were being held?

WL: Well, they didn’t show us any of those.

LC: Sure. Obviously they’re trying to keep you away from that.

WL: I knew very well that they were there but a lot of them had—let’s see, by ’93, quite a few of them had already been closed. I’m sure there was one near Xuan Loc because there was a rather large one there in the earlier days and was probably still there. But they didn’t let us see anything like that.

LC: Bill, let me ask you another question. Earlier you mentioned that one of the ways that DIA might evaluate a last seen alive report was that it was Bobby Garwood.
For people who aren’t familiar with this reference can you talk a little bit about who Bobby Garwood was and what your assessment is of that whole story?

WL: Yeah, I don’t remember an awful lot about Bobby Garwood except that he was a Marine. He was a Marine driver, he drove a jeep. I guess he might have been a lance corporal, probably a private, and he was captured in a village near Da Nang. I can’t remember what year but it might have been ’68 or ’69, I don’t remember. He was captured and wounded as he was being captured and taken to a camp by the Viet Cong out somewhere, probably near Da Nang. What’s the name of that province? Well, I can’t recall. He might have been taken up to Thua Thien, somewhere in the mountains and the jungles, and kept for many years and during the time that he was in captivity he learned Vietnamese language. He became what you’d call a trustee and a number of American prisoners, American captives, had contact with him during that period. They were captured and they were brought in to the same camp where Bobby was and they noticed that he had relative freedom of movement in and around the camp while they were kept in cages. So he was termed a collaborator and there was even some doubt on how he was captured, whether he actually surrendered willingly or whether he was really captured. But eventually he was moved to the North, given a good deal of freedom. They trusted him. He was even seen from time to time in the South. Apparently some people reported him as seeing him carrying a weapon. So that meant that he was really a pretty serious collaborator. After the war was over and the prisoners were repatriated he was repatriated I think about the same time.

LC: Was he?

WL: Yeah. He came home at least and the Marine Corps charged him with collaboration and desertion. He was tried by a court-martial and I can’t recall what the sentence was. I think he was found guilty on some of the charges but he was given a suspended sentence or something like that. He of course got a dishonorable discharge from the Marine Corps in the process. That’s Bobby Garwood and he was seen a number of times in different places around Da Nang and well actually west of Da Nang out in the mountains and later on seen in North Vietnam. It’s those sightings, many of these prisoners of war sightings that we saw that we received from sources, were attributed to sightings of Bobby Garwood by DIA. As I said earlier a lot of those sightings that were
attributed to Bobby Garwood were impossible to be that because he wasn’t in those
particular areas.

LC: Did you look into—I mean while you were with the committee—did you
look into the case in any detail and into the evidence that was presented at his court-
martial and so on?

WL: Yes. We saw the entire story of Bobby Garwood. But again I can’t recall all
of the details of that. That’s about the best I can do on it. I’m sure there’s a great deal of
material on Garwood. I bet you if you went on Google you’d find the whole story.

LC: You’d find several different iterations of it too.

WL: Find several different interpretations of it. The Marine Corps was pretty
well set on the idea that he was a deserter. I come down somewhere in the middle on it.
I do believe that he was captured; I do believe that he made the best of a really miserable
situation. I don’t know if I would have done the same thing. I kind of doubt it. I don’t
think I would have collaborated to the extent that he did. But if I could make my own
situation better without bringing harm to anyone else I might have done the same. The
problem was in some of the reports that his situation made it worse for other prisoners of
war that didn’t do the same thing and that would be a pretty serious charge if he had done
anything to bring more suffering on to the fellow prisoners in the camp that would have
been pretty serious.

LC: Even by comparison? Even if let’s say the Viet Cong interrogator said, “You
need to act like him or else this will fall on you.” Even by comparison—?

WL: Yes. It could’ve been something like—something like that could’ve
happened.

LC: The other thing that’s arisen Bill, is that Bobby Garwood himself has been
said to be—and I haven’t spoken with him so I don’t know—but has been said to be the
source of a number of sightings of others. Did you sort of follow that loop as well?

WL: Yes, I’m sure we did. I can’t remember specifically doing that but there
were a number of prisoners that he reported seeing and whether all of these came out I
can’t recall now but that’s true. Some of them, I remember, at least one died. Maybe
more than one died in the camp that he was in.
Interview with William LeGro  
Session 21 of 22  
April 10, 2006

LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the tenth of April 2006. I’m in Lubbock and Bill is in Virginia speaking from his home. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill thanks for continuing with the Oral History Project. You and I have been talking in our most recent session about your service with the Senate Select Committee and you’ve outlined some of the interesting personnel and positions associated with that committee on the issue of whether there were surviving POWs. One thing that I would like to ask is whether the DoD position was the only position within the Department of Defense. In other words, were any of the people that you talked to or still had continuing contact with in the Army or folks that you might know from the Navy or Air Force interested in pursuing the possibility of surviving POWs to a degree that DoD wasn’t really happy with?

WL: I can’t really recall any conversations that we had with anybody outside—we, members of the investigative staff of the Senate Select Committee—we didn’t have any conversations with the service branches or representatives of them or actually with the Department of Defense. All of our military contacts were with the Defense Intelligence Agency and their own POW/MIA office within DIA. We did speak with of course the field representatives out in Vietnam, the people on the ground. But we had no contact, at least I didn’t, I don’t know anybody that did, with the service branches on the subject so I can’t speak to what the attitude was. If you go back in history there was a strong feeling in the POW/MIA office at the very beginning in 1973 that there were people left behind. Dr.—I can’t recall his name now, I will later on. But there was a civilian responsible in early 1973 to look into the possibility that we didn’t get them all back during that prisoner exchange in February and March of ’73.
LC: Was that a position that was linked to the idea that Americans taken prisoner in Laos were still being held in Laos or was that based on an idea that they had been taken elsewhere?

WL: I can’t really—I don’t believe there was a distinction made. The main issue was that there were Americans that were seen to be and known to be in captivity of either having been seen or through radio transmissions knew that they were on the ground and about to be captured. Many of those Americans never turned up in the prisoner exchange and were never accounted for by the North Vietnamese. Because the war was a general war involving territory in Laos as well as in North Vietnam and South Vietnam we, the United States government, held the North Vietnamese government responsible for all of the POWs. Not that they didn’t make overtures to the Laos government but it was considered that the Laos government was only a puppet to the North Vietnamese anyway. If the Laos government, pressure had been put upon that government by the North Vietnamese and that government had POWs we would have got them back. That was the general attitude. But there was an attempt made by the official who was responsible for POWs in the Department of Defense to make the case that there were some that were left behind. He made that statement to the secretary, the acting secretary, of defense sometime in the early 1973. I can’t—do you have that name down or do you know who that is?

LC: I don’t actually have it at my fingertips. No, I don’t. Between the two of us we’ll probably come up with it though because I think I know who you’re talking about. Bill, in your own mind since there was this division, essentially, within the staff over the issue of whether this was a problem that needed further pursue—and you talked about that division—did you have, in your own contacts, were you talking with anyone in the Army at this point?

WL: No.

LC: Did anyone seek you out to try to say to you, “Look, Bill, we need to push this issue?”

WL: Nobody from the Army. The real activists in this issue were either in the National League of Families or another organization of family members who split off from the National League and a few other people. Prominent among them were Billy
Hendon, whom I think I mentioned earlier, congressman from North Carolina, former congressman from North Carolina, and John LeBoutillier from New York, also former congressman. Those two were very active in this as was Red McDaniel who retired from the Navy as a captain. I guess he was a much lower grade when he was shot down and he was a prisoner for some seven years I believe. He was active in this but there was nobody in the active Army or Navy or any other services that I was in contact with who expressed any opinion or did any active work on this issue.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about these other groups who were obviously directly interested in the findings of the committee. First of all, I want to come back to the families and their organizations in a moment. But first let me ask about some of the POWs who were released. Obviously those men after some time had their own organization that continued to do so. I just wondered what, if anything bubbled up from those gentlemen. I know, of course, John McCain was on the committee and you’ve talked a little bit about his position, but I wonder if there were contacts between committee staff and individual POWs or the organization of ex-POWs.

WL: No. There was no contact that I’m aware of. I didn’t have any except with Red McDaniel. I had met him before I was even on the committee while I was working with John Brown of whom I’ve mentioned before. I met Red; I believe I met him in Billy Hendon’s office as I remember. They were working together on it and it was my impression that Red McDaniel firmly believed that there were prisoners in captivity in North Vietnam who were not returned.

LC: Did you get a sense of what he based that on?

WL: The only impression I had is that he had communications, or other people that he knew, other prisoners had communication with some of these people, either during the time that they were captured or being moved from one prison to another or perhaps through their communications that they had within the prisons.

LC: So there might have been names that were on the POW’s memorized lists as we know of?

WL: Yes. Could have been. I’ll have to qualify that with that. Could have been. I don’t know for sure what it was based upon. I think I mentioned that Senator Kerry and Senator Smith were given an opportunity to look at some of the debriefing reports when
the prisoners who were brought back and were debriefed by intelligence agencies. They, the two senators, were given an opportunity to look at these debriefing reports. None of the investigators and none of the other senators were given that opportunity so I don’t know what was in them.

LC: Now, how would that have been decided? Why was Bob Smith included?

WL: Well, Bob Smith was the co-chairman of the committee—

LC: With John Kerry?

WL: With John Kerry and Smith being a Republican. As I mentioned it should have been a really non-partisan committee and that’s the way it was described but it wasn’t in practice. There was a pretty clear division down party lines except for the case of McCain. He seemed to be on the Democratic Party side of this. Again I’m making this division because of the way they acted not because of what they said. In other words, the Republican side selected some investigators and the Democratic side selected some investigators so that from the outset appeared to divide the committee.

LC: But is that standard procedure as far as you know?

WL: Yes, I think it is. Although in most cases the subject matter of a committee and what they’re interested in does have very strong political overtones always. I mean whether we’re talking about financial agreements or the judiciary committee or agriculture committee, all of them have certain attitudes that are related to their party platforms and so on. This one should not have been but it seemed to develop that way. It was always kind of a mystery to me why the Democratic side would have been so strongly of the opinion that there were no prisoners left behind and the Republican side kind of slanted in the other direction. At least they seemed to be more objective about it and they didn’t accept the DIA position without question. The DIA position was there were no prisoners left behind alive. That was an interesting development and I don’t know how to account for it.

LC: Well it is kind of strange that Senator McCain would take the position that he did seeking less information rather than more, which is sort of what it sounds like, because as you mentioned in the last session he invited the DIA to come in and give a rebuttal which led to not only chaos on the floor of the committee room it sounds like, but also kind of squashed the discussion a little bit. Were you—and when I say you I mean
collectively the staff—able to bring people forward before the committee? Could you
have asked anyone you wanted to to come in and give testimony?

WL: Yes. We had some ability. We had of course in all cases if we wanted a
witness to be subpoenaed and to testify or if we wanted an individual to be deposed we
would have to present that as a request to the committee counsel, Bill Codinha. Also get
the approval of Francis Zwenig who was the staff director before we could do that. I
can’t recall any case where they refused to depose or to ask somebody to testify that we
requested. I mean they approved it so we could talk to people that we wanted to.

LC: Could you for example have called Secretary Kissinger?

WL: He was called. I don’t recall who called him. We didn’t. I imagine they
decided that at a higher level. I imagine Bob Smith and John Kerry talked that over
between them and they got Kissinger to testify. They got a couple of former secretaries
of defense to testify. There were some pretty high level people.

LC: Was that helpful at all or was it kind of a distraction from the meat of the
issue?

WL: No I think it was helpful because it established the situation that pertained at
least at the time of the ceasefire.

LC: Right, and did you have a sense that they, these sort of the superstars that
were called, for example Dr. Kissinger, were objectively approaching the issue as it lay
before you in the early 1990s?

WL: I think they did. Most of them did. There were some perhaps that I may
have felt were withholding some information in order to perhaps protect their reputations.
But I can’t, at this time, after these many years, I can’t pin anything like that down.

LC: Right. Okay. Let me ask a little bit about the family organizations. Were
leaders from those organizations also called to testify or to participate in some other way?

WL: Yes, yes. There were quite a few of them that came and testified and gave
their own views on what was going on. Some of the family members that testified were
those who had actually lost brothers or husbands in the war and testified about the
circumstances and explained their frustration at being unable to receive what they felt
was information that the Defense Department had and would not release to them; things
like that, some of which seemed to have merit and others probably didn’t.
LC: How important do you think it would have been Bill in terms of resolving this question for the Defense Intelligence Agency and therefore DoD to release more data than they did publicly?

WL: It would have been very important and very helpful. So much of the information that, the reports, the intelligence reports, that we were allowed to look at had been so heavily redacted that important information was probably left out that we could have used. Great sections of the reports were entirely black by wiping out. What they said they were doing was protecting sources, which had some validity at some time and in some cases. But I saw so many reports that it rather stretched my imagination to believe that that source had to be protected. These were villagers and people that would cross the border from Laos and Thailand were interviewed by POW investigators at the time. They had anonymous names, in my view, and nothing could have been interpreted from the report that would renown their dangers in the future. It was a stretch. Too much of it was redacted.

LC: Well, it sounds like not only were the identities of the informants held back but also a great deal of content. I mean if there are just whole paragraphs blacked through then that suggests that it’s not just the name of the person who’s supplying the data.

WL: Yeah, that’s true, and—

LC: You’re an old intelligence guy so of course you would—I mean you understand this—

WL: There were more intelligence people with better credentials than I do on intelligence on the staff, John McCrary among them. He like I was very frustrated by the way that worked. Also Nick Nicklas who had his entire career in intelligence.

LC: Well, okay, if you say so. But I think you had at least stretched your legs on the intel side so you had a sense of how important it was to—

WL: I figured that I had developed a sense for determining whether a report had any validity, little validity, or none at all. I mean I could pretty well sense that sort of thing.
LC: But this was frustrating, obviously. Tell me a little bit if you can remember about the families’ representatives. Are there any, even if you can’t recall their names, who stand out or whose story stood out for you?

WL: I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll have to think about it and after a while some of these names will come back to me and in our next conversation between now and then I’ll try to write some of them down. Right now I can’t recall all of their names. Ann was the leader of the National League of Families but I can’t recall her last name.

LC: That’s okay.

WL: Dolores had the other one but I can’t remember her last name either. In fact I just saw her last year. They asked me to speak to them. They had their conference here in Washington.

LC: So that group is still meeting?

WL: Yes, yes, they’re still alive. I get emails from them quite frequently and maybe that’ll bring some of it back if I can find some of them.

LC: Sure. Their organization, if you can remember Bill at this point, did it include people who had family members unaccounted for from earlier conflicts?

WL: Yes. It included people from the Cold War, not necessarily—yeah, that was earlier—Cold War shoot downs. In those cases what we’re talking about primarily were the intelligence flights flown on the perimeter of the Soviet Union there and some of them out of Japan, some of them out of other parts of Alaska and so on. Some of these aircraft were lost and also some of them were lost in shoot downs or just disappeared. Some of the crews from those aircraft were probably, and in some cases certainly, captured by the Soviets and they didn’t come back. So that group of families was one of them. The most famous case that I can think of right now is the flight that went from Turkey over to Armenia, Soviet Armenia at the time—EC130 shot down very close to Yerevan in Armenia.

LC: About what year?

WL: Shoot I can’t remember that. Actually we went over there in Taskforce Russia. We visited this site where the crash was and there was an Army unit digging in there and they recovered some fragments, some bone fragments, and a couple of teeth
and so on and other evidence and a dog tag or two. Right now there’s a little memorial
there that the Armenians constructed. But that’s a type of flight that we’re talking about.

LC: Sure. So those families—?

WL: Those families, some of them were members of the organization.

LC: I mean I guess the issue that I’m thinking about leads to a question that I
probably should have nailed down earlier. Was the mission of the committee; was the
purview and brief of the committee broad enough to actually reach back into either earlier
in time or to other areas than Southeast Asia and US involvement in Southeast Asia and
personnel losses there?

WL: Yes. I can’t tell you how that it was initially considered. I believe that when
it was established, when the committee was established, the focus was entirely on the
Indochina War. But soon after they began their work it was determined that there were
other issues involving prisoners of war going back clear to World War II that should be
looked into. So it’s my impression that they expanded their scope. Now perhaps their
scope was that way to begin with but I don’t believe so. Then when John Brown gave his
testimony and some of the other activists—Tom Ashworth of Arkansas—they testified
about World War II and Korea and they rather compelled the committee to expand its
scope. That’s my impression. Now, as I say, they may have had that scope to begin with
but I don’t believe so. That’s how we worked on that. But Korea was the second area to
be investigated. As I recall now we didn’t do much on World War II. That was a little
bit of a stretch for us to go back and work on that one. Had the committee been
extended—see, the committee had a sunset clause in the law. It was to end on the thirty-
first of December 1992. That’s when it was to be over. It was extended for a few weeks
in order to write our final reports but for all intents and purposes it was over on the thirty-
first of December. We, members of the staff, told the leadership that we should extend it
for another year because we were not finished with our investigation. There was no—
and I can’t tell you why they didn’t do that. I could sense that there was no interest in it
in the Senate to continue it. Bob Smith may have been interested in extending it but John
Kerry certainly wasn’t and McCain wasn’t. They felt that we’d done all we could do and
there was no point in extending it. So there was no effort that I could see to extend it.
LC: Can you talk a little bit or at least offer your observations or your guesses about the motivation for both of those two gentlemen, McCain and Kerry, to just want to see this inquiry ended?

WL: Well, I have to give them the benefit of the doubt I think on that. I think they determined in their own minds that there was no firm evidence that anyone was left behind in Indochina and they also saw that—you see, put it in this context. During the last few weeks of our investigation we had testimony from General Volkogonov from Russia. He’s the one who said—he was their historian for the Russian Army. Correct me on this now, when did Russia take over from the Soviet Union?

LC: Nineteen ninety-one.

WL: Ninety-one, okay. So we had Russia by this time. We were dealing with Russia not the Soviet Union.

LC: I think so. This is late ’92.

WL: That’s right. So Volkogonov said and prime minister primer of Russia told us that, “Yes we believe there were some American prisoners of war in the Soviet Union.” That led to the establishment of Taskforce Russia to support the US/Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War. With that in mind at the end of ’92 I would say that McCain and Kerry and perhaps all of the rest of them figured that, “Well we don’t have to extend the life of this committee for two reasons. One, we thoroughly investigated the case of prisoners of war in Indochina and we now have the US/Russia Joint Commission who’s going to investigate the possibility that American prisoners of war were moved from Korea into the Soviet Union during and after the Korean War. So we don’t need this committee any longer.” I think that would be a logical conclusion for them to make so that’s why I think that they didn’t extend it.

LC: So at least the issue of whether US personnel had been or were still being held in the Soviet Union or former Soviet Union territories was going to be the job now, following up on that would be the job of this new taskforce under the joint commission.

WL: Yes. Well, you see the taskforce was a support organization. It contained the investigators and the staff to look into the allegations that the Soviets had made that there were prisoners there, or had been prisoners there. But the main body was called the United States/Russian Joint Commission on POWs and MIAs. That was their official
Taskforce Russia was established to do the work for this commission. Those members were at the ambassadorial level. There was US ambassador who was appointed as the US representative on the commission and General Volkogonov represented the Soviet side. Of course they had some couple of staff officers there on each side but Taskforce Russia was to do the investigations and Taskforce Russia established an office in Moscow and we had an office here in northern Virginia.

LC: Now, Bill, what was your relationship to Taskforce Russia?
WL: I was engaged to be a special assistant. That was my title: special assistant to the director of Taskforce Russia. That was General Bernie Loefke.

LC: Was he still on active duty or retired?
WL: No, he was called back to active duty. He had recently retired. Colonel Loefke knew Russian. He was a Soviet linguist. In fact he knew several languages. He had been, as I recall now, he had been US military attaché in Moscow at one time, fairly recently I believe. The ambassador that they appointed for the US Joint Commission had been ambassador in Russia; well actually in Soviet Union I’m sure.

LC: Do you know who it was Bill?
WL: I can’t remember his name but I’ll look for that too.
LC: Darn it I keep asking you. I’m sorry. I think you’re doing pretty good. Now tell me a little bit more about Bernie Loefke. First of all I just want to confirm that he was US Army.
WL: Yes. He spelled his name, I believe, L-o-e-f-k-e. I think that’s right. Bernie Loefke told, in talking to him—I got to know him fairly well. He was born in South America I believe in Venezuela or Bolivia and became a US citizen much later but there of course he learned Spanish. I believe his father was German and he was a very interesting guy. He was a parachute officer, he was an infantry officer, he was pretty elderly. He wasn’t as old as I am but he was getting along there. But he had actually hiked over the Andes Mountains. He was a real outdoorsman if you can imagine walking over the—

LC: No. Not really.
WL: He walked over the Andes. That’s quite a hike.
LC: Yep, it surely must have been.
WL: Anyway, he was a really good guy and smart and energetic and devoted to the task.

LC: Had you come across him at all or did you know of him beforehand?

WL: Oh, it was an interesting way that I got involved in this. His executive officer, when this started—when they organized Taskforce Russia I was still with the joint commission. It was Stu Herrington who was brought on to organize Taskforce Russia, and you know who Stu Herrington is.

LC: Well I do but for someone who doesn’t can you just give—

WL: Well, Stu Herrington was a colonel. At the time he was still on active duty. He was military intelligence branch and he had been chief of the US intelligence station in Berlin earlier. He was really something of a spy catcher. In the early days of my tenure in DAO Saigon he worked for me as a captain so I knew him from long ago, 1973. He worked for me from ’73 to ’74. He was Vietnam linguist as well as German linguist and I think he knew some Russian. I’m sure he did.

LC: He’s a sharp guy. At least to go by his writings, I’ve never spoken to him but—

WL: Yes, he’s a very good writer and excellent officer. Well anyway he organized Taskforce Russia.

LC: He called you?

WL: Yeah. He called me as this committee was coming to an end and asked me if I’d come over and replace him because he was getting another assignment. I don’t remember what it was. It might have been when he was going to the War College. I think he was assigned to the faculty of the War College about that time and he didn’t want to pass that up. So he asked me to do that and I said, “Okay I’d do it as soon as this committee was over.”

LC: Right. So you transitioned—?

WL: I transitioned from the Senate Select Committee over to Taskforce Russia. It was about a two month break in the action there.

LC: Before I ask you too much more about Taskforce Russia I just want to ask the question that I’ve been kind of mulling over since we talked last and that has to do with the particular assignment that you had with the committee, with the Senate Select
Committee, to write up some of their findings or to at least summarize some of the
information that had come before the committee as to Korean POWs. Can you talk a
little bit about that Bill before we go to Taskforce Russia? Obviously they’re linked as
well.

WL: Well I don’t recall why they gave me the Korean assignment. I’m sure that
it was Francis Zwenig that did it. She told me to take over the Korean issue because the
others were more involved in the live sighting reports. John McCrary was responsible for
that and John Holstein helped him on that issue. I think Nick Nicklas was working on
that too. So they needed somebody to write up the Korean part. I had been in Korea; I
had been in intelligence in Korea in the old days so that might have influenced them a
little bit. I knew something about the issue and I had done some of the study with the
Korean matter. John McCrary and I for that matter had gone up to Hackensack, New
Jersey and interviewed a fellow who had contact with the North Korean delegation to the
United Nations and we deposed him. So I had some information about the Korean issue
that perhaps a little bit more direct than the other investigators did. That’s why we did
that. I didn’t tell you about that interview did I?

LC: No.

WL: It was kind of interesting. The fellow’s name is Bobby Egan, E-g-a-n. Very
interesting and colorful fellow. He runs a restaurant in Hackensack across the river from
Manhattan. I can’t recall now how he contacted us but he did and McCrary, being a
lawyer—I think I mentioned that—he was empowered to depose witnesses. So he asked
me to go up to Hackensack with him and interview Bobby Egan about his contacts with
the North Korean Embassy or delegation I guess they call it.

LC: Right, to the UN.

WL: To the UN. Of course we have no relations, no diplomatic relations, with
North Korea so they don’t have an embassy. They are restricted to a few miles around
the UN headquarters. They can’t travel outside of Manhattan, which made it kind of
interesting because Egan had to kind of smuggle them over to his restaurant in the trunk
of his car I believe, have dinner and so on. Egan—it’s kind of a footnote to it—but Egan
as I say was a colorful figure and he was the caterer for the New York Mets and the New
York Giants football team. I met some of those fellows there at his restaurant. We had to
go to the police headquarters at Hackensack to interview him because we needed a quiet, secure area with a room that we could use. So he knew the police chief pretty well so we used one of their interrogation rooms to interview him.

LC: Can you give me a sense of what he had to say?

WL: The sense of it was that he had information from the North Koreans that yes, indeed they did take some American pilots that were shot down in North Korea. They captured them and they turned them over to the Soviets. So that was the essence of his information. I was convinced that Bobby Egan was real, that he had no reason to dissemble or lead us in paths so that’s what we took back with us, John McCrary and I.

LC: Did he talk at all about the role of the Chinese in this?

WL: Not so much. In the air war in Korea during the Korean War, the fighter pilots were Russians and they were flying with North Korean markings on the aircraft. But it was a bona fide Soviet Army Air Force’s fighter wing that opposed the US Navy and Air Force pilots over North Korea. It wasn’t much action as far as I know with Chinese at all in the air. Chinese were on the ground in huge numbers but the air war was between the United States and Soviet Union.

LC: So the Chinese would have been more or less bypassed if it downed, if a US pilot came down in North Korean territory?

WL: Yes. US pilots, particularly those that were flying our new jets, were of very prized captives by the Soviets. They wanted to learn all they could about the American aircraft and that’s why they wanted these pilots and they took upwards of a hundred of them into the Soviet Union and we have their names. Egan didn’t give us the names or anything as I recall. He just confirmed what we already had discovered from other documents that we’d picked up.

LC: Now, this is work that was all done as part of the select committee still?

WL: It began with the select committee, yes, and it was continued and confirmed and really analyzed in greater depth by Taskforce Russia. We really developed the case in Taskforce Russia with great deal more certainty than we were able to do in the brief time we had available to us on the select committee.

LC: Was the US/Russian Joint Committee or Joint Commission, I’m sorry, an open ended development? In other words it didn’t have a sundown date on it?
WL: No it didn’t, and I don’t know whether it’s still in being or not.

LC: It would be interesting to know.

WL: Yeah. I think the US—what do they call it now? It’s in the Department of Defense. It’s a deputy under secretary of something of Defense for POW/MIA. They still have that office and they may still have a Taskforce Russia element in it. I think Taskforce Russia itself phased out and was folded into the POW office of DoD.

LC: I think that’s now called Joint Taskforce for Full Accounting but I—

WL: That’s what it is. Yeah.

LC: But I think they have also changed their name numerous times so I may be slightly behind the curve on that.

WL: Some of the original people are still there, I think. Norm Cash, Cass, Norman Cass, I think is still the staff director.

LC: Bill, tell me about—first of all, were you ever assigned to go over to the office in Moscow?

WL: Yes. I made one trip over there with them.

LC: Can you tell me something about your responsibilities and then how that trip fit into what it was you were supposed to be doing?

WL: Yeah. Actually, my effort really was to listen and to meet our investigators that were over there, just to listen to the dialogue between the two sides. To backtrack we first flew into Frankfurt and we got on an Air Force special mission aircraft and flew down to Yerevan and investigated the shoot down there. This particular case was interesting because the Soviets admitted that they did indeed shoot down this aircraft.

LC: Now are we talking about the EC130 that you talked about earlier?

WL: EC130. This case really was driven by the interest of the sister of one of the crewmen on that aircraft. Her name was Lorna Bourne, I believe. L-o-r-n-a B-o-u-r-n-e. She was a sister in the Catholic Church in Louisiana I believe. She was in one of their relief missions down there, public service missions. In any case a very fine lady and her brother was on the crew of this aircraft. There was some conflicting reports about it, about the shoot down. We knew without a doubt that it was shot down by a Soviet fighter plane because we had transmissions that they’d picked up the transmissions between the fighters that were chasing the aircraft. They’d taken off from a US airfield
in northeastern Turkey, got off course, and flew directly over Yerevan, the capitol of Armenia. There’s some indication it was drawn off course by fictitious aerial navigation signals from the Soviets. In other words they enticed it over the border. Incidentally this is right by Mt. Ararat if you’re familiar with it.

LC: This is where the ark is or something?

WL: Yes, where the Ark might be, where it might have landed. Anyway it’s an interesting topography there. Ararat looms on the horizon. In any case the aircraft flew over Yerevan, made a turn to get out when they discovered where they were, and were shot down. They crashed there outside of the city. I guess it’s about twenty kilometers outside of the city.

LC: When you say that communications had been monitored such that there was confirmation on the US side that the aircraft had been shot down can you tell me what you’re referring to? In other words who would be monitoring that kind of—?

WL: It would have been their base there in where they flew out of in Turkey.

LC: Would the Air Force have its own monitoring effort or would this be another agency?

WL: This would have been the Air Force element of the big NSA picture, National Security Agency picture. It was an Air Force operation as most of our, in fact all of the—no, not all. Navy had some too. But the Air Force ran most of the aerial reconnaissance, electronic reconnaissance missions worldwide. This was one of theirs out of Turkey.

LC: Is it fair to say that there were transcripts of the discussion back and forth between—?

WL: Probably. There probably are.

LC: That would be between the Soviet pilot and his base?

WL: The other pilots and his ground station. I believe, as I recall now, they asked for permission to shoot it down and they were given the permission to do it. They could have just chased it out but they decided to shoot it down. Of course this is an unarmed aircraft.

LC: Their mission of which would be what, an EC130?
WL: Well their mission was to test Soviet and to pick up Soviet communications. Probably did to test, among other things, their ground response. Their response from a flight that’s close, get their radars to turn on to find out where their radars were, that sort of thing. I can’t get anymore specific than that. That was a general mission. They were really interested in Soviet air defenses and how they would react to aircraft that was flying close. That’s the main mission that they had. There were reports that we had, and I can’t recall now where they came from, that parachutes were seen coming out of the aircraft before it hit. That was the reason that we wanted to investigate it that we thought that there was a possibility that a few of the crew had survived, had parachuted safely to the ground, and were captured. That was our interest in the mission.

LC: You mentioned that the family member of one of the crewmen was very active. How did she press her case?

WL: Well she came to the committee and she called us. I don’t remember who she called initially, it might have been John Holstein, and said that her brother was shot down in Armenia and she wanted to know what the committee was doing about it. Taskforce Russia picked up the responsibility. We continued our contact with Lorna Bourne and actually brought her with us or met her. I don’t think we—I’m sure we didn’t bring her on the aircraft. We wouldn’t have had the authority to do that. But she flew into Armenia while we were there and we met with her and we went to the crash site with her and by that time we had a US Army team from the Taskforce for Accounting or whatever they called it then. Surely looks like an archeological dig with the tape and the measurements and all the thing that the archeologists do and they were digging there at the site while we were there. At the time they discovered Lorna Bourne’s brother’s dog tag. Dug that out of the soil there. So that was pretty conclusive evidence that he went down with the aircraft. Of course when it hit it burned, it burned all the way down to the ground virtually. Any person that was still in the aircraft was burned to cinders but she was then convinced that her brother indeed was killed in the crash and wasn’t a survivor.

LC: I mean did they actually find the dog tag while she was there?

WL: I believe they did.

LC: While you were there?

WL: Yes. Not while we were standing there right at the site no.
LC: But during the period of your visit?
WL: While we were there they discovered it.
LC: Can you recall anything for us about how this was made known to her or how she reacted?
WL: Well she was relieved. That’s about all I can say.
LC: Really?
WL: That the issue was closed. At the time, earlier than that, the Armenian government had constructed a small stone memorial with a plaque on it detailing what had happened. The United States aircraft shot down by the Soviet Air Force, or words to that effect and the following individuals, Americans, were killed in the crash.
LC: They had the list of the names?
WL: Yeah, they had the list.
LC: Wow.
WL: It was quite a moving event. I would say that, because they dedicated that memorial while we were there. There was a little ceremony. It’s interesting to visit, my first visit to Armenia. But it seems that there are more Armenians living in Fresno than there living in Armenia. One guy asked me, he said, “Have you been to Chicago?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well do you know my cousin? His name is—” They have a very close relationship with America because of the many immigrants that we have here. I knew quite a few of them down in the San Joaquin Valley when I—there’s a large number of them.
LC: I think there’s a big group near Detroit as well. There’s several pockets like that. As you say it’s an interesting relationship because Armenians have since at least I think the 1920s probably looked to the United States in a very special way for support. It’s interesting.
WL: Yeah. I think the United States; it took a position early on that the Turkish Holocaust, you might say, in Armenia was true. They keep denying it and the United States official policy I believe was to agree with the Armenians that that did happen.
LC: Yeah, it’s touchy stuff but still there is a special relationship there. So it’s very interesting that somebody there took action to place a monument at the site. Where did you go from there?
WL: From Armenia we went up to Moscow. We had a meeting with their chief delegation there in the Kremlin.

LC: Had you been to Moscow before Bill?

WL: No I hadn’t.

LC: That’s what I thought. What was your impression?

WL: It was very interesting. That’s a dumb thing to say but it was.

LC: Oh yeah. I think I’m with you.

WL: It looked so huge, the architecture of Red Square and so on.

LC: Bigger than you thought?

WL: Yes! Very imposing and formidable you might say.

LC: I think that’s probably fair.

WL: But we were treated very nicely. I was with the, let’s see, who was that? I’m trying to think of my main guide. Hold on just a minute.

LC: Sure.

WL: I was with one of the members of Taskforce Russia, one of the best, very good Russian linguists and an extremely intelligent fellow. He was my guide on the Russian subway. We took a little side tour and I would have been lost on that subway without him along, but it was—have you been there?

LC: I have.

WL: Yeah. Any case we had a briefing there in which they discussed where we could find more evidence. We were given access to KGB files about Vietnam.

LC: Where were the offices of the taskforce?

WL: They were at the American embassy there.

LC: Okay.

WL: We did visit the US Embassy and we had a meeting there too with the ambassador, some of his folks, and with our small team there. We had about six people there. They were all Russian linguists and they had some Russian employees too to help them with their investigations and they had been into the old Soviet archives.

LC: Now you mentioned earlier, specifically the KGB archives, were there other archives too that they had access to besides the internal—?
WL: We had access to some archives—we went from Moscow up to—then they changed the name already to St. Petersburg I guess. You know, Leningrad. We met with, there was Soviet Navy installation up there that we wanted to talk to the people up there because there was a shoot down in the Cold War that took place up there in the Baltic and we wanted to talk to them about that one. That was a Navy aircraft in that case.

LC: Soviet Navy.


WL: Yes, US Naval aircraft flying out of somewhere in northern Germany.

LC: You wanted to talk to the Soviet Navy or former Soviet Navy because—?

WL: Because they had some archives up there that we wanted to look at.

LC: How successful were you?

WL: Pardon?

LC: How successful were you in that approach?

WL: Very successful.

LC: They let you through?

WL: Yeah. They let us in and let our investigators, our team up there get into the archives and they did discover some interesting information. I can’t tell you in detail what it was about now. But we did determine that they did indeed shoot this aircraft down, they being the Soviets, not necessarily the Soviet Navy, did shoot it down and it did crash and there were apparently some survivors but they died later. I believe that was the case.

LC: In captivity?

WL: Yes. They died probably soon after they were fished out of the water. They were probably badly injured.

LC: Okay. So they didn’t live for any period of time.

WL: No. There was no evidence that they had captured anybody that remained in captivity for any length of time at all. They perished, essentially, in the crash.

LC: But to confirm that is actually quite a coup in some ways.
WL: Yeah. We had a cocktail party there. They gave a party for us, the Soviet Navy did, the Russian Navy I should say. It was at a submarine base.

LC: This is sort of through the looking glass isn’t it?

WL: Interesting, and the captain, a Russian Navy captain, a captain of one of their nuke submarines, came over to me and I was introduced to him as Colonel LeGro, a veteran of World War II, and his face lit up and he’s speaking in Russian. It was all translated for me. “My great comrade from the Great Patriotic War,” and he threw his arms around me and gave me a big hug and I was his buddy from then on because I was the only guy there that had also been in the Great Patriotic War as he had. He was kind of an old guy.

LC: That’s actually really interesting.

WL: It was fun. One of the really interesting events that came out of—there were two, two interesting events that came out of that visit. One, we got to interview with our team there a Russian who had lived in Khabarovsk in Siberia, way out there by Manchuria, who had been present when a US aircraft had been shot down there off of Kamchatka. The aircraft crashed in the water, several bodies were recovered. Our impression was that there were one or two that were alive when they were brought aboard a Soviet patrol boat. Can’t confirm that. I don’t remember now whether we confirmed that or not. It’s possible that we did. But one of the bodies was taken and buried out there in a small gravesite on the peninsula. This man participated in the burial and as he buried this body he removed from one of the corpses a ring and the ring was a graduation ring from the US Naval Academy, Annapolis. It had a date on it and it had a name, I believe. At least it was close enough to one of the crewmembers who we knew had been on that aircraft that it was positively identified as one of the crew members on this particular aircraft that was shot down. He gave us information about where that grave was. After our meeting there a few weeks later we managed to get a team down to that gravesite and they exhumed the remains, which of course were very little left of the remains by this time. But they positively identified it, that corpse or the remains of that corpse, as the particular individual that we thought it was and we notified the man’s widow and brought the remains back to Arlington National Cemetery and they were buried here with appropriate honors with his widow present. It was the end of a long
story and she’d been—we had known her before. She had contacted us about her
particular case and we closed that one. That was a really fine event.

LC: Were you in attendance at Arlington?
WL: Yes.

LC: That really must have been some moment.
WL: Yeah. It was great.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about the team that would have been sent there?

Was the team operating under the commission’s authority?
WL: They belonged to Taskforce Russia.

LC: Oh, they did.
WL: Yeah, and they were all military.

LC: All US military?
WL: US military enlisted men—specialists in Soviet intelligence and of course
they’re all linguists. They were very well qualified to do what they were doing. The
other thing that happened there was that we got a copy of a report, and I can’t remember
whether we actually picked it up there or got it a few days later, a report written by a
Soviet KGB agent in Hanoi early on in the war before 1973 in which he detailed a record
of a meeting of a Politburo in which the general, the lieutenant general of the people’s
army, testified about the prisoner. This particular general was responsible for POWs in
North Vietnam and he told the Politburo that they had some seven hundred or so more
prisoners of war, Americans, in captivity than they were reporting to the Americans.
This was pretty well tracked with our opinions that we had made in the Senate Select
Committee that they actually kept more than they were reporting. This in my view
particularly, this confirmed our conclusions that the North Vietnamese did indeed keep
American prisoners of war back. That document was given to us and was also picked up
by an independent researcher. I can’t remember his name now, but he got a copy of that
report and he made it public I believe in an article in the New York Times. As soon as
we got it DIA insisted that we classify it at least confidential. We explained that it was
already in the New York Times and it was a little bit silly to put a classification on it but
they insisted that we do that. Actually 1205 I think is the number. We called it a 1205
document as I recall because he said that we had 1205 more prisoners of war than we
reported. I believe that was it. This document also happened to, in my view, corroborate
another document that we had from a Vietnamese defector, a North Vietnamese doctor,
who defected earlier and he said that there were some seven hundred or so prisoners that
he had seen and treated that were not reported or returned in the prisoner exchange.
These two particular events really confirmed in my view that my opinion that we lost
upwards of a thousand prisoners in Vietnam that never came back that were actually
prisoners was right. I think it was right.

LC: Bill, can you say a little bit more about the physician that you’re referring to
and how he came to your attention?

WL: I didn’t hear about this until I was—we got this report while I was with the
Senate Select Committee. It was one of our reports that we believed that corroborated
our view of the validity of the live sighting reports. I can’t recall now where or when he
was captured.

LC: Was he captured or did he—?

WL: Well actually he wasn’t captured. He defected himself and he in general
terms he said that he had worked in prisoner of war camps where there were Americans
and he had treated some of them. He’d kept a diary of sorts about this and whether he
had names or not I don’t recall. I don’t believe he did. It’s just that he identified places
where Americans were kept that the North Vietnamese never admitted to. We had a
number of camps on our maps that we knew, or at least had good information about,
where Americans were held and the North Vietnamese denied that they had ever held any
there and this particular doctor verified that they were indeed prisoners in these camps.

LC: Now, is this someone who was actually brought before the committee or how
did the information reach the committee about this gentleman?

WL: This came from intelligence reports that—

LC: DIA reports?

WL: DIA reports. Yeah.

LC: Okay. So he had been debriefed and some kind of summary of his statement
appeared in a DIA document that was made available to you?

WL: That’s my recollection, that’s how we came upon this. DIA’s conclusion
apparently was that this was a fabrication, that the man wasn’t telling the truth.
LC: What makes you think that that wasn’t the case?

WL: Well because of the preponderance of other evidence that seems to support
that makes it feasible that he was telling the truth. You add to that, why do you think he
was lying, what was his motive in making up a story like that? You know it just kind of
offends your logic to attach a motive to someone without having some reason to do it.
Was he looking for a reward or so on? There’s no indication in the report that he asked
for anything in return for giving the information. It just seemed to me that he felt that it
was his moral obligation to tell us about it.

LC: Now, as distinct from the KGB document in which a summary of which or a
précis of which appeared in the New York Times, did information about this defector’s
statement ever make it into the press?

WL: I don’t believe so. No.

LC: So the only open record about it would be in the files where the bound
volumes of the select committee?

WL: Yes. In the committee’s reports and also in Taskforce Russia’s report,
although we were under pretty strict orders not to report anything in our reports that were
ever made public. I don’t know if anybody’s ever got any of our Taskforce Russia
reports in the open press or not. We did make a number of reports to the US/Russia Join
Commission. That’s where our reports went and what they did with them I don’t know.
It’d be very interesting for a researcher to look into Taskforce Russia and write a nice
thesis on it.

LC: Well I think you’re right. I actually just have in my hand one of the
documents that you sent and that is in the collection here now at the Vietnam Archive
which is one of the hearings reports from the Senate Select Committee and although the
dates on the hearings in this green covered volume—I’m sure you remember the type of
thing I’m talking about—the dates for the hearings are November tenth and eleventh
1992. In the appendices there is a set of Taskforce Russia translations from Russian
documents dated eleventh of May 1993. So potentially, I’m just kind of looking through
here quickly, some of what you’re talking about may have surfaced actually within the
select committee’s publications having been submitted to them after the committee itself
no longer was in operation but before its report was printed.
WL: Yeah, that’s possible.

LC: So it looks like somebody slipped some—these are all Ministry of Foreign Affairs Soviet Union documents from 1954 and earlier that I’m looking at right now. So it looks like some of it has entered the public record.

WL: Another thing you might look at if you find that package I sent and if you can’t find it I can send something again. But in my prepared statement that I gave to that congressional committee in ’94, I read it again the other day just out of curiosity—I haven’t seen it for so many years—I give a pretty good summary of my impressions of the entire POW issue and I detail my credentials for writing that. I think I talk about these reports, about the document, the KGB document, that report and it was a lot fresher than it is right now. I wrote that in 1994 so you got to look at that. That document, that KGB document, DIA said that’s a fabrication. They wouldn’t accept that as a real KGB report.

LC: Why? Was it because of content or was there some—?

WL: It seemed to contradict their view that this didn’t happen.

LC: So you think that was completely a political decision, had nothing to do with the provenance of the document or—?

WL: Exactly. I think it was entirely a political decision.

LC: That’s a little disturbing.

WL: Yes it is. Certainly disturbed us at the time.

LC: Yeah, and as you look back over your prepared statement that was for the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee was it?

WL: It was a subcommittee, the Asia subcommittee. Gilman—what was his name? Ben Gilman, Republican from New York, was chairman or maybe he was vice chairman of that subcommittee and he called me to testify. That’s the statement I wrote up and handed to him before they started questioning me.

LC: What was the inquiry of that committee? Was it along the same lines as the Senate Select Committee or not as broad?

WL: Yeah, it was kind of a follow on about were prisoners left behind. That’s my best recollection. I don’t know why Gilman brought it up again in 1994 but he did.

LC: Interesting. We should check into that, but you were called up to the Hill?
WL: Yes.
LC: So you had to prepare a statement and that’s what you submitted a copy of to us at the archive but you also were questioned. So who was on the panel with you?
Were there others who were called?
WL: Yes.
LC: Do you remember who they were?
WL: I can’t remember right now. I’m sure that’s in their public record.
LC: Oh yeah, it would be.
WL: If you look at the date of my testimony you’ll be able to—
LC: Sure. You could pick it together.
WL: Yeah. You can find out who else was testifying about it. I can’t recall now who it was.
LC: What was the thrust of what they wanted you to talk about? Was it your experience with Taskforce Russia specifically or—?
WL: It was my impression of whether or not prisoners of war were left behind. That’s my best recollection of it. That was the thrust of it. Did we leave any behind or did we not?
LC: Bill, as you reread that a little while ago, as you reread your prepared statement, which researchers will always have a chance to look at either in the House subcommittee records or here, did it still sound right to you?
WL: Yes it did.
LC: Really?
WL: It sounded—I was really pleased with the way I stated the case. I can’t do it anymore because I can’t remember all of those things.
LC: But as you reread it you thought, “Yeah darn right?”
WL: Yeah. That’s exactly right. Of course it made me sad again too.
LC: Yes. Well, I think that’s kind of inevitable on this turf. The whole thing is kind of sad.
WL: Yeah.
LC: Was there anyone who was working on these issues, either with you or against you, but who was working on the same issues whose work you particularly
remember whether they came down on the same side you did or not? Are there others whom we might include in the record here as people who were au fit with the documents and with the investigations?

WL: Yeah. I would say that the most important and the most reliable guy on the committee, on the staff, was John McCrary. John McCrary was, as I think I mentioned, he was a lawyer. He also was a senior analyst in DIA and he was on loan to the committee from Defense Intelligence Agency. Of course he really fouled his nest when he was over there in the subcommittee. They didn’t want him back to DIA—

LC: Because he had taken this position?

WL: Yeah. For taking the tack that he did, and he didn’t go back to DIA. He went back to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They have an intelligence staff at the JCS and he worked there. He may be still there. He shifted from Asia to the Middle East and [he is] very sharp. He might talk to you. You might try to find him.

LC: Are you in contact with him at all Bill?

WL: I haven’t talked to him for a couple of years. I can try to call him.

LC: Okay, well we can talk about that maybe a little bit later.

WL: Yeah. He’s one. The other one would be former Congressman Billy Hendon. He’d be a very interesting and colorful fellow to talk to. He’s the one that really got Bob Smith energized about this whole affair and he’d be a good guy to talk to. He went over to Vietnam after the committee—well, he got fired from the whole staff. They took his security clearance away and a lot of other nasty things to him.

LC: This is Billy Hendon we’re talking about?

WL: Billy Hendon. He went over to Vietnam sometime later and he went to a prisoner of war camp where he believed Americans had been held somewhere in North Vietnam and he chained himself to the fence with handcuffs as I recall and got arrested, naturally, by the North Vietnamese. He had quite an interesting tour in North Vietnam.

LC: It sounds like this was done to draw attention to the issue.

WL: I can give you his email address if you want it.

LC: Okay. I’ll ask for that in a minute.

WL: He would be of interest to you, I think. Let’s see, who else? Those are the main players.
LC: Let’s take a break there Bill.
WL: Okay.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing the oral history interview with Col. William LeGro. Today is the eleventh of April 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bill is speaking by telephone from Virginia. Good morning Bill.

WL: Good morning.

LC: Bill, yesterday we were talking about the family organizations that were formed by survivors of missing personnel who were not accounted for in Southeast Asia and actually in our previous American conflicts, both in World War II and Korea. I wonder if you can say a little bit more about those organizations and what you learned about them in the course of your service with the select committee and Taskforce Russia.

WL: Yes. The first organization, the origins of it, was a lady named Ann, A-n-n, Mills, M-i-l-l-s, Griffiths with an S on the end. Ann Mills Griffiths organized the National League of Families of Persons Missing in Action in Indochina and she became quite prominent. She gave quite a bit of testimony. She had many members. The members were family members of men who were missing in action. As the situation developed over the years a number of the members felt that Ann Mills Griffiths had been in a sense co-opted by the Defense Intelligence Agency. These people, this group, was dissatisfied with DIA’s effort, particularly in their analysis of sighting reports and other intelligence information in which these people perceived DIA as making a judgment that there were no men left behind, they had all come home, and anything any intelligence information that was collected on persons remaining in Indochina in captivity had to be wrong. Either it was fabricated information. There were many Vietnamese and Lao people who were giving information and in most cases DIA attributed their information to a search for rewards. These people wanted money for their information and therefore they believed that nearly all of these reports were false.

LC: Was it policy by the investigative teams—?

WL: I think it was an unstated policy—you mean to give money?
LC: Yes.

WL: Oh no. They had a policy never to give any money. They would not reward anybody and they wouldn’t even promise them asylum. Of course they could get asylum if they could show that they were in danger if they went back home.

LC: Right. Under other terms but not simply for the act of—

WL: Not as a reward for giving information.

LC: Right. The other question about policy is whether this was a DIA blanket policy toward any incoming information?

WL: Yes, and I felt that it was. I’ll elaborate on that a little bit later. But this other group broke off from the National League of Families because they thought that DIA had this mindset, what we call a mindset to debunk. Either the information was fabricated or it was wrong. They saw something but it wasn’t American prisoners of war, or as I mentioned before it was Bobby Garwood who was seen in these outlying camps so it wasn’t evidence that there were Americans left behind.

LC: Bill can I just interrupt you for a second because we did talk a couple sessions ago about the Bobby Garwood phenomenon and just to be clear for someone who doesn’t know a little bit more about this Bobby Garwood is someone who never surfaced back in the United States, is that accurate or he did?

WL: Oh he did! He was repatriated.

LC: When did that happen? In 1973?

WL: In 1973 during the repatriation.

LC: So he was one of those who was accounted for in the exchange?

WL: Yes he was, and he was sighted from time to time by Americans on the ground mostly around the A Shau Valley somewhere is where the camps he was in were located. He was a Marine who was captured near Da Nang, and I can’t recall the date. It was in the late ’60s I believe. He was captured up there and he was a jeep driver. He was wounded as he was being captured and he was taken by the VC out into the jungles around the A Shau Valley.

LC: He would have been then debriefed when he returned to the United States just like all the other POWs.
WL: Oh yes he was. In addition to that he was court-martialed. He was tried by
court-martial for collaborating with the enemy because he was sighted from time to time;
he was sighted at least on one occasion carrying a rifle while he was in captivity. Other
prisoners who were taken and were in camp with Bobby Garwood testified against him
because he was cooperating with his captors. He was in these camps for a couple of
years out in the jungle and he learned to speak Vietnamese while he was there and he
survived.

LC: Was he ever called up before the select committee?
WL: I don’t believe he testified.
LC: Could the committee have done that?
WL: I think they could have and they may have. See, I didn’t join this committee
until three or four months after it was formed.
LC: Oh I see. So there was a whole bunch of legwork that you might not have
seen.

WL: There was some testimony before I even joined it but while I was the
committee Garwood did not testify. As I said he was tried and convicted. He received a
very light sentence. I don’t believe it included any imprisonment but he was, as I recall
now, dishonorably discharged from the Marine Corps. He lived here in northern
Virginia. In fact he may still live around here, I’m not sure. I’m sure you’d find him on
the Web site too somewhere. There were two views on him. Some believe that he was
indeed a collaborator and should definitely have been punished and thrown in jail when
he got home. Others—and I kind of tend to the other view—that in the circumstances in
which he tried to survive he did the best he could and I don’t believe that he did anything
to the detriment of other prisoners that were captured. Now, it’s possible that he did and
if he did why he certainly should have been punished but I didn’t see any evidence of that
myself. I don’t know. I’m a little ambivalent about him.

LC: I think most people are and since it’s such a complex story maybe we should
try to find him and get his word on it. But in any event you were discussing the sightings
and the debunking mindset, mindset to debunk.
WL: Yes, that was part of it. I had the impression that DIA couldn’t figure out
any other reason to refute an intelligence report. They said, “Well that must have been
Bobby Garwood.” Unfortunately in some cases they claimed it was Bobby Garwood when it was in a location where we had very—we knew Garwood was never there at that particular place. So it looked like a trumped up excuse for denying the validity of a report.

LC: So in some ways he, not he himself but his name, and the fact that he was moved around sort of became, is this fair to say, a way of denying the validity of reports by just attributing it to this kind of phantom guy who was thought to be collaborating and therefore could be anywhere?

WL: Exactly. Yes.

LC: Bill, just thinking about—well, you said you would talk more generally about the DIA policy in a minute. Maybe we’ll wait on that while you talk about the organization.

WL: The other organization, these people had split off, were led by a lady named Dolores Alfond, A-l-f-o-n-d. Dolores lives up in Washington State near the University of Washington I believe. I’ve corresponded with her over the years. I haven’t heard from her for about a year but she sends me emails a lot, not to me personally but their network is still operating. They talk among themselves. They were not only very strongly critical of DIA and its conduct of its analysis of sightings and so on but they were very firmly opposed to resuming normal relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or whatever they call it now, Democratic Republic or whatever. Anyway, they were much opposed to that—

LC: Diplomatic relations?

WL: Yeah. They didn’t want to do that. They didn’t want to reward, in their view, reward Vietnam for its inadequate cooperation with the United States in discovering what happened to the missing in action. They believe that all Vietnam did was allow our teams in Vietnam and Laos to search crash sites and gravesites but that wasn’t enough. They wanted them to be able to come clean in other words on what happened to the other POWs that were missing. I think we finally settled on a figure of 244 who were definitely seen in captivity during that period and they had to be accounted for. Excuse me just a minute.

LC: Sure.
LC: Bill you said that a figure of 244 folks seen in captivity had been arrived at. Now is that after reading through a lot of different reports and is that the committee’s number?

WL: Yes. Yes that was our, as I recall now, that was our final report. I think that’s what I said in this testimony, that’s why I can recite that number. It’s somewhere in the testimony. Those are the names—we had names for all of those. I forgot about that but—

LC: Really? You had names for that list of 244 people?

WL: That was—there were, according to the documents I mentioned yesterday that we got from the Soviets, that number was much greater and we believe it was much greater. The difference is that we have definite names of these people of that 244. We knew exactly who they were. In fact the Defense Department had used that number for a while, and I’ll get back to that in a minute. Dolores started what she called the National Alliance of Families for the Return of America’s Missing. That’s what they called it, the organization. Her brother was an aviator—I think he was a naval aviator—and he was shot down somewhere in Indochina. I can’t recall now the incident but his name was Victor Apodaca, A-p-o-d-a-c-a. Victor Apodaca and he was a—there was evidence that he was captured and he never returned. So that was what compelled her to get into this POW event.

LC: She took a leadership role in this—effectively what we’re looking at is a splinter group but it’s really a separate group.

WL: It’s very separated. It started out as part of the National League but it separated out so—and as I say they’re still active. Now as I look at this testimony, actually my original statement, the reason this particular subcommittee was having the hearing they were discussing the normalization of relations with Vietnam, which was tenth of February 1994. I don’t recall now what stage of our negotiation with Vietnam was in or whether we were talking about it but—

LC: Which House committee was it Bill?

WL: This was the committee on foreign relations and the subcommittee on Asia, the Asian subcommittee. The hearing was being conducted by representative—I had the name yesterday. Ben Gilman! Gilman of New York. He retired a few years ago. I don’t
recall now whether he was I guess what we call a ranking member because I think at that
time we had a Democratic majority in the Congress.

LC: Was Stephen Solarz one of the people that was involved? Does that name
ring a bell?

WL: Well he was on that committee and I don’t remember now whether he was in
that hearing.

LC: Okay. Why were you called Bill? I mean I think I know the answer but just
to clarify do you know how that came about?

WL: I’m pretty sure, it’s possible and quite likely, that Dolores told
Representative Gilman to call me. That’s probably what happened. I didn’t volunteer on
it. When they were having hearings I didn’t say, “Hey I want to speak.” Somebody had
put my name in. It was probably Dolores Alfond. They have an annual conference and
last year it was here in Alexandria and they asked me to speak. I don’t know if they
really liked what I say is too much because I wasn’t definitely opposed to normalization,
and I figured there were—and that comes out in my statement that there were probably
some pretty good reasons separate from the POW situation for us to enter into at least
some level of cooperation with Vietnam, for economic reasons and humanitarian reasons
if nothing else. But so I wasn’t in lockstep at all with the National Alliance. I did believe
though that Ann Mills Griffiths was much too weak within her relationships with—weak
is probably not the word but much too accommodating with DIA. She should have been
much firmer in her relationships with them. But that’s a matter for debate too. I still
believe though, very firmly, that they did have the mindset. To go back to that what I
kind of tie that on to is that I remember now the name of the chief of the POW office of
the Defense Department during that 1973, during the ceasefire negotiations and during
the period of return, the repatriation February/March ’73. His name was Shields. He was
a PhD of some kind. We called him Dr. Shields. I can’t remember his first name.

LC: Was he a civilian?

WL: A civilian, yes. I guess he was something like a deputy assistant secretary
for POW affairs. That was probably close to what his title was. He testified. I think he
testified before I joined the committee, but his testimony is in there somewhere. The
event that was described to me is that Shields was convinced after all of the prisoners
came home, after they were all repatriated, all that they were going to give us, President Nixon said, made a radio broadcast for prime time television and said, “Thank God they’re all home. We’ve got them all back.” That’s what he said and that became the mantra. That was the national policy, they’re all home. Shields went to the acting Secretary of Defense, Clements, a politician from Texas, because the secretary of defense was out of the country at the time and he said, “Mr. Secretary, I saw this announcement that the president made last night and it’s not true. They’re not all home. They’re still many that are unaccounted for that we know the North Vietnamese captured and had in captivity and we didn’t get them back.” Clements said words to the effect, he said, “Dr. Shields, read my lips, they’re all home.” Words to that effect. Probably something like that. “You’re not listening Dr. Shields. The president said they’re all home. That’s it.” Shields protested but that became the policy. That policy, whether it was stated in documents to DIA and to the rest of the intelligence committee I have no idea. Probably not. They just got the word that you have to be extremely skeptical of any report that comes in that says otherwise. We got them all back and we’re not going to continue this dialogue about where are the rest of them. That’s the end of the story. I believe that that’s what happened. That really set the stage for DIA to not even have a category in the intelligence reports that they had they catalogued them. There was a category for fabrication, there was a category for Bobby Garwood, and there was one for misidentification, that is the people that they saw in the camp were not Americans. There was no category for possibly true, possibly true, absolutely true, or confirmed to be true. There was no category that allowed them to put a stamp of authenticity on any live sighting report and again we pointed that out in the committee, which led us to believe that there was a policy.

LC: Would there have been a point in the late 1970s, for example in the Carter Administration, when this stamp of policy on each of the sightings reports might have been undone? Was there anyway to undo a policy like this once it’s established?

WL: If somebody had got into a position such as a Secretary of Defense or Secretary of State and said, “Look at this again and see if we’re doing this right.” They could have done that.
LC: Were the family organizations not yet broken such that it was the National
League of Families and their kind of cooperative approach to DIA that was in control?

WL: I think in the ’70s I don’t know how strong they were.

LC: Yeah. They might not even have been completely co yet.

WL: I think I told you but I first became aware that there was a strong movement
about this in about that time, about 1985, something like that. That’s when John Brown
accosted me and said, “Are you aware that we left a lot of them behind?” I mean he said
words like that. I said, “No I didn’t know that.” That’s where he got me involved in it
and where I began to meet with these what you would call these POW activists who were
really a thorn in the side of the government, whether it was a Democratic administration
or a Republican administration it didn’t seem to matter. The administrations held to this
point of view that we got them all back and no evidence to the contrary would change
their viewpoint.

LC: Bill, this continuation of policy is in your view one that continues now?

WL: Yes. I don’t believe there’s been any change. No not at all.

LC: We’ve been using kind of the shorthand of DIA but are there any other office
within, are there other offices within DoD that you would point to and say these offices
are also operating on this, to this standard?

WL: No. Only at the Defense Department level itself, yes. The office for
POW/MIA is not in—well, I don’t know if they moved it over to DIA or not. Maybe
they did. I can’t recall now. But when it first started, that is there was an office within
the office of the secretary of defense for POW/MIA matters. In fact Taskforce Russia
worked directly for them although it was an Army organization they reported to this
POW/MIA office in the Defense Department separate from DIA. Now it may have been
folded into DIA by now but it was separate. But those were the only two agencies within
the Defense Department that were concerned with the matter. If you exclude that
forensic laboratory that they have in Hawaii—I don’t remember who they reported to,
probably for administration to Pacific Command of the Defense Department directly—
and then the teams in Hanoi and so on, they were like I said operated out of the Defense
Department’s office also.
LC: So this is not probably limited to DIA but is in the office of the secretary of defense and some of its subsidiaries in fact.

WL: Of course the Central Intelligence Agency had a large role in collecting and analyzing the intelligence. They kept—their information was very hard to get to. They gave us very little access to it when we were on the Senate Select Committee and it was all very heavily redacted. There’s a fellow named Roger Hall who has had a lawsuit against the CIA for many years and Roger has sued them under the Freedom of Information Act. Well, you don’t sue under that but he requested documents under the Freedom of Information Act. They were denied him and he sued, and that suit has been in the federal court now for at least ten years and it’s cost him a lot of money. Poor guy. He has his own little Web site and he begs for contributions to help him keep it going. But they continue the classifications of things that are far well beyond the realm of reason. Why a report of a POW sighting in 1970 for example should be classified here thirty-six years later is hard to justify, in my view.

LC: You know that while there are exceptions, there are countries like Britain that have a very firm thirty year rule and documents generated during a year, say 1973, become available on January 1, 2004 with very, very few exceptions and of course we don’t have that system in the US. Declassification happens under lots of different legislation and executive orders. Would you be an advocate for some kind of blanket declassification that would be based on length of time from the generation of the document?

WL: I don’t think so. I really don’t but I think that each category of information and each category of collection means has to be looked at separately. I don’t believe in a blanket thing like that. In this case the president did sign an executive order that tells all the intelligence agencies to declassify information on POW/MIAs. He signed this off several years ago.

LC: Which president?

WL: Must have been Bush, the first Bush I believe. I’m not sure. Again, shaky ground here. But I do believe that he did sign an order like that and a lot of documents were declassified but the agencies are still very slow to implement. The order tells them
to screen the documents and be sure, you know, be sure it’s okay before they do it and
they’re just slow, very slow in looking at them.

LC: Well and of course this in the bureaucracies that we’re talking about is not
priority one by any means. So the personnel that are going to be assigned to this is not
going to be the bulk of the people they have available for any free floating task out there.
So there are internal problems that we need I’m sure to be recognized.

WL: To go back again on—we were talking about Taskforce Russia and I should
mention, I mentioned the personnel in there and they were all good, but the fellow that
was really the most brilliant analyst and driver of this whole operation was Ralph Peters.
He was a major then. He was on detail to Taskforce Russia from the office of the
secretary of the Army I believe. Ralph was my escort around Moscow on the subway but
have you ever heard of his name?

LC: I have not. No.

WL: Well I’m sure you’ll find him on the Internet too. He retired as a lieutenant
colonel and he’s one of the principal military commentators I believe now for CNN,
although I’ve seen him on Fox News a number of times. He has written some excellent
books, both novels and non-fiction, on military affairs. He’s an excellent writer. He’s
one of the most brilliant guys I’ve ever met in the Army and he was a real main stay on
Taskforce Russia as an analyst. He really pulled things together.

LC: Now, just to clarify, the Taskforce Russia was a US Army—?

WL: The Army was detailed, was assigned to be the executive agent for
Taskforce Russia. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the system, but when the Defense
Department has a mission that is not exactly definable as a Defense Department mission
or they want something done they will select one of the military services as executive
agent to carry out that particular mission. In this case they assigned the mission to
organize Taskforce Russia and support the US/Russia Commission they assigned that to
the Department of the Army. That’s what they did. So it was an Army organization but
it was reported not to the secretary of the Army but to the Department of Defense and to
the commission. We worked very closely with the secretary of the Army because he
made the assignments and he was responsible for having this carried out. We gave
frequent briefings to the assistant secretary. William—I can’t remember his name.
LC: Assistant secretary of the Army.

WL: Of the Army, yeah. We reported to him and he reported I guess to the secretary and on up to the secretary of defense. But our work was for the US Commission, the US/Russia Commission.

LC: For clarification how long were you with Taskforce Russia?

WL: It was about ten months I think.

LC: Were you a civilian employee for them as you had been? You weren’t called back to active duty or anything.

WL: I wasn’t called back to active duty. This is kind of a footnote to it but in those days—I believe I mentioned this earlier in my work with the Senate. But if you were a regular Army officer, regular officer in any of the services, you had to surrender part of you retired pay in order to get paid if you were working for the federal government again.

LC: Right. I remember. No double dipping, whatever that means.

WL: No. I was promised by the Army that they would waive that situation if I came aboard but they never got around to doing that so I did it anyway.

LC: So basically I mean you did it more or less for free?

WL: Well no, not for free. I only gave about a third of my retired pay I think that amounted to. It was a considerable amount of money.

LC: Well sure, but when you separated from Taskforce Russia all of that was restored to you with no problem?

WL: Well I began getting paid again, yes. I never got that money back.

LC: Right. It’s just gone.

WL: Yeah.

LC: But my guess is this experience was worth it.

WL: Yes, it was. It was very interesting work. Again it was quite frustrating because our reports were not received with great enthusiasm by DIA or by the Defense Department either for that matter. They didn’t want to see more evidence that Americans were left behind.

LC: Were these reports, were they periodical reports?
WL: We issued I believe a monthly report and then special reports. There was a very long special report on the Korean situation. That was the one we could really dig our teeth into because the Russians were being quite forthcoming in giving us lists of people that they saw, Americans, American pilots that were transferred to Russia. There was a lot of other information, some of it good and some of it not so good. But there was a lot of American collection going on such as trainloads of American soldiers, prisoners of war, moving through China and moving into eastern Siberia to Khabarovsk and then to Siberia. Some of these reports were quite interesting and looked feasible, looked like they were probably true although DIA refused to believe any of it.

LC: Now these reports, including the special report that you were talking about with regards to Korean air POWs, those would have been filed with the commission and with—?

WL: Yes and I think they’re available now in archives, yes. They should be by now.

LC: In the US? In the National Archives somewhere? Would you think?
WL: I would think they would be, yes.
LC: Were they classified at the time you filed them?
WL: Some of them were, most of them were because again the sources were classified. But some of them were not. We could have—and I can’t recall now if we did—we could have classified a lot of them as official use only. That was the classification we put on a number of them. That only meant that after two or three years they could be accessed by anybody. You could go through the Freedom of Information Act and get them. So I think a lot of that stuff is available right now.

LC: It probably is. Yeah. My guess would be that the family organizations, especially the Alliance, would have wanted these to be open and probably pursued them.
WL: Of course the other aspect of our investigations was in Cold War shoot downs that I mentioned before. We did investigate that site down there in Yerevan in Armenia.

LC: I had a chance to look at a map which I admit that I didn’t know exactly where Yerevan was located but it’s right on the border with Turkey so this aircraft would not have had to be too far off course to have been over Soviet territory at that time.
Yerevan currently lies right on the other side of a river or something from northern Turkey.

WL: That’s right. This aircraft was probably no more than five or six miles inside of Armenia when it was turning around and got shot down.

LC: Is it your thought Bill, just sort of broadly over the Cold War, that some incidents like this, where a local wing commander might have made the decision to shoot down an allied aircraft, and American aircraft, would have done that without political authority from Moscow? How do you think about those kinds of issues where you’ve got an intruding aircraft and Soviet air defense hasn’t been alerted? Would the wing commander have had that kind of authority?

WL: I think he probably would have flashed the message up to the Army commander, a higher echelon before he took that action. In fact I believe that’s what he did and we may have had some evidence that that happened. They probably had some standing orders. No doubt had some standing orders that any intrusion you would take immediate action to keep it under control, surveillance, force it down, and request authority to shoot it down. No doubt it had something like that, and as I said before in this particular incident we believed, and we must have had some evidence to this effect, that the Soviets had changed some radar beacons, some navigational beacons, in order to entice this aircraft over so it wouldn’t know—

LC: Where it was?

WL: Where it was. Yeah. They would think they were still over Turkey.

LC: The purpose of that would have been not necessarily to shoot the aircraft down but presumably to force it to land?

WL: Probably their first choice would be to force it down to cripple it so it would have to make an emergency landing. But in this case they just destroyed the aircraft. In other words there was enough gunfire into the aircraft that it disabled it so he could not make a crash landing.

LC: Yeah. We saw something not too dissimilar from this at the very early days of our current president’s first administration. I think it was a modified EC30 that was forced down on Chinese territory.

WL: Oh yeah! By Hainan.
LC: Yes. Hainan Island.

WL: In fact it landed in Hainan.

LC: Right. Of course the crew is trying as best they can to disable all of the specialized equipment.

WL: Yes. Of course they didn’t have enough time to do a thorough job I’m sure.

LC: I’m sure that’s right. But one thinks about these episodes over the course of the Cold War and then it seems there’s still Cold Wars in some areas, and particularly I think in US/China relations. But these kinds of incidents certainly are—it’s high risk to shoot down a US aircraft. Did you try to kind of place this incident, the Yerevan shoot down, into the broader Sino-Soviet or US/Soviet situation at the time? I think this happened in 1960 if I remember. Did you try to place it within the context and see if it affected events or were you just trying to focus on the crash?

WL: We were just focusing on this crash and what happened to the crew. That was our interests. It wasn’t a geopolitical one, it was just: were there survivors and if there were where are they? We made the determination after our team of forensic guys had dug through the rubble they found enough evidence we believe that these reports of parachutes coming down were probably not true. There may have been pieces of the airplane that were falling off. That’s more likely. If anything was falling off the aircraft some people thought that they were parachutes—we don’t believe that. We think all of them perished in the aircraft. There’s an awfully good account of Cold War shoot downs in a book called By Any Means Possible? Just a minute I’ll look at it.

LC: Okay. Sure.

WL: As usual, I can’t find it

LC: That’s okay. Don’t worry Bill.

WL: I’ll let you know.

LC: Bill, if you would take me forward to the 1994 testimony. You said that you’ve come across a copy of your prepared comments, which were I presume inserted in the record of the hearings that were held.

WL: Yeah, I guess so.

LC: What were the questions that were put to you if you recall?
WL: I don’t recall. I don’t recall anything about the interrogation part of it. I just
recall reading my testimony and I don’t know how many questions I got.

LC: Okay. Can you just reprise some of the high points in the testimony that you
submitted? Now these are your pre-submitted written remarks.

WL: Well, first part of it I just stated what my credentials were to even be talking
about the POW issue. I started out by telling them from April until the end of December
of ’93 I was a special assistant to General Loefke, director of Taskforce Russia, and that
we were concerned with the searching for evidence and analyzing any information
concerning POWs that were taken into the USSR following World War II after the
Korean War and from the Indochina War. You know, to reprise this a little bit, during
my work on the Senate Select Committee we had a witness, Czech general, who testified
and I was present at his deposition. He testified that there was a planeload of American
prisoners of war flown out of Hanoi on a Soviet aircraft that landed in Czechoslovakia.
He was at that time in the general staff of the Czech Army and he had persona knowledge
of this. They were taken off the airplane and brought to a safe house in Prague, kept
there for a few days, and then transported on to Soviet Union. Now, that was pretty
interesting information.

LC: Did he give you a year? Did you have a sense of when this was?

WL: I don’t remember what year but that’s in that testimony too that I gave you.
But it’s there. Information like that was important in influencing us to organize this
US/Russia Commission. How true was that? Did he make that up or was that valid?
This particular general defected to the United States and was kept by the CIA for many
years as a principle analyst for them in analyzing defense in Eastern European armies and
the Soviet Army. He was their resident expert on Eastern European military affairs and
organizations and so on. They relied on him heavily. But then when he came to the point
where he said, “Well there were American prisoners of war transferred from Vietnam
into the Soviet Union through Prague,” they said, “Well he’s lying.”

LC: So they believed all of his analyses, I mean essentially, this is kind of a
blanket statement.

WL: Yeah, but he made this stuff up. So that’s just kind of a sideline. This
mindset to debunk was pretty strong. Now maybe he did make it up but we couldn’t
figure out why if he did. What’d he have to gain? He already had a good job with the CIA. He wasn’t currying favor for something else. At least I couldn’t see any motive for fabricating a story like that.

LC: You were present at the deposition?
WL: Yes.
LC: Do you remember the fellow’s name? It’ll be in the hearings.
WL: It’s in the hearings.
LC: I’m sorry Bill. I hate to do that to you.
WL: Having a hard time with—it’ll probably come to me in the next couple of days or whatever.
LC: Well what was his demeanor while he was being deposed?
WL: Pretty serious and forthright. He spoke pretty good English.
LC: So he wasn’t confused, he wasn’t kind of you know acting strange.
WL: No. His story was straightforward without any—you know, it hung together.
He had an American mentor with him, a fellow that probably helped in his defection who’d been with him for many years. I can’t remember his name. An American.
LC: So this would be a CIA handler?
WL: Yeah. He may have been at that time, although you never find out those things.
LC: Sure. I’m sure. Bill, let me just ask you this as a kind of retrospective now sitting in 2006. The Eastern European countries are now admitted to NATO, things have changed just almost practically beyond recognition from the early 1990s, the period that we’re talking about, ’92 to ’94, when some of this information was brought into the public record. Is there any reason in your mind, even for historical purposes rather than as I mentioned before we began taping as a rescue mission, but for historical purposes, is there a reason to try to inventory all of these reports again and perhaps go and now speak to people who are in a very different political position now than they were fifteen years ago and reopen the investigation?
WL: That’s a very good thought and I hope that they’re doing that. If they’re not they certainly should be. There’s plenty of room for independent researchers like your university, of course it costs money to do things like that.
LC: Well, let’s say money wasn’t an issue and I know there’s no world where that exists but—
WL: You’ve got some graduate students there.
LC: Right. We’ll send them over to Prague and have them go through some files.
WL: You’ve got to get somebody that can read and write Czech or whatever language.
LC: Slovak and the different languages. Would you say from your experience, and your experience is a very extremely valuable one, that that kind of a project either inside the government or by external independent student researchers or professional historians might prove valuable, that there’s something to be found that we just haven’t found yet?
WL: I think there’s no doubt about it. In fact, you know, if you don’t find anything then you’ve also contributed something. If you do find something why that would be very, very valuable I think to the historical record. As I mentioned before, there’s so much information that could be found I would say in Poland as well as in Germany about the transfer of American prisoners of war into Odessa after World War II. What happened to them? The records have been gone over and gone over and gone over and there’s still plenty of gaps in what happened to these folks.
LC: Well, and German records, I mean Germany having been unified doesn’t necessarily mean that all of the internal East German records have been as thoroughly gleaned I think as probably the West German holdings.
WL: I think that’s probably true.
LC: It’s a very, for me as a historian, a very interesting perspective to think about how the opening of these archives really presents huge opportunities for not only the resolution of this but many other issues. One of the things that does happen as a result of the opening on a regular scheduled basis of British archives, is that questions do come to light as news because they are thirty years old that otherwise would simply kind of fade away. But because the archival records of the Foreign Office and the War Department and so on are opened on a regular basis, the journalists all go out there on the first week of January and dig through and try to find some story and the British public is continually reminded of some of their faults and misdeeds of the past. I don’t know. You’ve said
you don’t think we could profit from that, the United States, from that kind of regular
scheduling. I don’t know. It’s a difficult question.

WL: It is. One danger that I could see is that there would be perhaps some
derogatory personal information that would be divulged that you wouldn’t want to
surface until the individuals involved might have passed away. You got to be careful.
That’s why I say each category of information and each source has to be looked at
individually. Intelligence agents that did things thirty years ago and if their names show
up and they’re still alive and well and living somewhere in Kansas why they might not
want their names—

LC: You’re right. This is why Tony Blair will probably want to hang on as prime
minister as a young man. Well, Bill, let me ask about your continuing contacts on this
issue. You mentioned that, for example, Dolores Alfond, the leader of National Alliance,
is someone who on a semi-regular basis continues to include you in some of her email
distributions or the distributions of that list and—

WL: Yes, and she does that and I read most of them. I will say this. I’ve never
been what they would term an activist. I don’t go out and march, carry flags around,
things like that. I stay in the background as much as I can and right now I’m not active in
it and if they had asked me to speak again I’d probably refuse. I’m not interested in
doing that anymore.

LC: What did you say? This would have been last year or the year before when
they asked you to come and speak. How did you prepare your remarks?

WL: I’m trying to think now what I [focused] on. I’m trying to think if I can
remember. I usually try to pick up one particular aspect of a topic. This is such a large
issue that you have to focus on something and I don’t even remember what it was.

LC: Do you often receive speaking requests?

WL: I don’t get it. I don’t get one every week or so. The last time I spoke, I
didn’t speak about POWs.

LC: What was the last one you were asked to do?

WL: Last one I spoke—they have a Vietnam symposium I think they call it in
New Jersey. They have a very fine museum and monument there in New Jersey and they
asked me to come up and be one of their speakers on a panel to speak about—they
wanted to talk about the final days, 1975. In fact they made a video of that. You want me to send it to you?

LC: Fabulous! Yes, very much so.

WL: That’ll include not just what I said but a bunch of other people talked about the final—they were more interested in the drama of the final evacuation. Climbing over the walls and that sort of stuff. They weren’t as interested in the political and military events that led up to it. That’s what I tried to talk about. I said, “You’re going to get a lot of people talking about what they did in those final few hours.” I said, “You’ll hear plenty of that. I’m just going to tell you how we came to that situation where we had to leave.” That’s what I did.

LC: Right, and that’s what you did in this interview as well and that’s very helpful. I mean we do as historians have a photographic record of some of those scenes and certainly there was human drama and enormous upset. You personally tried to minimize that for some of the people that you knew, as I recall, you telling in these interviews. But you were there as a military guy and you had your orders and you were trying to obviously get information around to the people who needed it to make the best decisions for evacuation.

WL: Well I’ll send you this videotape. Maybe when you get around to it you can make a copy and send it back to me.

LC: I will indeed. We’ll send it on DVD if you like.

WL: Sure.

LC: If that’ll make life easier.

WL: That’s even better. Sure. I don’t have a way to do that.

LC: Yeah we’ll take care of that for you. Bill, let me ask you a couple of questions about your trips back to Vietnam. We discussed your first one, which occurred in 1992 as part of the select committee staff but you have been back a number of times.

WL: Yes.

LC: Can you kind of capsule your impressions of Vietnam since normalization? What do you see when you go to Ho Chi Minh City now?

WL: Well the first thing you see is the absolute absence of any military presence. While I was there during the war, during the three and a half years there, there were
military trucks, Army trucks and jeeps, all over the city here and there, convoys going
down the highways, and so on. It was very busy with military traffic. Now you go there
and you don’t even realize that Vietnam even has an army. You never see it. You don’t
see any semblance of it. There’s very few policemen on the street. You have to look
hard to find a police officer. In the old days, why, they were on every corner. Very
orderly. Traffic is extremely dense. It’s difficult to even describe it. This traffic is made
up about ninety-five percent I’d say of mopeds, small motorcycles, and it’s just wall to
wall down the main streets during almost all of the day. You try to talk about rush hour
but it seems like every hour of the day is rush hour up until ten o’clock at night.

LC: How do you get around when you’re there?

WL: We usually use a taxi, call a taxi, and it comes right down to our house. Our
house is in what was really the outskirts of the north part of Saigon in Gia Dinh Province
but now it’s part of the city proper. They’ve expanded the boundaries of the city. The
other thing you notice in Saigon when you compare it to the early days is the population
is about quadrupled at least. I think now they have their population of the greater Saigon
area around seven million people. That makes it very crowded. You get the impression
of a very booming society. People are moving everywhere. The people are always going
somewhere. What’s curious to me is where are all these people going? Why don’t they
stay home or something because they’re just all over the place all the time? The stores
and the little shops along the streets are awfully busy.

LC: So no more kind of lazy, French colonial, pearl of the Orient kind of thing.

WL: No. Nothing like that, it’s just booming. They managed to preserve a lot of
the trees. The city is still pretty. There’s parts of the city that’s still as nice as they used
to be and a lot of those places aren’t quite as crowded, it’s that downtown area that is.
The suburbs have boomed also. The main roads have been widened. The main road
going north, Highway 13, when I was there it was only a two lane highway. Now all the
way up to almost to Ben Cat why it’s four lane, divided, and with traffic signals. Before
in the old days there were only two or three traffic signals it seemed to me in the entire
city.

LC: So it’s an interstate, I mean what Americans would recognize as an interstate
highway.
WL: Yeah. You drive by and there’s a factory that’s making Mercedes Benz automobiles and there’s a Coca-Cola bottling company and there are high rise—well, not by our standards—but there are some very tall buildings I’d say fifteen, twenty floors in Saigon. Beautiful hotels. It is really a beautiful area. There’s an area called Rungsat which is really the mangrove swamp formed down at the mouth of the Saigon River and that was a VC stronghold. There were no roads down there at all. When we operated there we went by boat and the soldiers had to get off the boats were almost at least knee deep in muck in that mangrove swamp area. There was a large VC stronghold down there that we never were able to thoroughly penetrate. Now they’ve built a highway all the way down to the tip of the Rungsat and it’s a four-lane highway paved. Unheard of in the old days. Who would want to even go down there? But when you get down to the end there’s a beautiful beach and two or three new restaurants. There’s a park with monkeys running loose all through it. It’s very interesting, and they’ve reconstructed the VC base area down there. You can go through that and they have little displays of the VC aid station, the operating room, their bunkers, their command post, and so on. It’s fascinating.

LC: I’m sure you know about the Museum of War Remnants as it’s now called. I think earlier it had other more provocative names. Have you been through there Bill?

WL: Yes I’ve been by it. I haven’t gone in; in the last two trips I didn’t. Another trip I made was up north on Route 13. In fact I did this twice, up to Loc Ninh on the border.

LC: Up to your old stomping grounds?

WL: Where we had the battles and went through—they have a monument at the Battle of Bao Bang, which they show how they defeated the Americans. Of course we really whacked them twice there at Bao Bang but in their view they won both battles. Then off to the west of Highway 13 you can go and visit the command post of the COSVN out there next to the Cambodia border. In fact I went there with one of my cousins. My Vietnamese cousin was my interpreter. We drove out there—because the big sign on the highway said welcome. We got out there and we were the only ones there except for the caretaker and he said, “What are you doing here? You have to have permission from the province chief to be here.” My cousin told this fellow, “Do you
know who you’re talking to? This man is a senior official of the United States.” Gave him a big spiel about how important I was and he backed down and gave us a private tour of the place. There we saw the command post and the bunkers and the living quarters of this COSVN headquarters that was established there in 1972, ’73, after they took control of Loc Ninh they brought their command post in there.

LC: This is just inside the border?
WL: Just inside the border.
LC: On Highway 13?
WL: Yeah. Between Highway 13 and the Cambodian border.
LC: Is there a town nearby?
WL: No. There were two or three little villages. In fact they had camouflaged and made their little command post look like a Cambodian village. That was their intent. The buildings that were there were thatched roof. This is a semi-deciduous forest, not a dense jungle, and from the air you would think you were looking at a Cambodian village.

LC: But the facilities that were of course the important ones were underground?
WL: Yes. They had deep trenches and communications trenches and all of the buildings had dugouts. You’d go into the building and then you’d go down about a level and then you could go off to the side into a dugout so if they were bombed they were in pretty good protection.

LC: What was it like for you to go through COSVN headquarters Bill?
WL: It was kind of a chilling experience. You know we had looked for it for years and we virtually found it in 1960, early ’66. I knew that we were on the trail of it. We had communication lines to follow. Poor General Hay—when I was with the 1st Division—General Hay decided it would take too many casualties if we went any farther than we did. We were up in the middle of Tay Ninh and COSVN headquarters was up in the northwestern quadrant of Tay Ninh Province then. We knew we were really close. But by then there was no doubt that General Hay and General Westmoreland had instructions to reduce the casualty rate so we weren’t going to be as aggressive as we had in the year preceding.

LC: In terms of search and destroy missions.
WL: Yes, right.
LC: I frankly can’t imagine going through a location that was COSVN headquarters.

WL: If you ever get to Vietnam by now I’m sure you wouldn’t be interrogated.

LC: Uh no. I might make it out now.

WL: I know another veteran from the 11th ACR, 11th Armored Cavalry, that went on an excursion up there about a year ago and he went up right to the Cambodian border and probably across it and he got arrested by the border police up there, the Vietnamese, and was held for a few hours until they were satisfied that he wasn’t an agent of some sort.

LC: That was probably a bit uncomfortable. Bill, that area from An Loc south down Route 13 and over to Tay Ninh and so on, in the olden days, a number of plantations and I know you saw them when you were over there with the 1st Division, what’s the status of those now?

WL: Well those plantations have been expanded. They’ve planted new rubber and another thing they’ve done with the jungle along Route 13 and over towards Minh Thanh was to remove the jungle and plant orchards. The primary fruit that I saw there were cashews. They have a large cashew plantation there, several of them, and they’re exporting cashews nuts now. They haven’t figured out how to roast them without burning them but I think they will one of these days. They send me, my relatives there, send me whole boxes of them every now and then. But they’ve removed a lot of the jungle from alongside Route 13 and there are large communities. That old small village of Chon Thanh has been expanded. A lot of houses. In fact when we went there several years ago—when was it, ’96, I don’t know—why we had lunch in a restaurant at Chon Thanh. That’s when I decided I wanted to go into the plantation at Minh Thanh where we had that great battle there in July ’66. I wanted to see that again so we rented a van and a driver. The trouble is when I wanted to go someplace it was hard for me to go alone. They wanted me to take the whole family so I got this van load of kids and aunts and uncles and so on and we drove up Route 13, went off to the side road. I wanted to come in to Minh Thanh from the backside of it and very difficult road in those days. It’s much better now—full of potholes, this dirt road. We got into; we went across a little bridge into the plantation, which was very heavily overgrown. It wasn’t being
maintained very well at all. There was lots of brush and everybody got very, very
nervous. These people they were muttering back there about VC and so on. I said, “The
war is over. I mean there’s no VC up here anymore.” But they were all frightened so I
never did get into the part of the plantation—I had to turn around and go home because
they all said, “We’ll get in trouble if we go into here any farther.”

LC: So there was still some continuing nerve wracking.

WL: Well, they were nervous. I wasn’t.

LC: But among the Vietnamese—?

WL: Yeah, the Vietnamese. Vietnamese from Saigon, they never went up into the
jungle. When I got them up as far as Lai Khe they were nervous. I mean that was
civilized up there as far as I was concerned but they didn’t think so.

LC: That’s interesting. I mean the layover for them is very interesting because I
think there’s a sense out there that the Vietnamese have forgotten about the war and—

WL: But the other aspect of it is that these people, my relatives and all the
Vietnamese from Saigon, they don’t’ like to go up into the countryside. I mean they’re
not farmers and they’re not farmers and they’re not woodcutters. They’re city folk. They
just don’t want to go up in there.

LC: It’s because of the war or is it an urban, rural thing?

WL: That’s it. They’re city folks. I don’t know if they expect to see tigers or
what. But they just don’t like to go up into the jungle. The plantations aren’t quite as
sinister to them. I think they’re awfully pretty. I love those rubber plantations.

LC: It’s interesting that they’ve really redeveloped some of those on an industrial
level.

WL: Yeah. As I say they’ve expanded the rubber plantations. I don’t think
they’re still—you know in the old days they imported Cambodians as rubber cutters.
Most of the workers that I saw like in the large Michelin Plantation I believe they were
Cambodians. They brought them in from across the border to work because the
Vietnamese didn’t want to do that.

LC: They were Cambodians?

WL: Yes.

LC: On some of your recent trips?
WL: Yes I believe there were still some there.
LC: Have you been going over to Cambodia Bill?
WL: No. I haven’t been over there. I’ve never been to Cambodia in any of my tours. I’ve been real close but—now you can drive from Saigon to Cambodia, to Phnom Penh. I imagine it’s something probably about a four hour drive.
LC: Why haven’t you gone over there? Just got enough to do, enough on your hands when you’re in Saigon with the family?
WL: Didn’t let me. I mean she doesn’t want me to go to any of these places. She didn’t want me to go to the Rungsat. She didn’t want me to go to Loc Ninh. She wants me to stick around. She’s afraid.
LC: Well, she worried for you and I can see that. Bill, as you look to the future are you thinking about dividing your time between the US and your home over there?
WL: Yes. Well actually we knocked down her mother’s house and we rebuilt it. Now it has four floors and a roof garden, kind of a penthouse sort of thing. So they’ve reserved the second floor for us and we’re going to go over there and spend considerable time there. We’ve got to get our daughter started in college this year and once she gets over there and gets started in college we’ll be able to spend a little while in Vietnam, although getting my wife to leave my daughter alone in New York is going to be a real task.
LC: In New York?
WL: Yeah. She’s going to be going to Fordham.
LC: I think you mentioned that. Yeah. Good school but I can understand mom being a little concerned. How much time do you think you’ll spend over there a year?
WL: Id’ like to spend several months but I don’t know.
LC: It remains to be seen. What do you think the—I hate to ask you to prognosticate—but your descriptions of the busy commercial aspects of life in Saigon really point to the issue of impending conflict between Communist Party rule and the development of the capitalist instinct and the opening of the commercial economy in the south particularly and I wonder what you think about the likely developments there. Is it going to essentially transition as it looks like China is or will they find their own path, will it be more difficult?
WL: I really believe that over time, and this might be another generation away, that it will finally divest itself of the controlled economy of the Communist single party rule. I think it will change. They’ve given Saigon, the Saigon area, the Communists have given it a good deal of autonomy now and they’ve developed what they call a new economic zone and free trade zone, those sorts of things. They’ve had to adapt to the world economy and they’re not stupid. They know what they’re doing. There are still a couple of drawbacks. One is still a police state. They still have all of the control to keep the thing under control. They can’t let it go too far too fast. But the old Communist hard line believers, they’re dying off and I think the new ones that are coming on, they’re going to recognize that they have to adapt their economy in order to survive and to grow. They’re going to have to do it. The southerners realize that probably more than the northerners. Hardliners are still in Hanoi.

LC: Have you gone up to Hanoi?

WL: Not since I went up there with Kerry. We intend to go there. We’d like to take the train. You can take an overnight train from Saigon to Hanoi. That’s the way I’d like to do it, a narrow gauge railroad.

LC: Is there still to your observation a kind of cultural divide between northerners and southerners?

WL: Well I think there is yes and I think it’s very distinct. I imagine that will probably change over time because so many of the northerners have moved south. Thousands of them have come south, and I’m not talking about the exchange in 1954. I’m talking about recent since the end of the war.

LC: In order to be participating—

WL: I mean in economic opportunity—it’s available in the South and it’s not in the North.

LC: Because of these special economic zones where certain restrictions are—

WL: Sure. There’s more jobs.

LC: Yeah. There’s more going on, more opportunity.

WL: Yeah, that and of course I always believe, believed for a long time, it’s also the weather and the easy lifestyle of the South that the northerners never had.

LC: Yeah. It’s a different game up North, that’s for sure.
WL: There’s still a terrible problem they have I believe with corruption at the
highest levels. Still difficult to get anything done unless you pay off the bureaucrat,
probably at several levels to get anything accomplished. The top ranks are still very
corrupt.

LC: Have your family members—well, let me just ask if that’s evident in Saigon
as well as where one might expect it more further north?

WL: The corruption?

LC: Yeah.

WL: Oh I think it’s nation wide.

LC: Endemic?

WL: Yeah. It’s all through the Communist Party. They’re just as corrupt as the
old government was.

LC: What does that tell you? Anything?

WL: Kind of tells you about the Asian lifestyle I guess. They still haven’t signed
on to what we think is our ethic of government, not that we haven’t had crooks in
government by any means if not pervasive. When you go to the DMV, except in certain
places in northern Virginia, you expect to get your license without paying under the table
for it like that.

LC: Right. Those kinds of daily chore type things can get done here very cleanly.

WL: Yes. You want a license or you want to have a deed put in the register or so
on, why you get that done. But in Vietnam you better be prepared to pay something
upfront or they won’t get to your particular paperwork for several weeks. Things like
that.

LC: That is certainly something that is out there as a potential inhibition to further
economic engagement, if you want, with—

WL: In fact I believe that that has inhibited American investment over there
because of course we’ve got the law that says if you want to invest in a foreign country or
do anything it’s against US code to pay what would be tantamount to a bribe to a foreign
official to get something done. Other governments that I know of don’t have the laws
like that but we’ve got it on our books and it’s been enforced. So that’s why you don’t
see large American engineering firms and so on establishing.
LC: Right, whereas you do see Europeans.

WL: Oh yeah. The Australians, the Japanese, Chinese to some extent, and Europeans, they’re in there heavily. I recall I was with General Murray several years ago. He told me he had a contract with I believe it was Brown and Root and they were going to go over there and assist the Vietnamese petroleum organization. I think Petrofina was the name of their corporation, government, Vietnamese corporation, that was operating natural gas pipe [wells] and platforms out there off the coast of Vung Tau. Had quite a few platforms that were constructed there by the Soviets in the earlier days and they were in bad repair. They were kind of falling apart and they needed a good engineering firm to go out there and put in new ones or repair the old ones. I never know which is which. But in any case Brown and Root was interested in doing it and of course it had an internationally known capability to do things like that.

LC: Absolutely.

WL: It’s a very good engineering outfit. But Murray went over there and talked to them and looked around and found out that there was no way that they were going to get a contract unless they were prepared to pay. Of course again it’s against the law for us to do that so they had to kind of scuttle that idea. That’s my impression of what happened anyway.

LC: Bill, just to sort of bring things up to date, can you just in a couple sentences let listeners know what you have been doing since you left Taskforce Russia?

WL: Oh I’ve been doing a lot of different things.

LC: I know a couple of them but I don’t know all of them.

LC: The main, I guess the most—I worked for a small corporation that had a Defense Department contract involving special operations. I wrote scenarios because I got to know something about special operations concepts, organizations, and operations. I wrote them from a Soviet standpoint, SPETSNATZ (Spetsialla'noye Naznayacheniy (Russian Special Forces)). I wrote them some scenarios for that. I can’t go into any more detail than that.

LC: That’s fine.

WL: Then another little outfit asked me to write a proposal to the Department of Justice to convince them, convince the Department of Justice, that it should provide
consultation to the secretary of defense on a law, on a program that was established by law, that tells the secretary of defense to transfer excess defense department equipment to states and local authorities for law enforcement purposes. The law had a line in it and it said, “The secretary of defense shall consult with the attorney general in carrying out this program.” This little outfit noticed that nobody had been assigned by the Justice Department to do that consulting work so they asked me to write the proposal and I did, and then they hired me to do it. So I became the representative of the attorney general over at the Defense Department and later at the Defense Logistics Agency on this program. I got very deeply involved with law enforcement, particularly with airborne law enforcement activities in this. My duties expanded because another law was passed that tells the secretary of defense to establish procedures through which states and units of local government can purchase equipment for counter drug activities through defense contracts. I became the representative on a steering committee for that particular activity. I represented the Justice Department on that. I’ve done that for about eleven years now and it’s finally come to an end. They’ve decided they don’t need it anymore so I’m out of that. I’m not doing that anymore but I still have a job involving surplus property. I’m the executive director of the National Association of State Agencies for Surplus Property, which is kind of a different aspect of it. But that’s what I do now and that’s a part time job.

LC: That is not restricted to surplus property from—that might be just for—?
WL: No. It’s not exclusively Defense property. No. That’s property that is declared excess by federal agencies including all of the military services. After it’s declared excess and it’s not transferable to other federal agencies, then it becomes surplus and available to be donated to states, counties, cities, not for profit hospitals, and so on through the State Agencies for Surplus Property. This is a system that was established back in 1947. It’s been present since then. It’s based on what they call the Property Act, which is codified as Title 40 US Code. And each of the states has a State Agency for Surplus Property to transfer this property to what they call their donees. That is organizations within the state that are eligible to receive the property.

LC: So someone would have to certify all of those agencies?
WL: The state has to make application and they are certified by a part of the
General Services Administration, GSA. They look at the credentials of whoever is being
proposed as a donee and if they prove it, why, they’re on the books and can receive the
property. These state agencies formed an association, a national association of state
agencies, and I became their first executive director. I’m still doing that. That’s been
about three years now.

LC: About how many folks—I mean is this individuals or agencies who are
members of the association?

WL: Only the state agencies. The state agency is the member and the manager of
the state agency for surplus property; they are the members of the national association.
So there are a total of fifty-six members: the fifty states plus the six territories. They all,
each of them has a state agency. So I’m their executive director and I deal with members
of Congress on the program. I’m not really qualified as a lobbyist but I keep them
informed on the concerns of the states and the advantages of the program. I deal with a
number of other federal agencies—with GSA, with Defense Logistics Agency, and so on.

LC: Is this something that you can continue to do if you spend more time in
Saigon?

WL: If I spend a lot of time in Saigon I’ll probably have to retire.

LC: I can’t imagine it Bill.

WL: Me neither, not with my daughter.

LC: A daughter in university.

WL: I’ve got to have something to do.

LC: I hear you. Well Bill I raked you over the coals pretty good for many
sessions but I want to express my thanks to you. But I also want to ask you about how
you feel about having served in the US Army in the way that you did. Are there times
that you feel you were most useful. Someone who has listened to or read the transcripts
will know your references but just as you look back what do you think were the best
postings, the things that helped you the most as a professional military man?

WL: It’s awfully hard to say. I enjoyed almost every hour I was in the Army. Of
course there were some really, really bad times in combat. But your mind has a way of
kind of canceling those things out and you remember the fun times and the exciting ones.
There were some very good times, even in New Guinea and in the Philippines that I can remember. But I think my best contribution, the one I was most satisfied with, was as G2 of the 1st Division. I thought that was kind of a high point. Another one was the chief of intelligence for DAO Saigon. Perhaps I had the most enjoyable time as commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 10th Infantry. There were some great soldiers and fine young officers there and we had a very good year and a half. Times over in Germany as a lieutenant in the 16th Infantry, about three and a half years, there were some fine times there. I think I contributed a lot in the training and the development of the soldiers there too, the rifle platoons and weapons platoons that I commanded and in the company that I commanded there. I don’t know. I’ve had a very rewarding career.

LC: It fit you well didn’t it Bill?
WL: Hm?
LC: It really fit you well.
WL: I think it did. Yeah. I think I did a good job and I think the Army rewarded me adequately for what I did. I don’t have any regrets.
LC: Bill are there any questions that I haven’t asked you that you wish I had?
WL: No.
LC: Or anything you’d like to chip in?
WL: Pardon?
LC: Anything you’d like to chip in here at the end?
WL: Oh no. Well I would like to say this that I’ve certainly enjoyed these conversations with you. I think you have a way of drawing out the facts and things. Obviously you have some very good ideas of what went on in Vietnam and you ask some penetrating questions and a lot of were unexpected. I hope I answered them adequately.

LC: Well I think you’ve done an unbelievable job and I think that, no thanks to me really. Your testimonial really about your career has been a great learning experience for me and I know that it will be as the years go by for other people as we make these recordings and the transcripts that we’ll produce available for folks to look at and to study your career, places that you’ve been, and the contributions that you’ve made.
WL: Well thank you. I’ve got some work ahead of me to review these manuscripts and get them back to you.
LC: Yes you do. Well thanks very much Bill.