Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone; I’m conducting an oral history with Mr. Andrew DeBona. Today is September 11, 2003. It’s about 9:10 a.m. Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. DeBona, you are in Ennis, Montana. Let’s start, sir, with a biographical sketch of yourself, could you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about growing up?

Andrew DeBona: I was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania on the 3rd of October 1936. That was where the hospital was; where I actually grew up was Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, which was about 17 miles away. I was an only child. My father came over from Italy, my mother was a descendant of German and Irish parents both of whom came over from the old country so I am a first generation Italian. I led a normal life in Ebensburg in that I went to Catholic school for eight years and then high school for four years.

RV: What are your earliest memories of Ebensburg, what about your family life at home, you were the only child; what was it like growing up there?

AD: It was a very nice town there, nothing ever happened in Ebensburg. My earliest memories I think of course of living in the places where I lived at the time, one place we lived was near the railroad tracks. My father and mother divorced when I was in the seventh grade, so I didn’t see much of my father after that. He would periodically...
come by but not too much. We would go out hunting and fishing, which I enjoyed quite a
bit and it’s a rural type community probably, like I said, population for about 4700
people. The county seat of the county and the primary industry, if you would, which was
c coal. There were a lot of mines around the area.

RV: Where is this in relation to say Pittsburgh?
AD: Pittsburgh, we’re approximately 55 miles to the southeast.
RV: What did your parents do for a living?
AD: My mother was a housewife but after the father left then she was working as
a waitress. My father initially started out driving a bread truck and then he got into
insurance sales and eventually into automobile sales.

RV: Did your mother end up remarrying?
AD: No, oh correction yes, way after the fact when I was probably in my 30’s she
married an individual.
RV: What kind of jobs did you have in your youth; did you work?
AD: Yes, I caddied at the golf course, I worked at my grandfather’s mine to get
bulked up for football (laughter) which was not a very smart decision.
RV: Tell me about that, what did you do?
AD: Well, I was… we had a little mule down there and he had about one horse,
that’s exactly what it was, a one horse mine so I would go in there and dig out the coal
and load it in the car and the mule would go out and dump the coal and come back in
again. The other thing I did, I worked for 35 cents an hour after that at my father’s, at his
garage where I would do any number of things, including wash the cars, clean them up on
the inside, change tires, general nothing skilled type, just general maintenance type
things.
RV: And how about into high school, did you continue working?
AD: Oh that was when I was in high school, my junior and senior year.
RV: Tell me about going to school, starting in your youth, what did you enjoy as
subjects and how were you as a student?
AD: Initially in grade school, with the Catholic school, I enjoyed just about
everything, GCT or IQ testing, I was the highest in the class. I got all A’s and B’s. When
I got into high school I was diagnosed with having rheumatic fever; in my freshmen year
I went to school at 5’8, 135 and I came back to school three months later I was 6’0 175 and also I didn’t get any home teaching or tutoring so consequently I got, and deservedly so, the attitude or the reputation of a bad student. So in high school then what I would primarily do I would slide by, I lettered in my sophomore, junior, and senior years in both football and basketball, which were the big sports around the area, and my junior year we took the Class A Championship of the state of Pennsylvania.

RV: What positions did you play in basketball and football?
AD: In basketball I was the center and in football I was the right end and that was when we went both ways.

RV: Right, right. Was it expected for you to go to college, did your parents emphasize education and a post secondary education?
AD: College wasn’t mentioned per se; however, I did get a football scholarship up but due to my low grades, I think I graduated 117th out of a 121, the only saving grace was my SAT scores came out extremely high so I was offered a football scholarship to Massanuttin Military Academy, sort of a prep school and also a college scholarship to Washington and Lee.

RV: Did you pick one of the two?
AD: I went to the prep school; however, at the same time that happened the gal that I had been going with, my high school steady, turned out pregnant so I dropped out of school and joined the Marine Corps.

RV: What year was this?
AD: This was 1955.

RV: How long had you attended the prep school?
AD: I had been in the prep school; we went down there in August till December.

My grades at that point were once again A’s and B’s.

RV: Tell me about military experience and your family; had your dad or anyone else served in the military previous to you?
AD: My father was drafted in 1944 for a period of about, he was at the time almost 40 years old; he spent, I believe, a little bit less then two months until he was discharged.

RV: Is there anyone else?
AD: No, on my grandmother’s side, on my mother’s side rather, no one actually…they weren’t in the military. Later, a cousin of mine joined the Army but he was in for two years.

RV: Do you have any memories of World War II?

AD: The only memory I have of World War II is the end of World War II when they use to have the sirens in town to signify the air attacks in case the Japanese came over and also the drills that we had in school where everyone would get under the desks, waiting for the Japanese planes or the German planes to drop their bombs on Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, obviously, and I am sure that that was a federally mandated type thing and the end of the war I remember the town was closed down simply because all the sirens were going off and people were dancing in the streets and those are my recollections of World War II.

RV: How about Korea?

AD: Korea, not very many at all even though I was almost in high school, I believe I was probably in the 8th or 9th grades. My only memory of Korea per se is that one of the seniors who had joined the Navy was a Corpsman with the Marines and he was KIA’ed but that is about the only memory of Korea per se.

RV: Tell me why you joined the Marine Corps. First of all, why the military and then specifically, why the Marine Corps?

AD: Why the military, the draft was still invoked at that time, I figured that since I was not going to school, I did not have an education or a trade so I figured I would be able to kill two birds with one stone because I eventually wanted to go to college, even though I was married with a child and the whole thing, but I figured I needed something to support the family. And why the Marine Corps, I went down to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which was the nearest recruiting office, to specifically join the Air Force. The Air Force recruiter was not in, next door the only recruiter who in fact was in was the Marine Corps recruiter and I stuck my head in his door and said something to the effect, ‘When will the Air Force recruiter be back?’ and he said, ‘Boy, what a deal I have for you.’ And that is the short story long.

RV: So he persuaded you that the Corps was the elite I take it, and that it would be a good fit for you.
AD: Yeah, well it was more or less a challenge; I don’t think you can make it as a Marine Corps boy.

RV: So you got married and you had a child and now you’re going to go off to basic training.

AD: No, the marriage part, yes between the time that I initially saw the recruiter and at that time you weren’t allowed to be married and join the Marine Corps, so between the time I initially reported in, I got my physical and everything and I had my ship date which was the 17th of January, we got married on the 10th of January.

RV: Where did you do your basic?

AD: At Parris Island, South Carolina.

RV: Tell me about you basic training. What were your general impressions when you first stepped off the bus down there on the island?

AD: In retrospect, at the time it was probably nothing but except shock, and how could people do this, how could people yell at you at this type of thing because I came from a, if you will, somewhat of a peaceful environment and then being thrown into the Marine Corps environment and since that time, of course, I’ve been in that recruit training type environment but the initial thing was like I said, just plain shock. I knew I had to get through it and I knew I had to prove myself.

RV: Tell me about basic. What was it like?

AD: Basic was difficult, I never had that sort of discipline before. I was one of the… the drill instructors picked me out to be one of the, in fact, the section leader for the platoon so I was one of the three people who made meritorious PFC. At that time that meant an extra five dollars a month, which was a lot of money, and I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the experience. It was a military type of thing, and in fact I did a study later for my Master’s degree on the performance of a male from a fatherless child, now of course a male from a fatherless family while in recruit training, because there was always a knock about that type of an individual, and I found that in my thesis that had little, if any, bearing on it, the main thing was the person had a 12th grade education, in other words did he have to stick-to-itiveness to go ahead and go through high school and that was a better indicator of his performance in recruit training than any of the other variables that they were referring to.
RV: How did you adopt to the military lifestyle? Was it difficult for you?
AD: No, not really. I considered myself a Type A personality anyhow and I was always physical, in the physical aspect, the mental aspect was not really that much, I thought I was intelligent enough to see through what was eventually happening by the time the fourth or fifth week came along, and it was enjoyable, if you will.
RV: What would you say was the most difficult part of it for you?
AD: Boy, probably the most difficult part was initially being in charge, I was the drill instructor’s right hand man, they would tell me what to do, and then I would have the whole platoon do it, and sometimes some people in the platoon would not concede that I was acting in the drill instructor’s behalf so I would have to counsel them, and that was probably the hardest part of it for me. Physical was no problem, mental was no problem and at that time probably the first time that I had ever been actually away from Ebensburg, Pennsylvania so it was probably being away from home also had something in there somewhere but I sort of put that in the back of my mind.
RV: Did you feel like you were a natural leader or did your leadership kind of surprise you once you had been selected and you were able to carry out those duties?
AD: My concept of myself was that I was smarter then the average bear by virtue of going to the Military Academy, there at Massanuttin for that period of time. I had in fact had some discipline, I knew a little bit more than the average person coming in there concerning drill, weapons, I had hunted all my life, so I was good with weapons, and I guess if leadership by example could be proven, of course I didn’t know all those words at that time or the principles of leadership or anything else but I felt that I was in my element, yes.
RV: How much did it help you that you had handled weapons before? Was that a clear advantage for you?
AD: Oh definitely, because some of the Marines coming out of the cities for instance but had never had a rifle before in their hand. By virtue of the fact that I had known how to field strip the M-1 rifle, which I had to do in the Military Academy, so I was able to do that and also teach that.
RV: What kind of weapons training did you receive at Parris Island?
AD: At Parris Island we FAM fired the .45, which is just a familiarization fire, and then we shot two weeks at the rifle range. First week consisted of snapping in, where you’d get into the position that the Marine Corps would deem appropriate for firing the weapon at a known distance target, not combat training. And then the second week was actually getting your dope on your rifle, getting your zero on your weapon and actual live firing then.

RV: What would you say was a typical day at Parris Island?

AD: Typical day at Parris Island, boy. Depending upon if at the range, we would get up a little bit earlier but a typical day was probably up at 0600. During the latter stages of Recruit training, it was a just flip on the lights and you would immediately get out of the rack. During the initial stages, before the lights would come on, the garbage cans would be rolling down, the drill instructors would be in there screaming and hollering so you would get out of the rack and stand in front of the rack facing inboard at the position of attention in your skivvies and you were then given the word, ‘You have fifteen minutes to shower, shave, and get ready.’ Then you would go to the chow hall for the morning meal and you would go through the chow hall and after getting done eating, you would go outside and wait at where the platoon was ordered to form. From that point in time you would go do various and sundry things, whether it was class, whether it was a confidence course, wither it was bayonet training, anything like that but you would actually go to the classes then or go to the specific physical training and then of course the same thing would happen in the noon meal. After you get done with that you would go back to the barracks, you would have 10 or 15 minutes to go ahead and get spruced up (so to speak) get out, stand in formation, then march on over. Initially the DI’s did all the marching, later on I was able to go ahead and march the platoon over there. The afternoon was sort of a mirror image of the morning with the exception of different classes. Hardest thing I remember about that was not falling asleep.

RV: Oh really?

AD: Yes, the drill instructor were very unyielding if a recruit started to nod off and fall asleep in the class, that was not deemed military.

RV: What would they do?
AD: They would normally come up behind the recruit and either give him a reassuring tap on the shoulder or have him stand in the back of the room if he started to fall asleep. The voluntary thing was if you were starting to fall asleep you would stand up in the back of the room and listen to the lecture. The involuntary thing was once you got the rap on the back of the shoulder then you would get up and go to the back of the room, I never had that happen because I don’t know why but I do know that I have nodded off any number of times and sort of came back to again. Evening then was spent getting ready for the next day; shining shoes, various and sundry things. We would drill probably till about 2000 or 8:00 that evening and drill, that’s what everybody, did. In every waking moment, if you weren’t in class, you weren’t eating, you weren’t doing something, and you would be drill. Normally in the evening, then, we would also have about, later, we would have about 15 or 20 minutes of what was called free time where you could go ahead and write and then it would be in the racks at exactly 2200, 10:00, and that was sort of the typical day.

RV: Were your DI’s Korean Vets?

AD: Yes, all three of them.

RV: Did they talk about their experiences?

AD: Rarely, they weren’t there as a, and a strange thing about that I ran into two of them later in the Marine Corps. One was a gunnery sergeant by the name of Cockrine, who just died, and the other one was a staff sergeant by the name of Stammie who I ran into when I was a captain in Johnstown, he was in Johnstown, Pennsylvania with the I&I. He was at that time a gunnery sergeant and made corporal by wrecking the Marine Corps vehicle while he was an I&I, but yeah they were all Korean Vets and very confident and very able and just great Marines, at least that’s who we emulated quite frankly.

RV: How would you rate the training overall at Parris Island?

AD: Redundant, particularly in the stage of drills but I understand now, having been the commanding officer of a Recruit Training Battalion later, that the redundancy, the idea behind that is to make sure that you are no longer an individual, you are a member of a team, which the Marine Corps attempts to do and it’s been said many times that the Corps during recruit training which is a mystical type of experience breaks down the individual from who they were and from a boy and graduates a Marine.
RV: Did you find that to be true?
AD: Oh yes, very much so.
RV: How long did your Parris Island training go?
AD: At that point in time we were 12 weeks and while there also, this is when we took our various tests to see what we would do after Parris Island. I was… At that time the Marine Corps had a certain intelligence quota or an IQ quota to go to specific schools. I was selected to go to Aviation School. However, what happened was that prior to graduation, had a couple of officers come around, and ask me if I had ever played football and of course that was a well known fact, and to make a short story long there instead of going to Aviation School after recruit training and also the advanced infantry training at Camp Geiger I was assigned to Parris Island to play football.
RV: Really?
AD: Yes.
RV: On the Marine Corps football team?
AD: Yes.
RV: How long did that last?
AD: Well in addition to playing football there, I was also working in a gas station which is sort of a not necessarily an indicator but it wasn’t my idea of what I joined the Marine Corps, but that lasted for a period of three years until I eventually went and said, ‘I don’t want to play football anymore and this isn’t why I joined the Marine Corps.’ I had been promoted to corporal, been promoted to sergeant and said I wanted to do something else besides that so from there I went over and started working in the Brig.
RV: What year was this?
AD: This was in 1959, correction ’58.
RV: In ’58, what position did you play for the Marine Corps football team?
AD: End.
RV: Same thing.
AD: Yes.
RV: So in ’58 you went to work at the Brig, what were your duties?
AD: I was the turnkey initially, turnkey there, which was due to my just coming into the thing. I was the assistant turnkey initially which two people on duty at the same
time making sure that the prisoners knew that they did not want to come back there again. Basically to enforce discipline, not corporally in any way shape or form would we ever do that but continually up and down and harassment type in these drills. After that then I got to be the turnkey where I supervised the other people, the other Marines working there with the prisoners.

RV: How long did you do that?
AD: I did that for a period of about nine months. My thought at this time was hey, this would give me good training as far as getting out of the Marine Corps and perhaps joining the police force.

RV: So at this point you did not plan to make the Marine Corps a career?
AD: That’s correct.

RV: What happened after the Brig, where did you go?
AD: After the Brig I was given, it’s unusual, but I had spent a little bit over; I had a four year enlistment. I had spent a little bit over three years and two months at Parris Island and I received orders to go report to Okinawa with the 3rd Marine Division. At that period in time I had two children with another one on the way and so I extended my enlistment to be able to not only have my wife deliver the child and have the medical benefits paid for but also to make sure that I had a stable income at least until I got back. So I extended the enlistment and then I was assigned to a bulk fuel company, which by virtue of working in the gas station, that’s what my MOS was.

RV: When did you ship off to Okinawa?
AD: I left, oh let’s see, that was June, July…July of ’59 and I got back, well once over there in Okinawa I once again decided that well I’m just going to work in Bulk Fuel which I didn’t know, and I played football over there, too.

RV: How long were you there?
AD: It was a two year tour but I only spent 20 months there since I shipped over for another six years at that time. My wife had gotten a job down at Parris Island and she was doing very well in the civil service field, and the shipping over money allowed us to buy a mobile home or a trailer.

RV: So you were able to come back and live in South Carolina?
AD: Yes, in fact that was one of the options, when I was shipped over I was then stationed at the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, South Carolina where I was working in the mess hall as the storage guy and while there at the air station I also taught classes to other Marines and I had taken a, at that point, 19 or 20 Marine Corps institute courses because I figured if I am going to stay in this outfit I better start learning something about it. 

RV: Tell me about playing football in Okinawa. What was that like; who did you play?

AD: We played the other, everybody there. At that point in time the Marines had a team, the Army had a team, we were the Sukiran Raiders, we played the Army, the Air Force, the Navy did not have a team but there were about five teams there on Okinawa.

RV: And was the season just in the fall or was it year round?

AD: Oh yes, just in the fall.

RV: Did you enjoy that?

AD: Yeah in the fact, in the sense that it was something different and it got me away from the Bulk Fuel Company where I was at that point and time assigned as the police sergeant which is the scrounger, or the individual who makes sure that something needs to get done, I would get it done.

RV: When did you come back into Beaufort, South Carolina, was it ’61?

AD: Oh got back there in ’60 and I want to say it was around, boy I don’t actually remember the definite dates.

RV: That’s ok, that’s not a problem. How long were you in Beaufort?

AD: When I was in Beaufort I eventually started looking into a few things, including OCS, Officer Candidate School, because I figured I didn’t want to be an enlisted Marine my whole career, not there is anything wrong with that but I felt I had more potential than that so I was there for probably for a period of about nine to ten months and I applied for Officer Candidate School through the Meritorious NCO Program and the Marine Corps that had a board that met and selected 25 Marines from throughout the Marine Corps to go to, 25 enlisted Marines, to go, NCO’s, to go through Officer Candidate School and I received my orders on the 10th of September, I believe it was, to report on the 15th of September.
RV: To where, Quantico?

AD: Quantico Virginia, that’s correct.

RV: So 1960, September, what was Quantico like?

AD: Quantico it was sort of a modified recruit training in that the OCS, and the ironic thing is I went through Bravo Company in OCS and in 1967, correction 1968, I commanded that company. It was a modified OCS. They spread two to three former enlisted around to each of the platoons to look more or less take care of the college boys that came in. Age wise I was about two years older.

RV: How old were you?

AD: At that time I was 25, I had my 25th birthday there. I was about two or three years older plus I knew quite a bit about the Marine Corps being in almost seven years at that time as enlisted service so the drill instructors or they were called Sergeant Instructors, not Drill Instructors. They would pretty well turn over the platoon to the former enlisted and I would hold classes on how to pass a test and I was assigned there for the Jock Platoon. (laughter)

RV: Surprise surprise right.

AD: The Jock Platoon was all the former football players who were going through OCS at that time. So that was the platoon that I was assigned to.

RV: How sharp were they, were they good Marines or did you have to work really hard with them?

AD: I would say once the basics got established they were extremely dedicated. We were called the Animal Platoon also and that in competition with other platoons throughout the recruit, or the OCS regiment that we would always win on the 3-mile run, on the PT test, on the obstacle course, tug of war, I mean you name it, we’d take it.

RV: How long did OCS last for you?

AD: I graduated as a 2nd Lieutenant on the 16th of December 1961. On the 15th of December my warrant came in for sergeant, which they never presented because I was a sergeant E4 at the time and that’s when the Marine Corps had undergone their rank change where they added the lance corporal to their ranks prior to that.

RV: Before we leave Quantico was there anything that stands out in your mind when you think back about that training?
AD: Not really, like I say it was sort of a redundancy of recruit training except a lot easier. It was probably, my estimation, probably about 80%, one slight difference, it was probably about 80% physical and 20% mental while recruit training seemed to me it was around 60% physical and 40% mental and that was the differentiation I would draw between the two types of training. Of course you’re talking training a different individual too, but to get the same product, a Marine.

RV: How were the college boys, as you said?

AD: The college boys were really good people, I had no problem with them what so ever. They were very eager to learn, they obviously had volunteered for the Marine Corps and some of them had quite a long history of their parents being in the Marine Corps and so on and so forth. They were dedicated and even though it was the Jock Platoon in that they weren’t as academically as sharp as some of the other Platoons there, but though we got by.

RV: So after Quantico where did you go?

AD: Stayed at Quantico because after OCS there was a thing called the Basic School and I was a 2nd lieutenant obviously at that time. Now the basic school to me is a completely different experience because I figured once I got commission, I’m a 2nd lieutenant; however, up there I became a student officer and I didn’t like that.

RV: Why not?

AD: In that instead of being treated like an officer I felt I was being treated like a college kid and by that I mean that the talked down to continually, they were captains there who were the platoon commanders at the time and the one that we had was a Tanker and I knew nothing about Tankers at that time but the people assigned there, I felt, and also were officers at the OCS were not the highest quality people that the Marine Corps had. They were more or less marking time there. Some of the instructors were extremely good; some of them were extremely bad.

RV: What would you do in basic school, how long did it last?

AD: The basic school lasted a period of about let’s see December, January, about four months, it could have been longer, four to five months. It was basically Marine Corps history as I said before, the academics more than the physical and mental. It was
primary academics there, map reading, tactics, and the basic infantry officer type of things.

RV: How did you do academically?
AD: Academically I was probably in the top quarter but I never really applied myself.

RV: Why was that?
AD: I felt that I knew most of the stuff, there were some things that I didn’t know that I would devote more of my time to, to if you will look at my professional development.

RV: So this is 1962, did you have any information or any inkling about US involvement in Southeast Asia at this point?
AD: No. The big thing was there the last war, which was Korea, and the veteran instructors who were there as captains had been in Korea.

RV: Did they talk about their experiences with you?
AD: Some, not all and their experiences that they would talk about were not necessarily leading troops but terrain, weather, things of that nature.

RV: So after Basic School when you completed that, did you stay in Quantico or did you leave?
AD: No, at that time I was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines down at Camp Lejune, North Carolina. Went down there and I reported into a battalion where I was assigned as the 106 Recoilless Rifle Platoon Commander and that unit was getting ready to go on a Med Float in about six months so what happened with the 106 Recoilless Rifle Platoon, once I got there within the first couple months we had a very tight unit and what would happen is that anyone, any company, any line companies, or any H and S company were having a problem with a Marine he was assigned to the 106 Recoilless Rifle and Flames, also flame throwers at the, with me.

RV: Why were they assigned to your platoon?
AD: In that my brand of discipline, perhaps, my brand of being a Marine, that I was probably a tad bit stronger than most. In fact my fitness report at that time, the first one I got in the Marine Corps, I was rated number one out of 64 Lieutenants.

RV: Can you describe what your brand was of a Marine?
AD: I would treat them like Marines; if they screwed up they got treated like Marines. We would be out for a run for example and everybody would be getting tired, including me, so then they would start bickering back there so we would stop the platoon, I would have them go get the boxing gloves, they were actually pillows, and I said well if you two have a little something to take out, if you have that much energy left, then you may start doing that. Instead of going for office hours for a minor offense I would have them go out and dig a 6X6X6 hole and fill it back in. It was just a general way, I guess, my demeanor and I was no-nonsense so I had a reputation of being no-nonsense but fair.

RV: And how long did you do this with 106?

AD: 106, I had them for about five months and then I was assigned to a platoon in Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines.

RV: What did you do in Kilo?

AD: In Kilo I was a Rifle Platoon Commander which I always wanted to be instead of the 106’s which were a supporting weapon and I, General Platoon Commander duties in fact one of the most, one of my best things there, I had a Sergeant of mine who was an extremely sharp individual and I put him in for the OCS program, he retired as a major general in the Marine Corps. Another guy, my platoon guide, later I wrote a recommendation for him, and he retired as a major, and it was just more hands on with the people and that I knew everyone and everyone. You know what their kids name, what their problems were and everything of that.

RV: What was your rank at this time?

AD: At that time I had just one year in grade I was then a 1st lieutenant.

RV: How long did you stay with Kilo Company?

AD: I was transferred down to Marine Corps Barracks, Yorktown, Virginia or Marine Corps Weapons Station, Marine Corps Barracks Yorktown, Virginia. I got down there in’64 and the month I don’t quite remember it was probably though during the summer because the children were getting out of school and that nature.

RV: What were your duties at Yorktown?

AD: Initially I was the platoon commander for the, we had two platoons over at the Special Weapons facility and Special Weapons I will not go into but that’s where they made things that go with mushrooms and when they go bang, and I was there for a period
of eighteen months. In fact, the individual sitting next to me, a guy by the name of Mike Downs, later retired as a two-star general and from there I was promoted to captain and for the last six months I was then transferred to Mainside or the other guard detachment there where I was the Commander of the Guard or the Company Commander of the Guard Platoon Mainside.

RV: So you were there from ’64 until…
AD: ‘66

RV: Is that where you received your orders to go to Southeast Asia?
AD: That’s correct.

RV: Tell me what you knew of ’64, ’65 and into 1966, about what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia.
AD: I had, during this period of time, taken a number of courses, correspondence courses through Special Forces. My idea and my knowledge of that time, it was a guerilla war so consequently I took everything I could. In fact, I think they had three no residence special forces courses that I took, I would read anything I could about guerilla tactics, particularly tactics concerning the Chinese, but as far as knowing the overall goals, overall aims, or the big picture-nothing. I was concentrating more or less on how I could be an effective commander there, in the Marines.

RV: So did you know that you were going or suspect that you were definitely going to end up there?
AD: Oh yeah, I mean that was because when the Marines submit their fitness report, which is their semi annually thing, you always request your dream list and I kept requesting Vietnam.

RV: Why did you do that?
AD: Well first of all, I felt that I was a professional Marine, I had been eleven years in the Marine Corps almost by that time, I had never been shot at, and I feel that my professionalism would not be really tested or I would not know how good I was or how bad I was till such time as I had the opportunity to command the Marines in combat.

RV: Tell me why, I take it that this was on your own, but tell me why you were studying guerilla war so closely. Was this recommended by the Marines, or was this something that you had an insight into yourself?
AD: Yes, it was not recommended. I decided that since that was the only war we had at the time that I had better be as good or the best I could be, so I tried to get everything I could and read on the topic.

RV: Do you find that once you got to Vietnam did that help you any?
AD: Oh yes, quite a bit.

RV: Ok. We will come to that when we get to that point in Vietnam when we talk about how that helped you. So tell me about your family feelings about you getting orders to Vietnam? How did they feel about this?
AD: It was sort of a forgone conclusion because all Marines, everybody was going to go to Vietnam that was in the Marine Corps that had time to do it, particularly the officers. The main thing was that I was going to be in a safe environment. In fact, during my first tour my mother thought I was a courier just away from the front lines going back and forth till my name made the papers and that sort of blew that one, but mother was extremely anxious and as [were my] children and wife who were living then, at that time, aboard the base at Camp Pendleton.

RV: When did you get your orders to Vietnam?
AD: I got orders to Vietnam; it was probably late April of ’66. I was ordered to report down to the newly forming battalion, which was the 3rd Battalion 26 Marines down at Camp Pulgus. The wife came out later after the children got out of school to make sure that I got a company, I reported in a week early and I was the third officer who had reported in, the XO was there, CO was there, and I was the third officer thinking that since I got in early I would get a rifle company, however, once they took a look at my background I was assigned the Battalion S-4 which is logistics and mechanics. Beans, bullets, band-aids, if you will.

RV: What did you feel about that?
AD: I was pissed.

RV: And this was going to be your duty in Vietnam?
AD: Well this is my thought, you know I figured that God I didn’t join the Marine Corps to go count bullets or count band-aids, or to arrange transportation, or to get ammo. I joined the Marine Corps to you know go get shot at quite frankly at that point in time. So my expectations were not fulfilled shall we say.
RV: Did you go over with the 3rd Battalion?
AD: We went over as an advanced party, myself, the S-3, and the communication officer. While the Battalion sailed over on ships, we flew over and landed in country on the 27th of August with 1st Battalion 26th Marine so it was, at that point in time, a special landing force [SLF]. We joined them and observed them and how they operated and so on and so forth because one of the things that 326, 3rd Battalion 26 Marines are going to do when they got there, they were going to take over duties as the Special Landing Force and they had landed a Special Landing Force at that point in time who’s mission was sort of an off-shore reserve to pick contact is made, boom the SLF is in there. So we stayed there with them until I think it was around early September, at which point in time 326, which had sailed from Camp Pendleton, or San Diego. They landed in Okinawa where they offloaded the Navy shipping they came over on to on load other Navy shipping which was also on the S-4 Priority.

RV: Where initially in August ’66, where initially did you land in central time?
AD: We landed close to the DMZ, a little bit to the north, northeast of Dong Ha and it was called, I believe the operation was called Deck House I, it might have been Deck House II, it was some Deck House Operation.

RV: What were your first impressions of Vietnam?
AD: When I landed that time?
RV: Yes sir.
AD: Scared. My impression was what in the hell is going on here you know you see and you read and you have preconceived ideas and you know what you’re going to do or you think you know what you’re going to do but we were on the LPH, for instance, when they brought in the Medevacs and to see the Marines coming off there, you know with portions…

RV: What kind of expectations did you have that were shattered?
AD: I felt that it would be a much more controlled environment so to speak. We go find the bad guys, we bring it in, the world in on them, and that would be it.

RV: Instead what happened?
AD: Instead we sometimes find the bad guys and the world would not come in on them and we would leave.
RV: What were your duties there were you just observing or were you actually able to go out into the field and engage or what?

AD: There was no engagement per se, I went out on a couple of Medevacs as far as that goes, but as far as actually seeing what a bad guy looked like I never saw what one looked like. As far as actually having someone shoot at me personally, no, that didn’t happen. It was just an observer type role of how things happen, or what is the reality, if you will, of Vietnam, as opposed to what are the preconceived ideas and that’s stood me a good stead I believe.

RV: When did you meet up with the 3rd of 26?

AD: We met up with them in early September then. When we once again formed the SLF, we went on a riverine operation because the concept was, at that time, we might get one of the contingency plans was we would go in to do IV Corps or down the delta, Rung Sat zone so we would have to be riverine capable in what were the things of that and we trained there. We never did make a landing until the 16th of December of ’66 when the battalion came ashore.

RV: Tell me a little bit about your impression of the morale of the American troops when you first arrived in Vietnam and what you first observed?

AD: When I first arrived, the ones, I didn’t really pay that much attention to the troops at that time because my job, we’re talking August now.

RV: Yes sir.

AD: We’re not talking December; we’re talking August. When I, my main thrust at that time was how do we get Medevacs out, how do we get the beans and bullets out, what are the problems as far as mining of the roads, things of that nature. I was not troop oriented, if you will, because that wasn’t my forte then. A forte was the logistical type of thing: how do I get the request new batteries, where do they come from, how much lead time there is in this, what parts do we need, and that was the primary function then it was a, boy, a mechanical versus a humanistic type thing.

RV: How did you find the logistical system?

AD: Workable, however, there was always the back door and I hearken back to my days as the supply sergeant or the police sergeant for, you know the last time I was in Okinawa, there is always a way to get something if you have something to trade for it. So
that is not the concept the Marine Corps would like you to do but however it is the accomplishment of the mission.

RV: Tell me about December ’66. Where did the 3rd of the 26 make the landing?

AD: They initially went into Dong Ha. It was an administrative type landing, and you know there was no combat, no assaulting the beach, nothing of that nature. Correction it was the 12th, I am looking at my book here because I have my book here with the dates, it was the 12th of December but they landed. Just going in, setting up a Palace guard around the perimeter of Dong Ha, running their few patrols, waiting for a mission, which the mission was eventually assigned.

RV: And you were still serving in the S-4 position?

AD: That’s correct.

RV: Was there any chance of you getting a company at this point?

AD: I was beginning to wonder that.

RV: Did you still want that?

AD: Oh without a doubt. We’ll get into that a little bit later you know why I eventually got my company but we’ll go there.

RV: Tell me about some of those operations, the initial in December ’66 into January ’67, what you all were doing there around Dong Ha.

AD: Well we left Dong Ha on the 19th of December. We were only there a week and we were assigned an AO, Area of Operation, in the Co Bi Than Tan Valley. This is supposed to be a three to four week operation where we would move in there, set up a base, a battalion base camp, patrol around the area, make contact with the bad guys and etc. etc. So we got in there on the 19th of December, which was right before the Christmas, or the first Christmas truce. Hit a land mine going in, if I remember very distinctly that, engineer vehicle got its right wheel blown off, no one was hurt, thank goodness. The companies went in, took a few rounds of sniper fire, to pick his contact with that time came around the 21st when India company was out on a post and a bunch of the bad guys ran into him and they killed about forty-five of them. The battalion perimeter was, I used the term loosely, attacked twice during that period of time with a couple of the rifle companies firing their final protective [FPF] fires into the assaulting
masses of enemy. However, the next morning we would go out and there would be no
bodies so that basically and another thing was the rain. It rained continually.
RV: Really?
AD: Yes, for forty-six days and we were wet, we were miserable, and this is of
course when I was still the S-4, and also when I eventually did take over the company.
RV: I imagine the rain made your job that much more difficult.
AD: Exactly, everything was getting bogged down. I mean it was just a one big
slush.
RV: Did you actually ever get into combat yourself during this time period?
AD: During this time period the only thing that happened when India Company
made their contact, I took a small reaction force full with ammunition and everything
else, as far as getting shot at, no.
RV: Did you have a sense of the strategy being employed that it was effective or
did you see something at this point that was not working well and you wanted a change
as far as how you all would operate in the valley?
AD: At that point in time, no because I didn’t have hands-on. I wasn’t aware, I
wasn’t with if you will the operational aspects of the battalion. I was still with the
logistical aspects of the battalion. So as far as the operational aspects, I would attend the
briefings of course, listening to my, if you will, my job at that time or my profession at
that time were strictly in a logistical role, not troop leading.
RV: How long were you in this position, how long were you all there at the Co Bi
Than Tan Valley?
AD: We landed there the 19th of December, we left there on, I picked up my
company on the 3rd of January and we left the Co Bi on, I’m looking here now, 8th of
March. So the three to four week operation turned into be a much longer time.
RV: Yes sir, and why did that happen?
AD: Because of the initial attacks, they didn’t know how many enemy were in the
area. The India Company attacks and later when I took over the company we would make
continual contacts.
RV: Sir why don’t we take a break just for a moment.
AD: Sure.
RV: Ok sir, why don’t we continue. How did you get your company, what happened?

AD: A couple of things happened. First of all the company commander, whose name I will not mention, he later got killed with another battalion, had as I related before two frontal assaults so he said on his position where they fired the FPF, final protective fire, everybody in the world would open up, fire the mortars, fire the artillery and everything else and never had a body to show for it. He got amebic dysentery in that he was assigned a sweep one day and he went to the battalion commander and said, ‘Hey you know I can’t do this because I have amebic dysentery’. Well at the same time I had amebic dysentery but I did not make that known and so this was on the 3rd of January. So we went out on a search and destroy type operation. As a new company commander, I had no idea who my platoon commanders were nor anything else but it was just like, ‘Hey throw me in the gap,’ which I did.

RV: How did it go?

AD: It went well. I mean, we didn’t make any contact, thank goodness, but we went on out on the sweep and came on back in and at that point in time it was decided that the battalion commander, who I will get into later if we get into that type of a subject, decided that since the other company commander was too sick to continue that I should take over the company.

RV: Was this Mike Company?

AD: This is Mike Company, that is correct.

RV: How long did it take you to get to know your officers and everybody who would be working with you?

AD: Now, the first thing I did was call in my officers, obviously, and tell them they knew me from being the S-4 which is a totally different thing because really in a line company you know there is an S-4 but you don’t know who that individual is or you know his name but you don’t know anything about him so I called in my officers and I had one Lieutenant with former enlisted service and I had one Naval Academy graduate, I had another OCS graduate and my XO was another OCS guy.

RV: How would you rate the junior officers with whom you served?
AD: The ones that I picked up were the ones that I had; I would say that they were probably the finest Marines that I’ve ever served with as lieutenant.

RV: And you were captain at this point?

AD: I was a captain, that’s correct.

RV: Before we move into specific operations of what you all did, tell me about, I’m going to ask again about your leadership. Tell me about stepping into this role, being thrown right into the fire basically. And how did you react to this as a leader? Was it a natural progression for you or did it take a little bit more time to adjust?

AD: I would say that within a heartbeat my mindset had changed from logistical to troop and that I’m finally here, this is finally what I wanted to do and now how do I go about doing it. The company commander that I replaced was a very well-liked individual in that he was calling his lieutenants by their first name, of course they were always sir to him because a Marine captain, even though it’s only one pay grade above a 1st lieutenant, a Marine captain, particularly in combat, is God.

RV: Yes sir.

AD: And this aspect of it you know, I could not be him; I had to be me. I am not a glad hander, I am not a pat on the back except if you really do something well or something of that nature, but I liked to say, once again, professional, firm, and fair and this is what I brought with me and that’s who I was and that’s who I had to be. So as far as breaking in with the new, there were a couple of, one of my lieutenants specifically was not too happy that I had taken over the company and this was the former enlisted guy. He later got hit on the mid-January I guess it was and he was Medevac from country, but anyhow it’s just a sense that I had because I felt that I could read people.

RV: Ok, so he didn’t really say anything to you, it’s just something you could feel?

AD: He didn’t say anything it was just sort of you know when I would say this is what we are going to do or this is how we are going to do it, it wasn’t the way that we used to do it and of course my thing was why I don’t care how we use to do it, there are two ways to do it; the right way or my way, three ways actually; the right way, my way, and the wrong way and we are going to do things my way.

RV: How did that work out, the relationship?
AD: Initially it was a growing period, particularly the missions being assigned, the missions being assigned for search and destroy and if you remember what I told you about the weather at the time, continually raining. We would go online across a big rice paddy, of course the rice paddy water was up to at least mid shin level, we would get a few sniper rounds from a village or something of that nature and then we would shoot back and go in there and there would be a bunch of people there which was not a good idea to shoot back but there was some sniper somewhere shooting at us and we made very, we actually killed very few of the enemy probably during my first two weeks with the company and the biggest one, the biggest change in tactics, one time very early on we continually get shot at when we cross this one little bridge and I sent out making a routine, if you will, sending out a patrol over that bridge at the same time everyday and this particular day, the patrol at that time was normally a squad or at most a platoon, this time I took out the whole company and the bad guys made the mistake to try to ambush a squad or a platoon and we pretty well decimated them. We had 40 Mike Mike’s with us, the army weapons, and this is when that lieutenant got hit and by continuing on then, we killed quite a few of the enemy that day which is the first actual solid success that the company had ever seen as far as far as seeing dead bodies. There was that atmosphere type thing, but one thing I noticed that they would continually shoot first at us, we didn’t have the opportunity to shoot first at them. At this point in time I went to the S-3 who was a, one of the, in fact he actually ran the battalion. The battalion commander at that time, whose name I will not mention, during these alleged attacks that we had taken in early December I would go into the CP to see what was happening and he would be crouched in a hole with his helmet on, flak jacket on talking on the radio with his hand on top of his helmet. I could never forget that; how not to lead troops type things. Of course his background was motor transport but everybody having their ticket punched, which is another sore topic of mine, he got a command of a rifle battalion and thank god that he was eventually transferred, in fact he was transferred in mid-January so I then went to the S-3 in combination with the S-2 and found out what areas primarily the enemy was working in so what we would do, we would go out like the typical Marine unit, everyone had a case of C-rations on their back, double BA of ammo, water was not a problem because it was raining all the time and plus there were numerous streams and rivers in the
area and we would go out on a sweep, we would set in like we have a hill, which the
Marines would always pick the high ground, make like we were digging in, firing our
artillery fires so that the bad guy knew where we were and what we were doing and this
is if you want to attack us you know, here we are. Then after dark, depending upon the
moon rise we would move and we would get up and go in the dark probably at least six to
eight clicks where we would set up initially. We set up in a series of squad-sized
ambushes and Marine Rifle Squad and the other thing I did too was pull an extra machine
gun out of H&S Company so each one of my squad’s would have a machine gun and I
pulled out extra radio’s from H&S Company so each one of my squads then would have a
radio. We would set in, I would assign an area to my platoons, I recommend to them, or
the platoon commanders, recommend to them where the ambush spots along that area
would be and before daylight we would set in and we would not move. So instead of now
the enemy initiating the contacts, we initiated them. I mean they were the most stupid
people in the world in that they had never expected us to be there, never expected us to
do that, they’d come singing and laughing, literally, down the trail until they walk into
the ambush and we would hit them.

RV: I take it that this was a pretty successful tactic.
AD: Oh extremely successful.
RV: Did they learn to get wind to this; did they ever adapt and not do that?
AD: No, and the reason being is because the, couple of reasons. They never
adapted to it in that when we sprung an ambush on them, we would kill them all or the
ones that we didn’t kill, we wounded. This happened time and time again, we would
either get them as prisoners but no one ever escaped the ambush and then we would have
another thing, we would not bury the bodies of course, we would just leave them there,
but we would police up all the brass in the area, like you know we had never been there
and then we would move after that ambush had been sprung to another area and in fact
sometimes we moved out of our artillery fan and the bad guys would never expect
anybody to move out of an artillery fan. To compensate for that though I had a section of
81’s with me which were two guns and each one of my troops and in addition to their
case of C-rations, they would either carry one 81 round or two 60 rounds and that
included the company commander and also claymores. We were very heavy in
claymores. So the typical rifle company then and I would take somewhere with
attachments, I would probably at that point in time take anywhere from, oh gee whiz, two
twenty to about two thirty in the field with me. We were heavy and we were loaded for
bear.

RV: How often would you go out? How often would these missions take place?
AD: If you will, we established somewhat of a routine in this. About the only
routine I would established in that we would go out for a period of six days which would
last when our C-rations would run out and after six days it was my, initially we went out
for four, then we went out for seven but in my opinion at that time combat effectiveness
would suffer after about the sixth day because of the constant strain and everything like
that. So I established the routine where we would go out for six days, come back into the
area, we had C-rations to eat for forty-nine straight days when we were there. We never
had a mess hall set up, we never or anything like that. So that when we would come back
in, the normal quota was two beers or two sodas a day, my troops mostly drank soda, I
guess because of the age group, clean weapons. I tried to get at immersion foot squared
away which was a problem and of course the solution from higher headquarters was for
immersion foot is to keep your feet dry and that is very difficult to do as you’re sloshing
through rice paddies, when you’re sitting in the bottom of a hole with water in it, or
you’re laying in an ambush position getting rained upon all day. So what we would do in
this case was just try to get as much as possible, have the corpsman look over the feet,
take care of the strains, or any bruises, bumps, or anything else that we had along the way
and then we would have rifle inspection, discuss the next area route going out, and on the
third day we would go back out again.

RV: What would you do if you were wounded if you were out in that middle of
the six-day span?
AD: If we had our wounded, if in fact we did have wounded, and the amazing
thing was we had exactly one. It wasn’t till mid February that we got our first wounded
and that was a butt stroke to the back of the head. We had ambushed an NVA or VC
platoon coming down. There were nineteen of them and we got sixteen K and three
prisoners but what happened was one of my links we’d set up, we would have the
majority of the platoon set up along the trail. Around two to three hundred meters on each
side, on the enemy side if you will, because we’d have another platoon down the road mutually supporting them, maybe a click away or something like that, but where no obvious avenue of approach would be. So platoons would only have one LP and in this case when they sprang the ambush on the VC, they had a [two-man] rear guard, or two guys were lagging back. So as one guy went running by the LP which is about two hundred meters out, they stood up and shot him and the other guy came running by and instead of shooting the LP, they gave him a butt stroke to the back of the head which obviously is a wound, even though he had his helmet on, and they killed him also but the morale was just unbelievably high since we were not taking any casualties, we were doing what Marines were supposed to do, you know close with and destroy the enemy. The enemy never even saw us.

RV: Were these your tactics that you had kind of devised or was this something the battalion was doing in general?

AD: No, this is what I recommend to the S-3, I said this is the way we got to go about doing this. Now may I answer your question about our Medevacs?

RV: Yes.

AD: We did one time, during this period of time a platoon, one of my platoons in ambush position, not in a good ambush position, but at a cross roads ran into a NVA battalion and as the NVA battalion was coming on through, you know they were counting them off you know here is seventy or here is eighty, here go the machine guns, here go the mortars, and I said open up and by that time I had the other mutually supporting Platoon I had eventually got up there but we had 2-K’s and three wounded out of that action and the Medevac birds came in and took out our wounded but they would refuse to take our dead and this sort of upset me, to say the least, because now I had to have eight of my Marines carrying out two bodies. That changed because when I got back to the battalion I requested to see the battalion commander, made a complaint about the air wing, in fact, that’s not the first one, we will get into that one later, that they didn’t come back to take out the dead and I lost eight effective Marines. To make a short story long the commanding general got a hold of that and told the air wing that they will now, they will continue, and they will take up dead bodies. I think I probably rambled off that subject didn’t I?
RV: Well no, that’s fine. That’s exactly what I wanted for you to talk about. Tell me; let me ask a couple of general questions. How were you in combat? When you first experienced it, was it different from what you imagined?

AD: My anticipation of combat, I thought, you know, that we would be shooting at them, they would be shooting at us, but that did happen. I mean there are different types of my definition of being shot at. You can be shot at with mortars, artillery, or their area fire weapons, and if you get hit with them, it’s bad luck. The other way to get shot at is a personal shooting, the small arms fire. Now there are different types of getting shot at with small arms fire, somebody else could be getting shot at with small arms fire which you see them getting hit over there. The other type, which is extremely personable is when they are shooting at you and they know they are shooting at you because you got little things going digging up around you, you can see, actually see the wink of the weapon, you could hear the rounds going by. So when you say getting shot at in combat, my definition of that would be when somebody personally shot at me and in that case what I, I don’t know whether it was just my eyesight, whether experience, or whatever, but I could normally pick up the flash of the weapon shooting at me or near me, and I would deliver fire and I’m a very good rifle shot, and I never carried a .45 simply because I wanted to look exactly like one of my troops, I always carried a rifle and Marine company commanders are not supposed to shoot. However, that’s one of the other rules that I broke, in fact I did shoot.

RV: Did you shoot most all the time or was it just sporadically?

AD: No, I would primarily shoot if someone was shooting directly at me or if I had a target that no one else was taking under fire, but no I did not got up and play like rifle men. My main concern first was to get the supporting arms in on the enemy and what we would call ‘Million Dollar Days’ or I would call them. And if one sniper would shoot at me I would call the world in on him, I would fire artillery, I would get fixed wing air, I mean I would make his life miserable and you know I don’t care, you know one round at one of my troops is, that’s one too many.

RV: Tell me about life in the field. First of all, you personally, tell me about your uniform. What was on it? What did you carry?
AD: I carried the same thing that all my troops carried, with the exception of the machine gunners and the mortar people, obviously. I had a flak jacket, helmet, the case of C-rations, and on the back, I would have my map, flashlight, matches for heating tabs, even though they were in the C-rations but I normally kept one and you always have your spoon with you, the spoon that you ate your food with and that was not very hygienic. As far as camouflaging, wouldn’t do much of that but I would just the basic look like any other Marine there.

RV: What kind of weapon, you said you did not carry a .45 but you carried...

AD: I carried a rifle. We went from the M-14 to the M-16.

RV: Did you have problems with the initial M-16 jamming?

AD: Oh yes! That was later, that’s when we were at Khe Sanh when we got the M-16’s.

RV: Did you have a favorite weapon?

AD: I liked the M-14 much better than the 16. Another thing we used to do was called, if in fact we had to go out, when we did go out there acting like the typical Marine company we would recon by fire. By that I mean we would get up there and get on line you know and we are going towards the hill and we would have a mad moment where everybody shot a couple of rounds. Another thing we would do with the M-14, you could do it, with the CS grenades, we would shoot off CS grenades out to our front, after checking the wind of course, of tear gas to see if any of the bad guys were out there waiting to ambush us or anything of this nature. So during the daylight we would make as much noise as possible so they knew that we were in that area so they didn’t have to worry about the other area when we moved at night.

RV: Was there any weapon that you wished you had that you did not have?

AD: As far as a weapon, no, as far as a device, yes. The night vision goggles would have been a godsend. We very rarely made contact at night and the myth perhaps, at least I considered a myth, is that the night belonged to the enemy and that was not my experience at all. Any contact particularly we were moving, we twice ran into bad guys but that was all and we never got hit at night when we were out in the field in this type of am environment where they didn’t know where we were simply because they didn’t know where we were and they couldn’t plan to hit us. Did they hit that area or did they
recon that area when we weren’t there I don’t know, but that is one of the biggest myths I think that I know of, that the night belonged to the enemy.

RV: What was the most feared weapon do you think that your men had, that the VC or the NVA had?

AD: That they had? I would say we’ve got on different types of fears now, psychologically fearing arty and mortars. Simply because my experience with that you would just be getting pounded and you couldn’t shoot back. In fact, one time on my second tour but we will get into that later, I made a little statement there but that was the psychologically that was… that and booby traps. Booby traps were also a big psychological weapon that the enemy employed. We found in, initially when we were on our sweep operations when I first took over the company, we probably tripped fifteen to twenty booby traps.

RV: Wow. Can you describe them? What were they like?

AD: Oh well, one I saw that we didn’t trip was a 500 pound bomb that blew up an ONTOS and killed a squad of Marines on top. Other ones were 80 [60], 82 mortar shells, hand grenades, plastic explosives, pungi pits, you know you name it, artillery shells that didn’t go off, 155 or 105, just a broad spectrum of whatever the enemy could get or the VC in this area which are totally different now then an NVA, whatever they could get. One time had Recon team attached to me that hit a claymore, that’s the, you name it as far as booby traps go and I either saw it or saw it explode.

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

AD: Once.

RV: Really, what was that like?

AD: The K-9 units, we had a recon team get attached to us and this is one of those things again, this is while we were down in Phu Bai and our tactics changed somewhat in the Phu Bai area in that the VC were if anything perhaps a little bit smarter but the day before we were to go out on one of these typical things we went out on, they would assign me a recon platoon with a K-9 unit and so the lieutenant came to me and said, ‘What do you want me to do,’ and I said, ‘Well what can you do, because I am not going to assign you any missions that you know are beyond your capability [are not capable].’ So he told me what he could do and I said, ‘Ok this is what we are going to do, go do
your thing, if you need support give a call,’ and they tripped, one of the troops tripped a
claymore, they were on a trail unfortunately, killed a dog and I think killed one of them
and two wounded.
RV: Let’s talk about the enemy. In general, what were your impressions of the
Viet Cong and your general impressions of the NVA?
AD: The Viet Cong were not very professional. The Viet Cong were not as well
trained, in indoctrination, yes, all of them obviously had to be the same level of
indoctrination just by virtue of the war that they were fighting way back in the mountains
in the primitive conditions that they lived in. The support of the NVA, the logistical
support was not really good. Their medics, although we did find a couple of hospitals,
one hospital in particular when we were in the Phu Bai area and nurses, they did have
some female nurses and I am sure they had corpsmen with them but we never got to see
them because as I said when we would spring one of these ambushes, we would kill them
all or wound them or take a prisoner. So the VC were, in my opinion, not as professional
simply because logistically, they were not able to be supported, they didn’t have radios
with them. The NVA battalion were moving through did but the VC per se were second
teamers. The NVA conversely were first teamers, it’s almost like they read the same
books as we did as far infantry assaults. One particular time in September, when the
battalion got hit, we got hit with mortars, artillery, rockets, followed by a frontal assault I
mean it’s just right out of the text book, across open ground, rice paddies, and it’s the first
time that I have ever seen that, up to that point.
RV: What were their common tactics of the two groups?
AD: Common tactics of the two groups, normally the VC, my experience, would
be ambush type thing. Picking on a soft target, when I say a soft target either a probe or
an outpost somewhere that wasn’t well defended, in something of that nature. The NVA
would have a much larger force involved while the VC, I think the biggest VC force we
ever ran into was a platoon reinforced while the NVA we ran into the regiments, a lot
closer since we were up there the DMZ.
RV: Did you ever run into any foreign troops, Chinese, Pathet Lao?
AD: There were rumors obviously, you know, when one of the big you know
there was a larger than normal Vietnamese guy killed, in fact we had to take one one time
back, carried him back to the battalion CP but yes it never in my knowledge, I was never
told that any…I’ve heard the rumors that they had Chinese advisors etc. etc. I know they
had the Russian advisors in the north, and I never ran into any one like that.

RV: Ok, tell me about when you would capture the enemy. How would you treat
them, what would you do with them etc.?

AD: Normally, generally, and almost always they were wounded so the first thing
we would do is have the corpsman take care of them. Next thing I would do is give them
a cigarette if they smoked or you know because they were normally not very happy in a
sense that they were wounded and also in the sense that now what are we going to do
with them and then I’d call my Vietnamese interpreter. I had an individual in the
company who went through language school who could speak Vietnamese so then we’d
start interrogating them and inevitably they would tell us everything we wanted to know,
even their mother’s maiden name.

RV: Really?

AD: Oh yes there was no Code of Conduct, anything of that nature. In fact, I
found that even with the NVA [POW’s].

RV: Really?

AD: Yeah, when we captured the NVA, they would be, the bad thing about that
even though we were capturing them, even though they would be in our AO, my advisor,
my language speaker would speak to them, we never heard at least at my level what
information they gave to the higher ups. In other words, ‘Hey you know ok where is your
unit located?’ ‘Well we’re located near Mountain Humpy de Squat Newy Baho,’ for
instance, ‘Ok how big are they,’ they would say all that. ‘How many people were with
you,’ ‘Oh you got them all, they’re all here,’ you know, ‘What was your rank,’ etc. etc.
All the military information, you know this was a short period of time because then we
would report that we had a prisoner and this is when we would fly out the Medevac Birds
and take away the wounded NVA [equipment] and also the prisoner who was also
wounded, but as far as feedback form that source, at my level, I never, never received any
back.

RV: And I imagine, you think that was a major problem.
AD: I think that was an extremely major problem, since I was operating in that area and even though they were just passing through, somebody in that area helped them, maybe the Phoenix program got them, maybe somebody else did but hey I am there on the ground and I’m not that far away from the people who had helped them or where they were so why don’t you just send me?

RV: Right. Did you have enough supplies in the field? Were you ever short?

AD: Enough, I don’t think you ever had enough, the most, well when you were talking about it before about what you would take to the field; you always had a pair of socks with you particularly during the rainy season there. The most thrilling thing going was to go ahead and put on a dry set of socks, oh I mean that was just like having, of course ten minutes later you’re wet again but yeah that was the best thing going particularly with the immersion foot causalities we had, and we had quite a few of those. Supplies, we would go out with two meals a day and I felt that was more than enough even though because we were not moving during that period of time, we would just be sitting in an ambush. Water was no problem as I said; we had the streams and everything else through there. Batteries, radios, no, we never had any want for any supplies that I feel that in a combat. Maybe in rear, in the rear area where I would have liked to seen showers for the troops, I would have liked to seen, we had a warming tent, that’s what you want to call it because you go in two squads at a time, the troops would get warm, come back out, run into the rain an they would get cold again. Creature comforts, yes, we had little if any creature comforts. Supplies to fight a war, no problem.

RV: Let’s move on in your tour, I have some more general questions that you can answer specific to these areas but also in general but after you left, you said in March ’67, you left Co Bi Than Tan Valley, where did you all go?

AD: We were then assigned down to, and I am looking at my thing here, from nine March till the second of June we’re in Phu Bai.

RV: What did you do there in Phu Bai?

AD: Phu Bai we did basically the same thing. We relieved the battalion down there who had not had a contact, an enemy contact down there the whole time they were there and that seemed a little bit strange to me, why would they do that. So we started doing the same thing we did up at the Co Bi, go out during the day, set up, and then move
at night and within the first week, I think we had three. So we did basically the same type
of things only in different areas. I would go to the S-2 and find out where enemy activity
was like a you know VC platoon reported kidnapping people from this ville, shots fired
along Highway 1 at this location, so there was obvious activity of enemy in that area so
we would, in this case though instead of walking out because of the large AO, area of
operation, sometimes we would truck out, get off the trucks, pull up the typical things,
sweep through, make a lot of noise, pretend we were setting in for the night and then
move, the same general tactics.

RV: And they worked well there as well?

AD: They worked well, but not as well as because there weren’t, in my opinion,
as many of the bad guys there as there were up in the Co Bi Than Tan initially when we
got in there and another thing about the Co Bi, the one thing I did hear later that there was
a VC platoon about two clicks to the north in a little village up there that when we left
there the remaining two surrendered.

RV: Really?

AD: Yes, so we had pretty well wiped out that platoon and once again my
company was about the only one that did things in this matter.

RV: How would you rate the communication that you had, first amongst your
company and then from the company going up, particularly with yourself and your
superiors?

AD: Communication in that radio, communication in that ability to speak, what
kind?

RV: All of that.

AD: Radio communication was always good. I had grown up when we had the
walkie-talkie type radios in my earlier Marine Corps. The PRC-25 was one of the best
things in the world as far as communications. I mean I could talk almost to God with that
thing, when I had ALO, Air Liaison Officers with me, you know they could speak to the
world also over their nets. My artillery people could speak, I mean it was just
phenomenal, in areas where they could not speak they would put in radio relay sites, so
the communications, radio communications, were outstanding. Never had any problem
with that at all. Personal communications, that depended upon, to me, the rapport that you
had with the individual, as far as higher up. Going downward I had no problem, obviously. Going up I didn’t have a problem, in that the S-3 at this time, a guy by the name of [Jim] Woodring was a major who would later take over a marine battalion in county, in fact, at one time six of nine battalions in county were commanded by majors instead of lieutenant colonels because of their expertise in combat. This guy was just phenomenal, if there was ever a mentor that he was my mentor. The battalion commander, the initial one was a downright coward, the second one was a really great individual and the third one fit in, the third one that we got was a coward so I would tend not to speak to them, I would find someone and by that time of course I had been well established because I had had the rifle company for such a long time. Periodically we would get visits from the generals who came in and if I happened to be in from the field that they would call me in and say what have you been doing, how you been doing this, this, and that and it was very easy talking to them. The regimental commanders which were above battalion, I don’t, I might have seen them, I knew who they were but I never had an occasion to talk to them. About the only time that I would get a radio message every once in a while, for instance one time in Khe Sanh we had discovered a unused or unoccupied bunker complex and there were some uniforms in there so I reported back to the battalion you know that we have NVA uniforms here and you know we found rice da da dada so about five minutes later the word would come back, regiment wants to know, ‘How do you know they are NVA uniforms?’ So that was easy, I call back, I had my radio operator, [say we] found that they have Hanoi laundry marks in them. I mean it was just, you know, there were certain people that if I could get to the right person I could get it done, the S-3 watch office sometime is a lieutenant. After the fact I would go back and we would have little counseling sessions when I would say something, this is what I mean, you know, so on and so forth and you will report my words exactly not put it in your own vernacular but generally communications, like I say, at the battalion level, at the company level, great.

RV: We talked about communication and relationships within your own company a little bit, I would like you to expand on that a little bit. Did you ever hear any thing about fragging while you were there?

AD: No.
RV: Ok, that was a non-issue?

AD: That was a non-issue, I mean that was a non-issue (laughter) very rarely, well first of all, very rarely were we in the rear. Fragging, it seemed to me, if I did hear about it, it happened later, probably, boy, ’68, ’69 era when I wasn’t there. But I never heard of any fragging in the time I was there.

RV: Did you ever sense any tension in between those of you who were out in the field most of the time or tension between those who were back in the rear most of the time?

AD: Tension, no, not necessarily. The people, my impression of course this might be me talking too, you know there was always a palace guard around wherever the battalion was set up and the palace guard I would call one of them for the rifle companies, you know there was perhaps not necessarily tension but it was espirit. While we were always out in the field doing things you know they were sitting back there doing what, I don’t know, justifying their existence, protecting the battalion CP, whatever. So there was sort of an elitism if you will within the company because they knew they were good but as far as tension, fights, anything of that nature, no.

RV: Andy, how would you rate the intelligence that you received throughout your first tour?

AD: Intelligence that I received was developed mostly but I have to put a caveat on that. Ok, mostly it was internal intelligence from the battalion S-2 and that’s where I would go for my intelligence. They obviously had the radio intercept people there that had the super secrets, things that I would get a report in the field sometimes that there was a NVA or a VC unit located at, and then we would go into the coding and everything else. When I work out these codes that’s where I was and my normal comment at that time was well thank you very much, we’re shaking hands with him now, would you like to speak to him because what the radio intercept people were doing was picking up our radio signals as opposed to the NVA or VC. The intelligence that we gained, I was unhappy but like I said before about when we would capture a prisoner, the intelligence did not come back down, the intelligence went up and then in my opinion it flew away and this one specific battle in September, after action report on that battle said that regiment knew that there were a bunch of bad guys in that area yet the only thing I was
ever told was from the company commander that I relieved that they hadn’t had a contact in two weeks. How I would rate intelligence, from my operating level on the ground. Did I have a need to know? Damn right I had a need to know, I was there. Was I told, no. Was someone told, I don’t know. If someone was told I would assume it would be either the battalion commander or the two and I don’t think the battalion commander would ever knowingly let his troops walk into something that big, that large, and that lethal without some idea of what was there.

RV: How much did that interfere with your operations and how much do you think it effected overall operations for the military there?

AD: I can only speak from my level, at the company level, and perhaps to the battalion level. It is very disconcerting to find out that after the fact that somebody knew that there were a bunch of guys there and yet nobody told you and you lose a bunch of your Marines and yes, you are always combat ready, yes you are always have all your fire plans in and you everything else, but still though it’s always disconcerting not to know that somebody knew that there are bad guys right there all around you and nobody ever told you. How did it effect, I would say the effect that it would have would probably increased causalities on the Marine side.

RV: Did you let your Marines know that you weren’t being told certain things after the fact?

AD: No, because I didn’t, what I am saying after the fact is in some specific cases I was already gone from country and books then came out about it, that’s what I am referring about after the fact. I am not talking about immediately after a major contact for instance; saying hey you know they knew about it.

RV: I am thinking about maybe a week or two or three weeks later you found out some information, did you share it with your junior officers, and your other Marines?

AD: I never particularly after this last thing, my last official duty, if you will, in the tour, no I wasn’t there.

RV: So you stayed March to June in and around Phu Bai and that area performing basic still search and destroy missions your style.

AD: My style, not search and destroy because I hate that word. Because they would destroy you while you were searching for them.
RV: How would you term your type of tactics then, what would you call them?
AD: Find and kill.
RV: (Laughter) Ok. After Phu Bai where did Mike Company and the battalion move to?
AD: We moved then up to Khe Sanh which initially we were supposed to go up by road convoy, we left there on the, let’s see, notes say 2nd for June. The convoy got stopped up by the rock pile on the 3rd of June because the NVA had blown the road or blown a culvert in the road so we could not be trucked in so we stayed the night of the 3rd, the day and night of the 3rd there and on the 4th of June then they lifted the Mike Company up to Khe Sanh.
RV: And were you at Khe Sanh the rest of that tour?
AD: No, we were from Khe Sanh from the 4th of June to the 6th of September.
RV: Let’s talk about Khe Sanh then. What were your first impressions of the base?
AD: ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’ (Laughter) That was my first impression.
RV: Ok, can you explain that?
AD: We were down in the low ground on either side of us there were just peaks and you could almost feel the bad guys looking at you and also the Khe Sanh by that time their reputation of you know the early Khe Sanh battles in May-June; 881, 861, 634 which is not mentioned too much, 1019, the radio tower, the radio relay spot, and that was it.
RV: Were you stationed at the base or did Mike Company go to one of the hills?
AD: Oh no, we did the same thing only we did it a little bit differently here.
Instead of moving out and making a lot of noise, the enemy threat being that close to the DMZ, I felt that I could no longer put out platoon size ambushes, in that the size or the potential size of the enemy forces in that area were such that I could no longer do that and so I had to go out heavier. Initially we didn’t do that, the new battalion commander, we went on our first battalion, second battalion sized operation, by that I mean we had three, four of the rifle companies went out to this area that supposedly had good intelligence, you know a whole bunch of bad guys in the area and we never had a shot fired in anger. After that one, we went out, that was only the second battalion-sized operation that the
battalion at that point in time had ever been on. Mostly, it was company platoon sized. From that then, we were assigned a section of the perimeter which became old rather quickly so we moved out again only this time when we moved out, I would go out and set up like the typical Marine company because I didn’t want to take chance walking in night, walking in something bad

RV: How often did you take out these missions?

AD: We would go with the same routine again. Two days in, six days out, as the strange part in Khe Sanh, in the whole time we were there we made contact exactly during this period of time from, let me look again here, from 4 June to 6 September, we had four contacts.

RV: Really?

AD: Exactly four contacts.

RV: That’s incredible.

AD: That is incredible.

RV: And knowing now what we know about how many of the enemy were in the area. Why do you think that was so infrequent, the contact?

AD: Quite frankly, I don’t think at that period in time they had buildup, remember now we’re talking September. The first contact we had, we ambushed a platoon of the bad guys. Second contact we had, it’s an abbreviated contact, we got a couple of sniper rounds and I call that a contact. The third contact we had were a couple more sniper rounds, never ran into a booby trap there, and the fourth one was a rather large one. We ran into a platoon, probably reinforced with 51 cals, but outside of that those were the only four contacts we had there and we moved around that area. I mean we moved just about everywhere and one of the other things we did there, right before we left there was a, going to intelligence again, a recon team kept getting shot out of an area. Every time they would land in this area, they would just run into a world of bad guys who would shoot them out of the area, so I figured, ‘Hey, there must be some bad guys there,’ so what we did then, we walked. It was a total of about, oh it had to be ten, probably at least twenty clicks. We would move at night, stop during the day, move at night, stop during the day until eventually we would get into, we got into this position where, and then we made a fake helicopter insert. In other words, pull in the normal thing, we had artillery
shoot into the zone. The air wing was not too happy about this but they made a fake
insertion where they landed on the ground but instead of a recon team, we did have a few
Marines get off the bird, but the bad guys could see just a couple. My company was set
up all around this area, hidden in the woods, make a short story long, in that one no
sooner did they leave that I was ordered to go down to the road because this has
happened on the 5th of September, we were supposed to move over to Con Thien.
RV: Describe Khe Sanh Base to me.
AD: Khe Sanh Base was a sort of a slack period of time when I was there. The red
dirt, that’s, I think, one thing that you can always think you think of Khe Sanh, you think
of red, when you think of Khe Sanh you think of the surrounding mountains around you.
It was a gorgeous spot, a beautiful spot, of course we never got into the ville, or never
saw anything like that but it was a social event or so to speak, in that there wasn’t that
much contact and I wouldn’t say that we got loose or anything like that because we were
continually you know, always ready when we went out. By this period of time, it was a
training, you know we just got the M-16’s in too, so we trained with those things, you
know to get the zero in, it was sort of a rehab or a refit station and that was Khe Sanh
Combat Base. I mean they had a Officer’s Club there, my god a real Officer’s Club and
you could go down there and get two beers. The troops would get you know their two
beers and showers; I mean it was just like first team living, when we were there.
RV: Right, later.
AD: Yeah, well we’re not going to go there. (laughter)
RV: Right.
AD: I wasn’t there later.
RV: Right. Thinking back, you know, about your time there and then versus the
siege time, what do you think about the two comparisons between the two? Can you
imagine Khe Sanh in that situation?
AD: I can imagine Khe Sanh in that situation, I cannot imagine the tactics that
were used and I read quite a bit, I read for the fact there about the tactics, you know,
obody allowed out more then 200 meters from the perimeter. I can understand what
happened to Dying Delta out there, you know, when they ambushed them, that whole
thing but the tactics in my opinion, they were just totally off the, they were not Marine
tactics. Marines are not a defense force.

RV: A general question here, did you ever employ snipers with Mike Company?
AD: Yes.
RV: Can you describe it? Go ahead.
AD: Ok, we had snipers with us in the Co Bi, we had snipers with us in, one time
in Khe Sanh and where the snipers made their contact of course, since we only had the
four, we never had them there, or they were never employed, but in the Co Bi area right
after we had ambushed a platoon of the bad guys, there were three people running across
including one women who the snipers took them down. Range I would say, probably
about 700 meters, running through an open rice paddy, that was the only time we have
ever had snipers that actually employed their trade with us.

RV: After your three months at Khe Sanh running these operations, where did you
go?
AD: Then we went over to Con Thien.
RV: Was this a battalion move?
AD: This was, there was two companies of the battalion that were already gone
over there; Mike Company and India Company went over there. Lima Company was on a
roughrider mission at the time so three of the four companies moved over there with one
company already being there and that’s when they pulled me off of that fake insert thing,
which I was unhappy about, spending almost three days getting in position to do this
thing and then all of a sudden they pull me out before I have a chance to shoot a shot.

RV: What happened? Why did that happen?
AD: Why? Because the battalion had received orders to go to Con Thien and later
I found out, not earlier, that there was a threat coming down, at this time Con Thien was
taking quite a bit of artillery fire and there was a threat coming down where they were
going to interdict the supply or the main supply route from Cam Lo up to Con Thien to
cut off supplies there then to assault the base or so intelligence said.

RV: What kind of operations did you run in and around Con Thien?
AD: I would like to back up slightly.
RV: Sure.
AD: On the way up there we ran into Major Woodring, who used to be our battalion S-3 and he came out to the road to meet us and he had been in that area almost two months and this was obviously the first time we were ever there and, ‘How you doing Major,’ ‘Fine,’ and one of the words that I will never forget that he said is, ‘If you go anywhere up here, go with your whole battalion, never go with less, if you have to don’t go with less than a company but if you really want to go, go with the whole battalion’ and we got up and we made a transition of lines up near a place called the Church Yard where company, I believe they were from 2-4 but I’m not quite sure, 2-9, a company from 2-9. I talked to the Company Commander, they hadn’t seen anything in two weeks, hadn’t made a contact in a month, the area’s you know quiet, nothing is happening, the whole nine yards. So at this point in time 3rd Battalion, 26 Marines was assigned at AO, area of operation, I would say roughly five clicks square, which is not a big area for a battalion.

RV: No.

AD: Initially what I was told that the reason why we were there was to go ahead, and also all the company commanders, we were going to go ahead and relieve the battalion that was currently defending Con Thien. We were going to move in there and prepare positions to defend Con Thien. In the interim, though, just go on out and you know this is your AO. Well, second day there, India Company, which was the 7th of September, India Company and Mike Company were assigned patrol routes, with company minus, in other words only two platoons would go out. I was very hesitant to do that, when I went out I went out with my mortars. I had preplanned artillery all the way along the way and I just shot up everything I could everywhere, moving on up. India Company moved on out and fell into a world of trouble. The company commander got hit, I think somewhere around, oh I then I don’t know, I have the exact numbers somewhere because there is a book out about it, but they just got really bad news hit and we came back in from our patrol the same time India Company had reported that they were in heavy contact so I recommended to the S-3 because at this point in time battalion commander, the old 2nd battalion commander had been rotated and we got a new battalion commander who I won’t go into, and so I talked to the three who used to be one of the company commanders, and got frocked up as a senior captain and said, ‘Hey, we’re ready
to go’ and instead he sent out another company who also stepped into a world of harm.
Make a short story long we received, we being Mike, I received an assault that day, I lost
one of my better platoon commanders who was KIA, I had I think it was eight or nine
wounded and three K’s, but we repulsed the assault and we also picked up a prisoner, but
this was strictly conventional warfare. From the 7th of September the battalion moved out
on the 8th to go to another location but Mike Company stayed there, the reason why Mike
Company stayed there is when the helicopter came in to lift out, our wounded were
already gone, but when they came in to lift out the POW, when the bird was taking off,
the rotors hit a tree and fell back down to the ground and Mike Company was then given
a dubious distinction of securing the landing zone until a bird could come in to take out
that helicopter. I was not too happy about this because while the rest of the battalion is
going away, I am sitting out there like a sore thumb. We had, contrary to orders, contrary
to proven procedures set up a couple of booby traps outside of our old position that
started going off and I called in the world on that old position including every single
round of my 60 mortar HE and it got to the point where I was firing illumination rounds,
trying to, in my opinion, because there was a bunch of the bad guys coming. Eventually
the bird got picked out in late afternoon and we rejoined the battalion on the spot where
we were immediately started getting artillery fire. Now there is a sense that you have
when you are in combat that you know which direction fires are coming from,
particularly artillery mortars and it was my contention at this time that they were coming
from Camp Carroll and no one else would believe this, I reported the battalion and said
‘Hey, we are getting friendly artillery fire now the bad guys aren’t there, I know where
the bad guys are; the bad guys are over there because they had shot at us before,’ but not
at Camp Carroll. To make a short story long it was Camp Carroll shooting at us. Lima
Company had one K and three wounded and no people in my company, thank god, got
killed, but that fire eventually stopped.
RV: How common was that friendly fire?
AD: Very, very uncommon. You know that was the first time to do it that we had
ever got hit, first time with artillery or mortars. Twice with air over at Khe Sanh. One
time Dash 2 dropped a 500 pound bomb and the second guy, after they had already come
over, Dash 1, the first guy in the flight, Dash 2, the second guy, had already bombed this
target that we wanted, both had been in there once, the second time around the first guy put his bomb on target, second guy dropped early and one of our platoon commanders [sergeants] got wounded which once again made me a little bit unhappy and irate.

RV: How could you complain up a line? Were you able to?

AD: Oh yes, my first complaint went to the, we were in radio contact with the birds in that I had my ALO with me and I got on the line and I said something to the effect of, ‘I would like now to give your bomb damage assessment to Dash 2, you have just dropped a bomb on my positions and if I ever see you I will do harm to your body,’ or not quite those words but you can imagine. The next thing I did, I called up battalion and complained to them about getting that, and my understanding is that this was not, my understanding is that it went up the chain of command, came back down and the guy got a letter of reprimand. The other time this happened with air, it wasn’t necessarily a short round but they dropped me in the wrong zone, they had the gun ships down in the Co Bi area had worked over a VC company and so I happened to be back in, getting ready to go out the next day so they put me out that day instead the next day, dropped me in three different landing zones instead of the one so I was never able to get my company together until after dark to go figure out what happened. In that case the general came in, I personally briefed the general, and the air wing story was that they were receiving; it was a hot zone. My story was that there was not a shot fired in anger.

RV: Why the discrepancy?

AD: I think that my opinion of Marine aviators, particularly of a senior rank, is that they were worried about getting home. I had experience with both Marine and Navy, correction, Marine and Army birds; some of the Marine helicopter pilots were outstanding individuals. Other ones would I don’t choose to go there. The support that I received from the US Army, primarily in the second tour, was just unbelievable, they would land in a hot zone, they would pick up, they would go right through a whole wall of fire to come in after me, but we’ll get into that maybe second tour.

RV: Were you ever wounded on this first tour?

AD: Yeah, I got hit with shrapnel in the leg and I got hit with shrapnel in the Achilles tendon and I thought, that happened on the 10th of September, well the first time was 7th of September, second time was 10th of September and I was afraid to look at my
foot (laughter) so I turned to my radio operator, we’re laying down at the time and I said, ‘Is my foot still there?’ because I will tell you, it hurt.

RV: Did it sever your Achilles?

AD: No, it did not sever; there was just one little point that went in there, one little plunker I still have.

RV: Really?

AD: One little piece of shrapnel. Of course my helmet, my pack, and my air mattress particularly got holed and I was sort of unhappy about that because I always liked to have an air mattress with me, which is another thing I carried with me in the field, always an air mattress.

RV: Now you were getting short, were you aware of the date you would be leaving or was it something that was left up to the corps to tell you?

AD: I knew that I would be there thirteen months and I had gotten in country on the 26th of August I think it was so I knew that I would be out of there by the 26th of September which was my thirteen-month tour or thereabouts and yeah, I was getting short, in fact the original company that I picked up, we had still twelve Marines left of the original company that came over from Vietnam, which is another bone of contention.

RV: Yes, I imagine.

AD: The bone of contention was once when we were down in Phu Bai they took roughly one third of my company and spread loaded them out to other units. In other words I would get Marines from 1-9, 326 Marines would go to 2-4, 1-9, or whatever so not everyone would have the same rotation tour date. Normal attrition took care of that and what I lost during Phu Bai was once again I had to retrain my whole company because that’s another subject, a sore subject.

RV: Unit cohesiveness I guess goes out the window to a point.

AD: There you go, in piecemeal replacement and by the time you know who is this guy, you know and what does he do, and by the time you know him, it takes a while until you trust him. Well, the first time you both get shot at together so that’s neither here nor there. We’re still back in September, but I don’t know, I did not know an actual day.

RV: Did you change your habits any at all knowing that you were going home probably in a month or around that date?
AD: You know quite frankly when this thing in September happened I didn’t think I was going to go home at all.
RV: Really. You thought you were going to be killed?
AD: Oh yeah.
RV: It was that bad there?
AD: Oh yeah.
RV: How long did the contact last, was it constant or was it…
AD: It started on the 10th of September it started with a frontal assault against India Company across an open rice paddy by at least a battalion of the NVA and they didn’t see me or my company and my company just started mowing them down and…
RV: Were you on their flank?
AD: Yes, we were providing flank security; this is going to be another walk in the sun. India Company who had just been replaced, the company commander in the company had just been replaced, he had been wounded on the 7th so the new company commander came in, a guy by the name of Matt Caulfield, who later retired as major general, they decided that they were going to give him a little bit of experience operating with his company and this would be a great day to do it because we were only going to move three thousand meters but he could get his feet sort of wet because this was going to be a walk in the sun because there were no bad guys there. Well he started on out and by the time his first Platoon got there they were taking 51-cal fire and a heavy volume of mortars and also AK-47’s and he reported back that he had a platoon in front of him. Well that 51-cal, mortars, and volume of AK; there is not a platoon, so basically they launched an attack on his flank but my company was out there on the flank anyhow so I coming across rice paddy’s so we started mowing them down. So the bad guys then decided that it was good time, instead of going against India Company, go against the guys that were hurting them so then I got a frontal assault and my 2nd platoon commander was killed, my 3rd platoon commander, who was already dead, I pulled in my XO, he got wounded. All my platoon sergeants were dead, my 1st platoon commander reported that he was killed, later that came to be not true but that time it was reported that all my platoon commanders, all my platoon sergeants were dead and I came out with I think 114 people.
RV: Wow. Andy, can you describe for people who will be listening to this and reading this in the future, what an NVA frontal assault looks like and feels like?

AD: Boy, boy. When you first see it, you can’t believe it. I mean it’s there is nothing there and the next second you move and in fact I think the best description I heard of this is one of my troops saying something like, ‘Oh shit, the whole mountain just moved.’ This is on the other side now of the rice paddy and this was right and it literally looked liked the whole side of that hill side, it was low scrub brush I’d say oh not higher then four to five feet, if that high, probably more like waist high. I never saw them there and of course they didn’t see me there because I had been there quite a while but they did see the movement from India Company, as India Company is moving up. After the initial shock, so to speak, and that’s when started moving people around to get them in a good firing position particularly my machine guns and M-79’s and my mortars were back at position. I had my artillery guy started calling in fire and I mean it was just a mass confusion type thing. As long as they were going at India Company it was like a shooting gallery, they were not, it wasn’t people out there, they were targets. They had no personality, they were just targets. When they turned and started coming towards me then and my platoons that’s when it really became personal. The 2nd platoon was in front of me, which was the headquarters group, 3rd platoon was out to my left, 1st platoon was to my right so we were more or less in a company echelon right formation. When they came into us it was just mass chaos, confusion, I’ve heard the term also, and it’s not an original one, the fog of war. During this period of time too we were taking heavy incoming from mortars, they had shifted fires from India Company over to Mike. We got hit with rockets, we had a tank with us and it had broken down so if there was ever aiming stake it was the tank and the tank broken down [was an aiming stake] did not fire a round in anger while the bad guys were coming up.

RV: Did it get hand-to-hand?

AD: Not that I saw hand-to-hand. I think, you know I never knew what fear was before until this time and it was the first time in my entire combat tour that I knew actually what fear was and fear to me was it was almost like I was frozen. When I got hit for instance you know I just. ‘How in the hell did that happen,’ words going through my mind and then, ‘Please God get me out of this thing,’ and then I started receiving the
hysterical radio voices over the radio and so I didn’t know it was just almost something like a cloud that came over that it wasn’t me, it was somebody else and I think it was [an out of body experience] probably trainee. Anyhow on that one that I regained my sense of humor I knew what fear was, God knows I knew what fear was and I started functioning again in the manner, which I thought was appropriate.

RV: How did you deal with the fear, I guess did you kind of sweep it away, let it take its hold on you, let it go away and then did you reflect on it later or did it stay with you and you functioned in spite of it?

AD: I think after the initial fear came in I didn’t have, I was too busy doing other things to reflect on you know well I knew I was going to die.

RV: Were you conscious of that thought?

AD: Yes.

RV: Were you surprised later that you had not been killed?

AD: Very much so because from that point on I did a number of stupid things.

RV: What do you mean?

AD: Well like um exposing myself to the bad guys, when some of Marines were pinned down I went out and got them. Shot a bunch of bad people, just things like that. It was almost like a reaction type thing and I never really thought about it until that point much later which I will go into. It was just almost like a calm came over me.

RV: And this is all in your last forty-five days?

AD: This is in my last, actually, my last twenty days.

RV: Wow, what a way to go out.

AD: Yes, wait till you hear how I came in the second tour. (laughter)

RV: Tell me your opinion, or is there anything else you want to say about that day and that assault and what you went through?

AD: Except my Marines were outstanding and that’s about it. I mean they did everything expected of them. Eventually we got out of there then, we got out of there at the 11th of September they pulled us back down to ironically enough Camp Evans, Co Bi Than Tan and on the 15th of September the Battalion Commander called me and said, ‘Your going on R&R.’ I said, ‘Why, I’ve already been on R&R.’ He said, ‘You will obey orders, Captain,’ and they left, so I was really gone then.
RV: That was it?
AD: Yeah. I came back to the battalion for a, by that time they already had another company commander there so I called my troops together…let’s wait awhile.
RV: Ok, go ahead.
AD: Called my buddies [Marines] together, had about 110 left.
RV: What was your original strength?
AD: Little bit over 200, 202 when I went in and I just left.
RV: You were able to speak with them before you left them?
AD: Oh yes.
RV: What did you tell them?
AD: It was a pleasure being with them; hope I would share it with them again sometime. They were the bravest bunch of Marines that I had ever seen.
RV: Were you able to make contact with any of them later?
AD: Oh much later, yes. In fact, we now we still have our reunions now.
RV: Yes sir.
AD: My radio operator, one of my, oh he got hit that day too but he is, we are all close I would say. I only had one platoon commander, well two platoon commanders left alive. One was hit, and the other one wasn’t.
RV: How did you deal with death on the battlefield and combat? I don’t think the average person can fathom what that would be like, how you function in the face of that and then after action how you deal with, I mean you’re talking about a very serious subject here, you’re talking about this action, your talking about your platoon commanders being killed, how did you deal with that?
AD: My personal way of dealing with it was detachment. When one of my Marines would get killed it was, hopefully we would call in the Medevac right away obviously, we would have the corpsman working over them and you know some of them were just you couldn’t save. Quite a few of them I saw before they got Medevaced and some of them you know they just like for instance one or two specific examples; had a platoon sergeant got hit with one little piece of shrapnel, walked to the helicopter, got on, and he died and my gunnery sergeant in Khe Sanh get hit with one round through the leg and he died.
RV: Femoral artery?
AD: Yes, exactly. That’s exactly what happened to him and you know it’s why them? You know I had my radio operator right behind me get hit through the arm, in fact he was on the ground behind me and I am standing up shooting and he gets hit, and how do you deal with it? Boy, I would say initially you’re doing other things so you’re too busy to really concentrate on it then. When does it hit? Boy, it still does but it’s after the fact though, much after the fact, because one thing you could not do in that situation is just break up because everybody is looking at you I mean you’re the guy in charge so if you start really gnashing your teeth and weeping I mean it’s all over. The company just ceases to exist. Particularly with me, I mean I had the company longer than any other company commander there and of the original company commanders that went over there, three of them got killed, the other guy was seriously wounded and very rarely would they last more then three months and I was sort of, you know, probably in my own mind too, a legend you know that I am still there.

RV: Right.
AD: That was the other thing too is about six months of combat and get transferred to another you know only six months in command I mean I would of probably requested mass with the general if they would of tried to transfer me from my company. It didn’t happen.

RV: What did you think of the thirteen month rotation policy? Do you think that the United States military should have implemented a policy in a rotation policy that we had in other wars, that you served until the war finished, or did you think that this worked well, what we did in Vietnam?
AD: It did work well in the sense that there was no, once again, if you went over there with the unit like the early people did. They went over there in the 65, 66 and somewhat with the 27th Marines when they went over there as a unit it was much better. My experience or from what I have seen, for instance on the thirteen month tour what I would try to do once one of my troops had in twelve months, if he didn’t have his three purple hearts by that time, if he had in his twelve months I would try to put him in the rear and go to work for the 1st sergeant, go do something like that. My lieutenant that I had my XO, I had him in the rear just tidying up because he came over, he was one of the
original lieutenants that came over. My other platoon commanders, if they were to last six months, and none of them did, I would transfer them out of the company or no matter how good they were because they were just, it was too much, more than I could ask them to do in that period of time but the rotation policy was a political decision I believe and unbased, unfounded, it went against all tenants of the Marine Corps because you get the new guy in and you don’t know who the new guy is, you have to train him, you know how does he fit in, boy, it caused more problems than it solved. Now as far as remaining there the whole time, we would probably have less of a protest in that the people, the draft would not of needed as many people, so that was obviously a political decision. The Army had twelve months but the Marine Corps had thirteen and the Army had twelve so that means that there were, if you look at the logistical tale in Vietnam, which is the other thing, they had a relatively few number of people actually out in the bushes shooting at people. The Army’s logistically tale, it seems to me, was somewhere around nine or ten to one while the Marine Corps tale was something like seven to one, so for every rifle guy you got out there shooting there is seven guys back there supporting them. These seven guys back there supporting them are getting the same combat pay, getting the same tax breaks, if you will, as the guy who is out there getting shot at every day. So is it fair? No. Is there a better way to do it, yeah. The whole concept of building up a United States in Vietnam were the air-conditioned bunkers, and the sheets on the bed and the whole thing like that, that isn’t how you fight war. I don’t know wither that answered your question.

RV: It absolutely does, absolutely. Let’s talk about leaving Vietnam. Before we detail that you said you did take an R&R?

AD: Yes, I went over to Okinawa and got off the plane and the first thing I did went over to the bar and I started at the top and I could see how many rows having one drink of everything, anything along the way and I got through I think two rows.

RV: Did you really?

AD: Yeah, I thought it was pretty good.

RV: That’s pretty good.

AD: Yes, and I remember, you know, clearly, I wasn’t drunk, or at least I told myself I wasn’t drunk, walked in and went to sleep, woke up the next morning and I
started writing a little paper on what I had learned in Vietnam because I figured once I
get back there I am due to rotate, in fact my orders should have been in by this time so I
wrote up the little paper, all required to do that, I had it typed over there and went back to
Vietnam, got a roughrider convoy up to the battalion, walked in and said ‘Oh here are
your orders.’ Got back on the roughrider to convoy and went back down and left country.
RV: Wow.
AD: That was my ending.
RV: Where did you fly out of?
AD: Flew out of Phu Bai. No not Phu Bai, it was Dong Ha.
RV: And how long before you’re back in…..
AD: Not Dong Ha, Da Nang excuse me, Da Nang.
RV: Out of Da Nang, and how did it take you to get back to the States?
AD: Took me actually two years because we left on my birthday and so we cross
the international date line it was my birthday again. (Laughter) No, it was probably about
a 20-hour flight back, once again it was my birthday. Of course no alcoholic beverages
would be allowed on the plane but once the stewardess found out that it was my birthday,
somehow or another, magically a couple bottles of champagne happened to show up.
RV: That’s a nice birthday present, getting to leave Vietnam.
AD: That’s a true story.
RV: How much contact had you had with your family, and your wife when you
were in country?
AD: I went on one R&R and when she asked me what I was doing, I was, you
know, just in the rear with the gear and, you know, my mother, I used to write her at least
once a week, and I, you know, I was on convoy duty going back and forth between just
carrying stuff out, you know, to not do anything harmful. The unfortunate thing this 10th
September battle made the papers everywhere, and mom found about it then but that was
sort of after the fact because I was almost coming home by that time.
RV: Right. Your name was in the paper?
AD: Yes.
RV: So you protected them, you shielded them from what was really happening.
AD: Oh sure, yes, I had to. And wife found out about it then. Normal Marine
Corps policy is when you put down if you get hit, you want your family notified and I
said no. Well wife got a telegram and normally the Marine Corps policy was, you know,
that they would personally come up to the house, knock on the door and say, ‘Hey, your
husband’s been hit, nothing bad, returned to duty,’ but she got a telegram. Of course that
was a little bit ballistic time there too but almost after the fact again in that I was, you
know, already in Okinawa by that time and I had called her.

RV: So you get home, where did you fly into the United States?
AD: I flew into an airport near San Francisco. What am I thinking of, I don’t
know, all I remember is that I took a bus to go get a real airplane from that…Travis,
would it be Travis?
RV: Yes sir.
AD: Ok, that would probably be it. Flew into Travis, went through customs
inspection, got on the bus, went down to the airport still in uniform, and flew into San
Diego.

RV: And that’s where you were able to reunite with your family?
AD: That’s correct.
RV: What was that like being back in the United States so quickly and seeing
your family again?
AD: Shock. I mean particularly what had happened. I mean if it was, you know, if
I was sitting somewhere and you know, and had time to go ahead and plan this, you
know, coming back and the whole thing like that, you know, if nothing had happened
during that period of time, it would probably have been an easier transition.

RV: Right.
AD: But just going from where I was, even though with the R&R thrown in there
gave me some time to settle down, to get back, it was a different world. It was also a
coping type of a thing too. Here I am, what am I doing here and thank God I’m back.

RV: Right. How did you adjust or how long did it take you?
AD: I don’t feel, there probably was, but I don’t feel that there was an adjustment
period per se. Then when I came back, I also knew that my next tour of duty was going to
be…from there I was going to go to Amphibious Warfare School in Quantico, which is
the mid level school and it was due to start whatever but in the interim, I was to report to
OCS and I had my 30 days leave and you know, travel time and the whole thing. So it
was sort of like I fell back into being Dad/Marine instead of Marine/Killer.
RV: Right, and you were able to do that effectively?
AD: Oh yeah, I felt that that would, I had no problems with those aspects of me,
no personal problems, nothing of that nature.
RV: How much discussion was there of your experiences in Vietnam? Did people
ask you about it, did you talk about it much?
AD: No, no on both.
RV: Why not?
AD: Well some people, I wasn’t you know, no. There weren’t any in-depth type
things, if people wanted to know about Vietnam it wasn’t really wanting to know, it was
just a conversational type thing like ‘Oh you just got back’, ‘Yeah’, ‘How was it’, ‘It was
ok’, nothing in depth, not even with wife or children or anything, no in depth discussions.
RV: Do you think looking back that was good or bad or it didn’t matter?
AD: In my particular case since I did it, I don’t see any adverse effects that I had
from it. I don’t know if I would have dwelled on it, I would have probably not been the
same person but in retrospect, I can say probably it was good for me.
RV: Okay, okay. Andy, why don’t we take a break?
AD: Sure.