Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Scott Dawson on the 14th of September, year 2001 at approximately 6:20 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Vietnam Archive and Mr. Dawson is in Hikone, Japan. Sir, if you would, why don’t we begin with a brief biographical sketch of you life and just go ahead and state where and when you were born and where you grew up.

Scott Dawson: I was born in Orlando, Florida and shortly after that…well, I don’t know where I moved. I was raised by my mother and stepfather and my stepfather was in the Army. He was a career Army officer and we moved around from place to place for the next four or five years. After that there was some sort of…well, I call it a custody problem in the family, and I went to live with my grandmother in Wilmington, North Carolina. I was there until the end of junior high school. A combination of events caused me to go back to the family but from Wilmington, I went to Redlands, California and I went to high school in Redlands and graduated in 1967. I felt I had a rather normal childhood but it was not very…well, it wasn’t very affluent. Most of my memories are with my grandmother, and we lived on 35 dollars a week. She ran an apartment house, and I think I’d describe our condition as aristocratically poor, because my grandmother
had grown up in western North Carolina from a rather affluent family and then moved over the years further east until finally locating in Wilmington, North Carolina.

SM: Where in Wilmington did you live?

MH: I lived in the Merritt Apartment House on 3rd and Dock Street. It was on the same block as the Cornwallis house, and between us and the Cornwallis house were the original owners of our apartment building, and when it was built somewhat time before the Civil War, it had been their main residence, and they were I think living what used to be the Carriage House.

SM: What year did you graduate high school?

SD: 1967.

SM: Now in high school how much did you hear about the Vietnam War? Did you know anybody that graduated just maybe the year before you that did go off to war?

SD: Well the year before my father was in Vietnam. He went in 1967. He was a colonel in the Army, and the irony there was that he was planning to retire at that time and then his retirement was refused because of the need for field grade engineering officers, which then they sent him and they put him in a staff position. But, when I came from Wilmington to California, it’s like pulling anybody where they’re somebody and putting them into a place where they’re nobody and on top of that having a southern accent in Southern California is not a benefit. I had problems, so I really didn’t know that many people at all and those years before graduation there was a small number of people that I was closely familiar with but not that many. In the school at that time there was no monument or anything to people who had fallen in Vietnam but I remember when I went back later there was a monument to something like 11 kids who died in Vietnam who had graduated from there. The most famous graduate that I know of from our group, and I only knew him slightly, was a fellow by the name of Jim Fallows who went on to the Atlantic Monthly to become an editor and writer.

SM: When did your father come back from Vietnam?

SD: He came back about a month and a half before I went to boot camp.

SM: Did you get a chance to talk with him about his experience at all?

SD: We talked a bit. He was a bit closed about it because he was in MACV in Saigon and I was going to a very different place. He gave me advice from his wisdom of
the years in the service, but basically it was, ‘Keep your ears open, your head down, and
do what you’re told to do.’ He had a side arm but he never used it in anger while he was
there. He came back, it would have been about June of ’67, so that’s about six or seven
months before the TET Offensive.

SM: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

SD: I have two sisters and three brothers, all of them younger, and one brother
later served in the Army but never went to Vietnam.

SM: So none of your siblings served in Vietnam?

SD: No.

SM: How about other relatives? For instance, uncles maybe who served in
World War II or Korea?

SD: Well again, my father was in Korea as engineering officer and then I have an
uncle who served in World War II on the battleship New Mexico, and he has his pictures
and ribbons and whatnot and I’ve talked with him about his experiences. That was a long
time ago.

SM: Did you talk with him before or after you went to Vietnam?

SD: I remember talking to him before I went, long, long ago, asking him
questions. I was curious. I had a thing about Japan even back then. I was very interested
in the Orient and his experiences from World War II tied into that. We talked then and
later we talked when I came back from Vietnam. But, his questions were usually framed
in terms of, ‘You got even with those gooks, didn’t you?’ sort of reaction. I had gotten
beyond that kind of thought. This is getting ahead of the story. I came out of Vietnam
with very strong feelings in general, not very favorable to Asians, and I came out of
Vietnam on my third wound and then was sent to Japan and my experience there just
changed a lot of the way I reacted to people and the way I thought of the people.

SM: What were the formative things that affected you in terms of your decision
to go into the Marine Corps?

SD: Well one, to go into the service in general was the GI Bill because as I said
before, my stepfather, there are five brothers and sisters. I, in a sense, didn’t feel he
really had the responsibility to put me through school and I wanted some government
help. Again, in the back of my mind, I had this idea of becoming the teacher and I was
most interested in history, and for all it’s pejorative meanings, war is a big thing in
history books and this was, quote, my opportunity to find out what it was really like.
That was another reason. A third reason was very personal, maybe rather psychological.
But, when I was a kid in junior high school I got beat. Another kid who is about 16 got
held back a couple of times gave me a real thrashing. I remembered that experience and I
never wanted to have to experience that again. I never wanted to have that kind of
feeling that I had because I still had to go back to school with the same kid. He was in
the same school, not the same class. I wanted to be able to face him at some time in the
future, and when it came to that, give as good as I got. So, there was a mixed bag of
reasons, ranging from a sort of a kind of revenge wish to a feeling of responsibility of
taking care of myself.

SM: Did you feel that the Marine Corps would better train you?
SD: Yes, the Marines are very good at putting out the image and proving it to the
individual that they are the best and I still feel that way. The training they gave
me…well, I’m still here so I can’t complain.

SM: Just out of curiosity, did you ever run into that guy again?
SD: The irony is that he ultimately married a young lady that I knew in junior
high school and the only thing that made me feel a little bit better was the fact that he was
later arrested on second-degree murder charges and I had heard that he died under
unsavory conditions, which didn’t bother me in the least.

SM: Sounds like a mean person who met a mean end.
SD: Yes.

SM: Was there any concern when you graduated from high school or did you
know definitely that you were going to Vietnam?
SD: I actually enlisted in the service three months before I graduated. I had made
up my mind and I didn't want my dad coming back and changing things, and I’d already
turned 18, and so I just went in, took care of the paperwork, and my mother, with
hesitation, signed as well, had to sign some documentation. I had to sign a waiver
because of my eyesight. Basically I am 20/400 in each eye and there was some issue as
to whether I could get in without a waiver and so I signed a waiver. It was actually, at
that moment, a choice. I had tried to get a job with the forestry service and go out and
fight fires in the hills of Southern California and they said, ‘No,’ and so I enlisted in the Marine Corps and then two weeks before school ended they called me and said they had a job for me, but I told them I already had a job. So, it was a bit of poor timing there.

SM: Did you purposely enlist for the infantry?

SD: I would have been happy to be a clerk. I enlisted but I also knew from the recruiter that if you joined the Marines, the Marines go where the action is. I expected to go but I don’t think I’d have been disappointed if they’d have pointed me in another direction.

SM: What was your dad’s reaction when he got back and learned that you’d already enlisted?

SD: He was not disappointed. I think there was a bit of pride in him. I’m not sure about how he felt about me joining the Marine Corps but he never said anything derogative about the Corps itself. He said that his experience with mid-grade Marine officers in Saigon, the only thing he could say for them was that they had a professional ability in cursing. He had an extreme respect for Marine senior NCOs. The gunnery sergeants, master sergeants, top sergeants, he was impressed. He had no qualms. One of the things that my father was proud of, he was a colonel in the Army but he also had his Good Conduct Medal because he had spent close to three years in the Army before getting an appointment to the military academy. So the fact that I had chosen this route to go into the service didn’t seem to disappoint him or surprise him.

SM: If you would, why don’t you go ahead and describe your introduction to Marine Corps life?

SD: My family left California on I think it was around July 21st or 22nd, whatever. I then went down to Los Angeles where I was supposed to check into an induction center and they gave me a pass to get into a two dollar hotel to spend the night and then go check in for my physical the next day. It was one of these places where they give you rubber bands when you come in to shoot the roaches off the wall. The next morning I went in and immediately they were trying to put the fear of God into you. Some staff sergeant was running around sort of shepherding us like a wolf from place to place, trying to get us to think, ‘You have made the biggest mistake of your life.’ I just remember going through sort of machinery like process for physical and whatnot. They kept us
seated, standing, moving, walking, whatever, and then finally it was over and there was
nothing substantially wrong with anybody except possibly a little bit of overweight.

That night they put us on a bus, I can’t remember if it was a greyhound or
whatever, but I remember getting on I think it was a civilian bus and then later they
changed to a military bus and they had us sitting ramrod straight, two people to each seat
all the way back and then we got to San Diego and hell began. We didn’t get any sleep at
all that night, from haircuts to packing our clothes and mailing our clothes back to our
families, it was just, ‘Move, move, move, move, move, move! Don’t talk, don’t speak, don’t
think, just do!’ Finally we got to our quarters and while we were quite surprised, I guess
we should have been happy because were going to live in tents for our first, what, six
weeks…no, it was about five weeks of training.

There were so many people coming through the boot camp at that time that they
didn’t have barracks for them and so they had put up tents near the handball courts, and I
remember the handball courts because that’s where we’d go when we’d clean rifles or do
any sort of maintenance thing with our clothes or whatnot because at least there was
some shade there in the later afternoon.

The tents were a Godsend. You couldn’t wax the floors, and so we lived there.

I’ve still got my platoon book, the graduation book, and we lived…I remember one
incident. There were two guys that joined on the buddy system and they brought that up
to the drill instructor. This is one of those things that sticks in your mind but you don’t
remember if it’s apocryphal or just something that you’ve created in your memory. But, I
remember saying something, ‘Oh, you’re buddies, so you want to fuck your buddy,’ and
then this idea of putting them in the same bed. You join the buddy system, ‘Okay,
buddies, here you are.’ It was both trying to destroy your civilian character and create a
new being from the word go. You separate your identity from your past identity to make
you a new person who will follow orders. It just went on and on like that.

I guess the first three weeks were actually the worst. I think it was third or fourth
week there was…no, the first week there was a physical exam and that scared me because
at that time I was overweight and I was just really worried about being shipped off to
what they called the Fat Farm and spending two or three weeks of just physical exercise
and then being sent back to another platoon. Then, that going on until a physical exam
around the fourth week and that was really I felt touch and go. I stayed with the platoon and well, I ultimately graduated. There’s still some pride. We were the honor platoon of the series that time. Those sort of memories stick with you.

The drill instructors, I have always felt that those guys ultimately saved my life because again, the one thing they wanted to do was separate us from our past and the most important thing you could learn was to obey orders. They taught us well. I remember then with good feelings. They were harsh, they were rough on us, but they were good.

There were two incidents, one incident near the end of the camp and the chief drill instructor suddenly came out and said, ‘Who has not been thumped,’ and at one time or another most people came in for either verbal or physical…I wont call it physical abuse because it was not extreme, but they were there to make you tough and to realize that you had to pay the consequences when you screwed up. We were so indoctrinated that there were seven of us that immediately shot up our arms and then they marched us into the tent and the drill instructor came before each and every one of us and gave us a little bit of a dressing down. ‘How is it that you never came before me before this time? You puke, you…’ whatever he said, and then he popped each one of us one good in the solar plexus. It sort of doubled us up and we felt, ‘Oh, this is the real thing. We’ve achieved some sort of equality with the others.’ Now maybe the others hadn’t been hit either and they were just smart enough to keep their hands down, I don’t know. But, I remember that incident very clearly.

The other time was that one of my mother’s friends, that last week, and sent a box of cookies and the cookies seemed to be rather soggy with brandy and they were just saturated, and I think the only reason I didn’t get in trouble that time was that the drill instructors said they tasted quite good.

One more, and that was graduation day. One of the instructors sort of thought of him as like an iceman. He had no feeling. The chief instructor was always there, always right. There was another instructor that was sort of like our friend. He’d say, ‘The smoking lamp is lit for one cigarette and I’ll smoke it,’ and then a few minutes later he’d let the smokers who had a cigarette smoke as well. But, there was one guy who always seemed kind of cold and distant but did his job well. It was sort of like a psychological
ping-pong game between those three guys, bouncing us up between the different personalities. A friend of mine, we were walking around the base. We had a half day base liberty before we would get on buses to go to Camp Pendleton and we met Staff Sergeant Fisher at the EM Club, and he was the one guy we wanted to meet the least, and then he invited us over to where he was sitting and bought us a beer and we just talked, and in hindsight I sort of have the feeling of a man who loved his job, he did his job well, but there was a little sense of hesitation in terms of knowing a certain number of these young men that he was sending out weren't going to come back. The ribbons that he wore bore the fact that he'd already been there and whether it had been in Lebanon years before or if he even dated back to the Korean War, I don't know. But, there was a certain sensitivity in hindsight that I felt and he was a good man.

Incidents regarding violence in camp, there was one incident in which a Marine in another platoon got kicked in the neck and he was put in the hospital. I remember it being a corporal on the drill field, not a sergeant, not a staff sergeant or anything like that, but evidently a rather new man on the field and it just disappeared after that as an incident. I remember it because the drill instructors brought us together and talked to us about it and basically said to us, 'If we see anything to report to them,' that this was unacceptable behavior. Another incident was a reported suicide. Again, we learned about this basically because they brought us together and told us, 'This is a terrible thing, this is a very troublesome thing. If you’re going to kill yourself, don’t cut across the wrist, cut along the wrist. Do it right because it’s much, much worse paperwork if you survive.' I hope tongue in cheek, but it was to get across the point that, 'You are ours and you are our responsibility and we are going to take care of you one way or another.' So, they did.

Race relations in boot camp, I remember one young black man, whether you call it an attitude experience before he came into the service, why he came in, there’s always stories about the bad guy who the judge said, 'Go to jail, or go to the Marines.' I don’t know, but I remember that he was always in trouble and at the end when we had our graduation picture you could see him. He was at the end of the line and you could see him flipping the bird by his trouser seam, and that caused quite a bit of trouble for him. I never saw any retribution but I know he spent some time in the tent and one of those rare occasions when I saw the company commander - the staff sergeants, drill instructors,
every day - but the company commander, I think I only remember seeing three or four
times during, what, it was an eight week cycle at that time. It had recently been cut
down, or at least that’s what I heard, recently been cut down from 12 weeks because of
the demand for manpower.

SM: What was the racial makeup of your platoon?

SD: I would say about 50% Caucasian, white. I got the pages of the book before
me right now. It would look about 70% white, about 10 to 15% black, and about the
remainder Hispanic. I talked about my physical problems, weight, and sort of a lack of
exercise over the years in keeping up. Toward the last physical examination they put
several of the young black recruits in charge of me and said, ‘It’s your responsibility to
make sure this puke doesn’t fail,’ and then they give me a salt pill and call me Mr.
Terrific which was after a TV program that was on at that time. Some guy would take
something that looked like an aspirin and suddenly grow a cape and fly around buildings
or through buildings or whatever and it was their job to make sure I got a little bit of extra
training to get into shape. They had I would say a quiet contempt for me but there was
sort of a rough kindness as well.

There was no real friction there that I felt, but at that time in my life, okay, I’d
come out of the south. I was not a segregationist, I wasn’t a racist. I could remember
seeing the local black community on the steps of the city hall singing, ‘We shall
overcome.’ I can remember seeing people taken away from the lunch counters down on
the five and tens on Front Street or people sitting there and not being served, and the
thing was where our apartment house was, just across the street was the black Catholic
Church and there was a black parochial school. So, I would wind up going around the
corner and often playing in their playground. It was like I grew up without so much of a
color bias as opposed to those who grow up in isolation and only hear words of contempt.
I’m not saying I was perfect, but being around blacks was not new to me.

Now when I went back to my family, with my mother and stepfather and whatnot,
I was the colonel’s son and there were not that many middle rank black officers that I saw
around in the mid-60s. so, it was a very white existence. When I got into boot camp I
was very naïve. I had no idea of what racial relations were like. Malcolm X, I didn’t
know what a Malcolm X was. It had no meaning to me. I knew of the movement of
Martin Luther King, those sorts of things, but I was not up on the situation of race
relations or anything like that. We were just all Americans and I couldn’t understand the
bitterness in some people. Okay, these guys didn’t show me any bitterness but just a
sense of, ‘You’re the weak guy and I’m stuck with you.’ Anyway, I got through in part
because I thought we had our ground proofing just before the physical test and spending
close to three days, several hours in a swimming pool everyday really sort of builds up
your endurance. So, when we took the final test, I passed and continued on.

SM: What kind of weapons training did you receive?

SD: In boot camp we were issued an M-14 and we also fired the 45 at boot camp
also, but no other weapons at that time. After boot camp we went to basic infantry
training school and then to advanced infantry training, and then 20 days leave and then
back for further training before we went to Vietnam. In basic infantry training, lots and
lots of different weapons.

SM: That’s after boot camp?

SD: That’s after boot camp.

SM: Can you give me the start and finish months and years from boot camp?

SD: Entered end of July and then finished boot camp in mid-September.

SM: That’s ’67?

SD: Yeah.

SM: Then went on to your basic infantry school?

SD: Yes, and that was a month and then advanced infantry training, that was a
month. Then, 20 day leave. I remember being home for Thanksgiving that year and then
came back to Camp Pendleton and then arrived in Vietnam around December 20th. I
remember that date because that’s my father’s birthday.

When I went home there was one interesting thing. My dad realized that an
enlisted man, a PFC, doesn’t get that much money and so I knew nothing about catching
military hops, but my dad raised this issue and said, ‘You don’t have to pay to get out
there.’ So, he contacted some friends of his and being, what, Army engineer he’d always
had a lot of ties with the Air Force. So, one of his friends found up there was a flight
going to Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas. Here, I wound up close to 14 hours on an
old Constellation. I think it was made by Lockheed, sort of forked tail prop plane, with
the ranking major general of the Air Force who was something like in charge of Air
Force reserve, whatnot. So, I was back in the back of the plane with the flight crew. We
were back in the back eating pheasant because my uncle who did a little hunting had been
lucky so we had pheasant in the back while the major general was in the front eating
peanut butter and chicken sandwiches or something. He came back. I was still rough on
protocol and had just started to stand up, give a salute, no cover, anything, and he said,
‘Just relax, son, sit down, sit down.’ We talked for about 20 minutes and he just, ‘Good
luck, keep your head down, come home safe,’ and then off he went. I didn’t have this
reaction against officers. My father was an officer, I knew he was human. The people I
dealt with were all concerned that people they knew or young men under their command
came back so there wasn’t any antagonism there from the very beginning as in some
cases.

SM: The training that you received in both basic infantry and then advanced
infantry, did any of that include the M-16?

SD: Yes, both included the M-16. I carried an M-16 from basic infantry training.

SM: Was that the weapon that you then used regularly in basic and advanced?

SD: Okay, basic infantry, yes, the M-16. Oh my God.

SM: It wasn’t just familiarization training?

SD: I’ll be honest; I remember advanced infantry training school, most definitely
the M-16. Basic infantry training school, I honestly don’t remember. I remember doing
the dry nets with an M-14 I guess because I was scared. But, the M-14 for sure in basic
and then M-16 after.

SM: What do you remember about the differences and did you have an
immediate reaction after using the M-14 and going to the M-16?

SD: I don’t think I really had a reaction. I was more scared of the M-16 because
of all the news stories during the high school years about soldiers complaining about
jamming. The main thing that I wanted was as much experience shooting the thing to
build up a little trust in it. We had an adequate number of opportunities to shoot it,
different live firing ranges and the like. But, it also seemed basically the basic training
was to get us to fire as many weapons as possible; the M-79, the M-60 machine gun, like
I mentioned before in the questionnaire, the BAR which dated back to World War II,
again, firing the .45, wanting us to sort of intuit what to do with anything that came into
our hands, and just lots of live firing practice was the main thing that sticks out in my
mind with the basic infantry training.

SM: Now in training, did the M-16 ever lock up on you?
SD: No.
SM: How about after?
SD: No. I mentioned the one incident in Vietnam and if you want to talk about
that now or later…
SM: I didn’t know if that was the only time it ever happened?
SD: It was partly failure on my part because I didn’t check the breech. We’re
going ahead of ourselves. In basic infantry training, advanced infantry training, no
problems.
SM: Okay. Now, after you finished those periods of training, did you feel
confident in terms of getting…
SD: I was mean.
SM: You were what?
SD: I was mean!
SM: You were mean? Okay.
SD: I was tough. We were the best.
SM: Were you ready to go to Vietnam?
SD: I sure felt it. I wasn’t sure I was that excited about it, but we felt we had
been trained well and we were confident we could do our job.
SM: Now did they set up any kind of mock villages or anything like that for you?
SD: There was a combat town that we went through one afternoon, but other than
that most of the things that we did as far as practicing actions were looking for booby
traps, moving through trails at night, orienteering, map reading in the dark, location
exercises, this sort of thing, and walk, walk, walk, getting lots and lots of exercise and
going us ready to move. Some things on tactics, but tactics were minimal and very,
very simple. The idea is you shoot, keep your head down, and you move direct into or
you flank left or flank right. The Marines are always proud of themselves for the idea of
vertical envelopment, but we got a chance to jump off of some two by four helicopters
built on the ground to simulate getting out of a helicopter, but other than that there was no
vertical envelopment training to speak of.

SM: And in terms of tactics that you were trained on, what was the standard, if
you remember even if it was covered, standard response to ambush that you were trained
to?

SD: Ambush, if you’re in the killing zone, go down, start shooting at the enemy,
either the head or the tail, swing left, swing right depending on the direction of the fire
and start to move across the enemy flank.

SM: And in terms of movement, was it primarily Ranger file as they call it in the
Army, single file, wedge formations? What were the tactics that you were taught in
terms of moving through the jungle or through the forest?

SD: Basically single file. To be honest, Camp Pendleton, I remember once going
out on boats and coming in, hitting the beach. Then, we had to get in trucks at the beach
because we could not charge across the freeway. So then they took us by truck
underneath the freeway through some culverts and then we, again, got online. But as far
as actual movement tactics, it was basically single line or in most cases we went from
place to place in regular platoon formation and then as far as our exercises, whether they
be night or day when trying to move around, quote ‘with stealth,’ it was basically single
file.

SM: Now what did you think was going on in Vietnam?

SD: At that time when I was in camp I had absolutely no idea. In that period of
time we were not focusing on news whatsoever. I don't even ever remember seeing a
newspaper at that time.

SM: But just as an American in terms of what you heard and what you read in
newspapers, heard on the news, talked with your mom and dad before you went in the
corps, what from your perspective as an 18-year-old young man going into the Marine
Corps was going on in Vietnam?

SD: We were going to the aid of an ally. We were going to a friend’s house to
help put out a fire is the standard metaphor. I felt I had a responsibility to go. I gave my
reasons before, but this idea of citizenship and obligation. To a certain extent, I feel
you've got a duty to your nation and it sounds weak now but whether…love it, right or
wrong, I wasn’t in a position to make judgments. At that time I trusted my leadership, trusted the president, trusted the country to make the right decisions. I wasn’t in a position and I didn’t have the information to make those decisions. So, okay, I’ll go. I’ll find out…like I said, I wanted to find out about war, partly finding out about war in hindsight is how screwed up your leaders were.

SM: What did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam?
SD: I thought they were one, trying to give Vietnam time to establish a working democracy, and to do that you need stability, and we were trying to provide, to assist, the Vietnamese in achieving that stability.

SM: Were there any kind of discussions about these types of issues while you were going through your training in the Marine Corps?
SD: Other issues? Okay, other issues…
SM: Well, issues like as far as what the United States is doing in Vietnam, why you’re going, things like that?
SD: No. We were in the Marine Corps. There was not a draft into the Marines. You joined. You made the choice. Now, what does the Marine Corps do? The Marines fight. Now, if by chance you go to the east coast or you go to a technical training camp or whatnot, okay, that’s your luck. When boot camp finished, there were 67 people. There were six Marine reserves and they went to some sort of flight training, mechanics, whatnot. Of the other 60 men, there were maybe five that didn’t go infantry. We all knew where we were going. There was no question about talking about Vietnam or thinking about Vietnam because we weren't going over there as political emissaries, we were going over to fight. There was no really discussion of the war or why of the war.

We were going, so the best thing to do was to get ready.
SM: Now when did you know for sure that you were going to Vietnam?
SD: The first time I really had orders was at the end of advanced infantry training, but we knew it from the day we were going from boot camp. Like I said, it was not an issue. It was just a matter of getting orders. I think at the end of advanced infantry training I had orders to report to 1st Marine Division. That was that. It was just a matter of coming back to Pendleton, an indoctrination and some more training there, and then on your way. There was one thing that did come up in advanced infantry training school and
that was basically the issue of prisoners. There had been a couple of high profile court
marshals about Marines shooting prisoners and the point raised at that time was you do
not shoot prisoners. The only time that is quote, ‘That action would be acceptable,’ is if
you are in a situation where that prisoner is an endangerment to the unit and an
endangerment to the mission. Under that condition, that would be it. But, if you were
given an order to kill somebody who is a prisoner, don’t do it.

SM: Were the rules of engagement ever discussed in any other way?
SD: I never heard the phrase, ‘Rules of engagement,’ until I think there were
discussions about Panama years after I got out of the service. But, I never heard the
words ‘Rules of engagement,’ during any training. Like I said, that one instance that was
brought up was even if you get a direct order, you don’t kill the son of a gun.

SM: How about code of conduct training?
SD: Code of conduct? Yes, we had to memorize it. Can I still remember it? No.
But, I remember being a part of basic and also a part of infantry training, being required
at inspections to relay that we understood our general orders and the like.

SM: What was going home on leave like for you before you went to Vietnam?
SD: Well I went to a different home. Again, I was a stranger. My dad had been
transferred to Virginia and so I had to fly across the country instead of just go back up to
Redlands. It was disappointing, disappointing because there was no one to show my
pride to. I was the big, fat guy who was stupid enough to become a jarhead and I wanted
to impress the girls and show my friends and there was nobody there to show. It was low
key; relatives and the like, but all of them were a little down because they watched the
news every night. Maybe if I’d been watching the news every night as well maybe I’d be
a little more hesitant at that time. But, during that whole time I don’t remember seeing a
TV, very rarely seeing a newspaper; not that we couldn’t get them. There was just no
need.

SM: What was your send off like, your farewell when that leave was over?
SD: It was a photo opportunity. Everybody lined up. My brother said, ‘Be
careful!’ I remember my dad sitting down with me one time and just talking about,
‘Don’t set out to be something that you’re not, but at the same time, when you’re given a
responsibility, take the responsibility. When you have men, nobody messes with your
men except you. Do your best, and come home.’ My mother was rather emotional. But, she kept a straight face. Again, I was the colonel’s son. The people in our neighborhood, which was at that time Fort Lee, Virginia, were kind. No, no, this was outside of Washington, Annandale, Virginia, and most of the families around there were military, either Fort Belvoir or Pentagon.

SM: What did you have left to do when you went back to Camp Pendleton?
SD: Camp Pendleton? There were two more weeks of training and lots of paperwork and then one night they took us out to Los Angeles International Airport by bus, put us on a Continental Airlines at that time had the contract to take Marines across the Pacific, and I remember three or four of us trying to chat up some French stewardess who was working with Continental. I remember at the end of the flight, since I was sitting back toward the back of the plane, was one of the last to get off, some of the stewardesses were in tears. They understood what their job was and I guess they had this experience going both ways, because they’d done the route, some were coming back, some would recognize people coming back and they’d find out about other people who made an impression or they had a memory of. They understood what their job was, and they were emotional.

SM: Well, this will end the interview with Mr. Scott Dawson on the 14th of September.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Scott Dawson. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Vietnam Archive and Mr. Dawson is in Japan. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with the discussion of your flight over to Vietnam and if you would, would you please describe it, what it was like on the aircraft, the atmosphere, and your first impressions on arriving in Vietnam.

SD: If I remember correctly we flew on a Continental Airlines out of Los Angeles. We’d taken the military equivalent of school buses to the airport and some sort of processing, some sort of little talk, and then we got on the plane. It was just a regular passenger plane. The one thing I remember among the stewardesses is there was one French stewardess who was on loan from Air France and was doing training or some sort of indoctrination with Continental and I was toward the back of the plane and like good Marines we were chatting up the stewardesses. The accent was just driving me up a wall.
The flight itself, the officers were up toward the front so we in the back, we weren't rowdy or anything but it was a pleasant flight. Tensions, nobody was tense, nobody knew where we were going. Anybody who knew anything was sitting up in the front of the plane. It was just long.

The one thing I remember next would be when we got off that plane some of the stewardesses were crying. They’d gone though this before and they’d been carrying people back so some faces stuck in their minds and they remembered people and they remembered people who didn't come back. They had a feeling of what their role and what their involvement was as far as the whole transportation process.

We got first to Okinawa and spent about three days in Okinawa taking care of paperwork, assigning people to their units, making sure that pay records were all together, and then flew to Da Nang.

At Da Nang I was assigned to the 1st Marine Division, 1st Marine Regiment, and I remember burning the shitters for the first time in the transit area, going to the latrines, pulling out the half cut 55 gallon drums, taking them out, pouring in some kerosene, burning them, and then taking them to be buried; not the last time unfortunately.

The next thing I knew I was on a C-130 to Quang Tri, and then a deuce and a half on up to the base where I was to be stationed at Quang Tri. The trip was uneventful. The only thing that was really hoping for at that time was that Bob Hope had just arrived in Da Nang and there was some hope that we might be able to get to where he was at to see his show but that was not to be.

It was a long trip but it seemed very, very quick. It was like flying from Los Angeles to New York except multiplied by three.

SM: What month and year did you leave?
SD: This was December.
SM: December of ’67?
SD: December of ’67, right.
SM: December of ’67 is when you left?
SD: Right.
SM: When you arrived in country, did you receive any kind of briefings?
SD: No, I didn’t get any what I would consider briefings until we got to our company.

SM: How long did it take you to get to your company?

SD: About two days.

SM: That was what company again?

SD: 1st Battalion 1st Marines, Alpha Company, 3rd Platoon, 2nd Squad. Alpha 3 Bravo.

SM: What assignment were you given in the company, or in your platoon?

SD: I was a rifleman. I was the low man on the totem pole in 2nd Squad so that meant when the work details came up, I was the first to go.

SM: What area?

SD: Area meaning…

SM: I’m sorry, of Vietnam, yes, sir.

SD: Quang Tri.

SM: Quang Tri Province?

SD: Quang Tri Province. Our base was outside Quang Tri City. Did I ever see Quang Tri City, no.

SM: No?

SD: No, never got into the city itself. Our base was outside of the city, a little bit to the west. Other than seeing some villages and off to the right when I turned left, I never got into the city itself. There was no patrolling that I know of in that direction by our battalion, and that was the city’s security and everything was maintained by the ARVN.

SM: When you got to the company, what did they tell you about rules of engagement, dos and don’ts, things like that?

SD: The main thing they were telling us was to keep our eyes open. We had a one day indoctrination telling us about things to look out for when we were on patrol, and looking for signs at the side of the trail, looking for little piles of rocks, sticks aligned in a row or in parallel, signs of booby traps and that sort of thing, because the NVA, VC, whoever couldn’t remember where they were all at so they’d leave little signs to tell their own people to be careful. Talking about our responsibilities, in the base, and when we’d
go on patrol, but basically we were coming right out of basic or advanced infantry training from the states. We hadn’t had that much time to forget anything so they were saying, ‘Okay, these are some basic things about Vietnam. But, you’re going to learn on the job.’ It’s just sort of a pep talk. The company commander came in, our new platoon commander came in for a few minutes and then disappeared. Then, we had our series of classes and that was it. Then the next morning we went to our companies.

SM: How effective do you think that was in getting you prepared for your in country service?

SD: I think it was more to give the platoon time to decide where anybody was going because while decisions had been made in the states which division and in Okinawa which regiment, but the people at the platoon level really didn’t know we were coming until we got there. It seemed to me like it was to give them time to make arrangements to decide who went where.

SM: How about after that when you got into your platoon and into your squad. Did they have any kind of specialized training set up for you.

SD: No. It was just, ‘Go pick up the trash, go burn the shitters, go do this, do that, and listen; keep your eyes and ears open.’ Probably the real training was those hours when the first times I was standing watch and sitting in a foxhole watching out before it’s too early for anybody to go to sleep and you’re just talking, and those hours on perimeter watch those first days were probably the best lessons.

SM: Anything in particular stand out in your mind?

SD: No. It was just talking and getting the feel for what being in country was like, trying to get to know your partners, your comrades, let them know you, and also finding out what was happening, who was doing what, what were the responsibilities. It was probably more effective in the class because it didn’t put you to sleep.

SM: When were you issued a weapon?

SD: That was at company.

SM: What did they issue you?

SD: I got an M-16 and that was it for the moment.

SM: Did you feel comfortable and confident with that?
SD: Yeah. When I was going to my basic training, when we fired or had our M-16 at advanced infantry training, I had no problems with it. Compared to the M-14, it was like a toy. There wasn’t as much kick but you could still hit a target with it so there was no problem there. I didn’t have complaints about bore size.

SM: Were there any Vietnamese that worked on the base?

SD: No. When I say base, this was a barbed wire enclosure, sort of the top of a rather low hill, scraped bare, that reddish-orange clay that typified most of northern-south Vietnam and whenever there was a wind it just blew this reddish dust everywhere. It was flat to one side and to the other side then it started going into some draws and small valleys as you went further west. So part of where we were looked like it used to be a fruit orchard of some sort. The trees were lined up in regular order which made it a little disturbing at night when you were on watch because these trees sort of standing out in the distance, just one by one like people standing out there at night. Sort of made you a little edgy! But, if you think of a state side base, that’s completely irrelevant.

The largest structure was the command tent, and that would be, what, about 16 by 24 foot tent. That was battalion commander actually who was there, and then there were some of these little tents that look like something out of the Arabian Nights except olive drab where one or two officers or one or two staff NCOs would be in and beside each tent would be a slit trench for people to dive into in case we got mortared.

SM: So you didn't have bunkers?

SD: No. We had fighting holes and barbed wire outside, but it really seemed sort of a temporary arrangement. I don’t know how long they had been there before I got there but everybody seemed to know that we were going to be going someplace else soon and there were always rumors that we were going to go afloat and that really scared people because the people that went afloat only came ashore when something bad was going down. People weren't excited about that. They’d rather be on the ground that playing fire fighter for someone else who got in trouble.

SM: What unit actually occupied this base? It wasn’t just the company I take it, it was the battalion?

SD: It was the battalion, yes.

SM: Was the battalion full strength?
SD: To the best of my knowledge, yes, at that time it was. Our platoon was up to about 48, about 48 men at that time and a full platoon would be about 56. When I say 48 I’m not talking about the machine gun squad. Guns were we considered separate when we thought of the platoon because they were actually part of headquarters and Supply Company and then they were attached to each platoon. But, they were integral to the platoon.

SM: I understand.

SD: We had, if I remember correctly, it was up to 44 by the time we...yeah, 44.

SM: Now was your squad full strength?

SD: Yes.

SM: Do you remember anybody from your squad?

SD: There was a fellow by the name of Asaycek and I remember him because we wound up in the same holes in the evening most often talking a lot. In platoon, oh Lord, there was Eagleburger or Igleberger who was a rather...well, he was a noisemaker. He wanted to be the life of the party and keep everybody happy. The platoon commander, a Lieutenant Courtney, was a mustanger. He had been to Vietnam before and then went to Officer Candidate School and he was back in Vietnam for a second term. So, there was a lot of trust in him because he’d already been there once as one of us. Sergeant Hernandez who was the platoon sergeant, thin, wiry guy, bony face. He was a real hero and he got recognized for it as well. Reyna, Corporal Reyna who wound up being my squad leader was average height, sort of a little overweight Mexican-American, really great guy.

Everyone was looking out to try to take care of the people that were under them because the worst thing you could do is not bring somebody back. So, they wanted everybody listening, everyone being careful.

SM: Toward that end, were there ever any incidents of anybody falling asleep on guard duty or anything like that?

SD: In the days that I was there as far as falling asleep on guard duty, on guard duty perimeter, no because we were always running three man holes and usually two men at one time. So, one may be groggy but the other one was punching him to keep him awake and one person was sleeping behind.
I did have one experience with a situation on a listening post, and the guy who
had come back from a NCO school down in Da Nang, had just come back, and he wanted
to prove his oats or whatever and take us out on a listening post and so we went out and
he was the first one to fall asleep that night. He was told in very straight terms that we
didn’t trust him and to get his act together; not by me! I was the new guy there. I was
still wondering, ‘Can I punch a sergeant in the ribs and wake him up?’ sort of worries.
That was my experience in terms of a sleep situation.

SM: How far out was the LP/OP placed?
SD: We were about 200 meters outside of the wire and I don’t know if you want
to call it an LP or an ambush, we were looking over what must have been a well-traveled
path during the daytime and whether or not we would have turned into an ambush or not
is mute because nobody came along.

SM: How many people were on the…
SD: It was a fire team, four people.
SM: Anything except personal weapons?
SD: Just personal weapons. There was a radio as well.
SM: You didn’t have an M-60 or anything like that?
SD: No, no, no.
SM: What were your instructions if someone were to happen upon the trail in
front of you?
SD: I at the time would just be waiting for instructions. If they said, ‘Fire!’ I’d
fire. At that point in time I was low man on the totem pole.
SM: Do you remember how much ammunition you carried with you out there?
SD: I carried as much as I could carry. At times I would have as much as 700
rounds, and the normal, probably 400 would be more normal. But, I liked bullets and I
liked grenades. They gave me a sense of security.
SM: Yeah. How many grenades would you typically carry?
SD: Typically four. Later on we went into Hue City at one time I had nine.
People just sort of amazed as I kept rolling them down the floor so they could throw them
out the window.
SM: Well you said that there weren't Vietnamese civilians in your area. How about ARVN or Vietnamese Marines?

SD: Saw nobody. We were patrolling to the west of the city and that was just open plains; grass, tall grass, and not the very, very tall elephant grass but sort of waist high grass, a couple of places where there were former villages and some stone buildings left, but it was basically a free-fire zone. Nobody was there in I guess five patrols that we carried while we were still there. As platoon sized patrols, we found one person out there and that was some old grandmother who said she was gathering wood to feed her baby. I don’t know what that was supposed to mean, but that was the only civilian that we saw out in that area.

One experience when we were patrolling, they attached a sniper team to the platoon and we went out and then I was with the fire team who was working with the sniper team and we just dropped off as the platoon went on this one little knoll. The platoon carried on and then after a while we set off a stick of C4 and the logic there was that because there was usually nobody out there, if an animal or something should booby trap, the local unfriendlies, whether they be NVA or VC would sometimes come out to see what they got. Maybe they’d have some fresh meat for dinner. And, we sat out there and they made contact. I never saw them but the sniper said there were four NVA moving through the grass across the path where our platoon had just gone and they took a few shots but they came up with one cooley hat with a little bit of blood on it and they called that a confirmed kill. So, I wasn’t that impressed. There was activity out there. They weren't shooting at nothing, I’m sure of that. But, it was just empty grass; grass, plain, and rolling hills.

SM: Was this a free fire zone?

SD: Yes, there was to be no compunction about using your weapons. There were no civilians out here.

SM: How about friendly military forces? No chance they might be operating in the same area?

SD: The Army was starting to move units into I Corps and that’s what made it touchy because the artillery was setting up first, and the coordination between the Marine artillery and Army artillery was not completely perfect. There was one instance where
we seemed to have gotten caught near one of their test fires as they were what we called
thrust points, preset artillery targets or locations, whatever, and that scared the living
daylight out of us. Platoon got on the horn to stop it and there was no more. But, there
was the possibility of getting caught up in friendly artillery fire.

There was one other incident with an Army helicopter, and this was a classic, one
of the old whirly birds, the old Plexiglas dome type helicopter from the 50s and this
chopper buzzed us and we were scared because maybe he didn’t know who we were,
couldn’t see who we were because it was starting to get dark, and the platoon commander
was on the radio making sure people knew who we were and where we were, and then
this guy circles around and comes back, and he lands. We’re saying, ‘What is this?
What is this guy doing?’ He was lost! His compass was broken and he didn’t know
where the hell he was, and if he kept going he would have wound up in North Vietnam
probably.

Anyway, the platoon commander gave him directions and then here it is close to
six o’clock and we had to change our position again. So then we started roaming the hills
for about another hour until we found another place to set up. But, I always remember.
We were teed off but he must have been really scared because he was both running out of
fuel and going in the wrong direction. There were friendlies, but at that time partly
because of the upcoming change over everybody was just sort of scaling back as they
made preparations to either move on or move in.

SM: What was the nearest unit on your flanks?
SD: I have no idea. To the best of my idea and information, there were no units
on our flanks.

SM: How about to your rear?
SD: We were that battalion base. At that time, I had no idea of what was going
on around me. My world centered in that platoon. That was the world to me. My fire
team and my squad, this was the world that I cared about. Company worried about where
the battalion commander was, battalion worried about where the regiment was. At that
time, I didn’t have a need to know, and didn’t know.

SM: How did they treat you as the new guy?
SD: Well, as I said, the work details, my first day in the platoon the first thing that happened was to pick up trash in the battalion area. So, roaming around picking up the trash. The next thing I knew, I was burning the shitters. The next thing I knew, there was some other detail going on. There was no hazing to speak of. You get a bunch of Marines together there’s always going to be some roughhousing, but there was no hazing. Everybody knew that you didn’t want to make someone angry at you because here you were living in a society where everybody had to work together and everybody had a gun, and so you wanted to maintain the peace. You didn’t haze the new guy, you broke him in, and part of the break in process was, ‘Okay, I did this when I first came, now it’s your turn. Learn the ropes.’

I was treated fair as far as I knew because I hadn’t been there before and I got to like most of the guys. Okay, it wasn’t all peace and harmony and joy, but again, they were people that I came to know and trust.

SM: What was the ethnic makeup of your squad and platoon?

SD: Probably, oh Lord, 60% white, 20% black, and the rest Hispanic.

SM: Was there a lot of interaction between members of different groups?

SD: I was living with a black. We didn't get along that well. Especially with people first coming in, depending on your background, if you were a local tough guy, then you wanted to stay a tough guy and stay in charge of your life. I was big but I really wasn’t what I would call a tough guy. I was there to learn and to survive, and there were other people who were there. It seemed they wanted to thrive and be in charge. He wanted to be in charge of himself and the fact that he was stuck in a two-man hooch with this dumbass honky didn’t appeal to him. We talked civilly but there was a tension between us.

What I remember as far as the Hispanics were concerned that they tended to be a little bit more toward the career Marine. I don’t know what their ambitions were on the outside but they seemed to be a little bit more ambitious with regard to the service. It was a chance for them to do well and establish a starting point either in the service if they continued, or if they got out of the service. They were squared away and sharp, and they worked to maintain good relations with everybody. They were good people to work for and they took care of me and got me back.
SM: When you mentioned earlier that typically the relationships among the members of your unit were pretty good but there were also moments of tension and problems. When there were moments where there were problems, what did they typically stem on? What were the problem areas between members?

SD: There were personal things, just being…okay, my hooch mate; I think it was just a member of presence for so many hours of the day. There was a tension there about being around them. Maybe it was just something I felt. Did I ever see any real altercation? No. Was there a feeling of tension at times, a feeling of discomfort? Yes. There was a real effort to stay stable, to stay sane amidst this insanity, and everybody knew that you had to rely on the person next to you.

So, you didn't let it come to serious words but there was friction and there was just a tension around suddenly being thrown into call it a…okay, you had it in boot camp, you had it through the training, but there were larger numbers with regard to the mixing of races so that when you had your private time, you could separate out with your group, with your buddies, who often tended to be like you. In the field, there was no choice, and for those people who had never had this experience, again, that tension of being around, okay, in this guys’ case, being around this big white guy was just disconcerting. So whether it was my habits, or maybe it was my snoring, there was sometimes a feeling of tension. I don’t remember any incidents as far as something that just caused anybody to snap, but okay, I felt tension at times.

SM: What was the relationship like between the lower enlisted and the NCOs in your unit, in particular your squad and the platoon?

SD: Corporal Reyna was one of us. He had a hooch with one of the other Marines nearby us. He was there with us all the time. Sergeant Hernandez, he’d been to Vietnam before and he was always around and always there when you needed him or he was needed. He had a sense about what was happening in the platoon and he was a lifer. He was going to make it a career if he could, and he did his job well. NCOs, no problem whatsoever. Officers, we truly loved Courtney, Lieutenant Courtney. He was there for us and we truly trusted him. It was sort of, I don’t know, did you ever see the movie ‘Beau Geste’?

SM: Yes, with Gary Cooper?
SD: Yeah. Who is it, the sergeant, was hated by every man in the unit but they knew if push came to shove, the one way to get out of there alive was to follow him. Well, we loved Courtney and we felt that same way. He would get us out of there, whatever happened. So, the relationship was good. We had a high level of trust and we had good people.

SM: How frequently was your base mortared or rocketed?

SD: While I was there we were never mortared or rocketed. There was one I guess you’d call it a fire fight but it was actually a big mistake because on that side of the base that faced the hills there was a draw and two figures of the draw which were both occupied by Marines got into a firefight with each other, and nobody was hurt but it figured out about five or six minutes to figure out that there was nobody in the middle. Other than that, we were in Quang Tri at a very, very quiet time. This drew prescient because the reason it was so quiet was because the NVA were moving people down to participate in the TET Offensive.

SM: Right, and I want to talk about that, but before I do, if you would, could you describe your first experience out on patrol and what happened?

SD: Okay, first patrol, we suited up. I remember the NCOs coming around, checking us, making sure we had everything we were supposed to have, and we went, we left the perimeter. We were gone. It was an overnight patrol, what we referred to as mortar security, and out we went. We just headed out and walked and walked. I was in the middle of the main columns. There was someone scattered out toward flank to each flank and it just seemed we were walking rather aimlessly around in these sort of lush, green fields. That night we just sat in on top of a knoll. We dug rather shallow fighting holes. I doubt if anyone could stand in their hole, probably you’d have to sort of lean and fire out over your shoulder if it really got troublesome. But, dug in and then just spent the night sleeping out. It was sort of like the boy scouts. That night, though, I found that I was a threat to everybody in the platoon because of my snoring. I had Sergeant Hernandez come over in the middle of the night and say, ‘By God, are you trying to get us all killed?’ and woke me up and told me to roll over on my stomach.

SM: Did that work?
SD: Well I guess it worked; either that or I didn’t sleep anymore that night because I was so scared. But, it was a non-event. We just went out, and then walked back. The event came the next day when we returned because you returned to your base and the first thing you do is clean your weapons. I took out the magazine. Okay, I want to remember pulling back the charger guide, and then releasing it. Anyway, when I released the charger guide it slammed the bolt home and fired a round into the air, and I just saw the rest of my life go out the window. ‘They’re going to throw me in jail!’ whatever. It was terrible because the thing was when the company commander showed up, he had just been at the battalion commander getting his ass reamed because regiment was screaming about too many accidental discharges.

So, I had this feeling that they were going to make an example out of me. Basically they did their best to scare the living hell out of me. Then the company commander told my platoon Lieutenant Courtney, ‘You take care of it.’ Lieutenant Courtney told Hernandez, ‘Okay, pick your punishment,’ and Hernandez then put me to digging a six by six by six as sort of a non-recordable punishment. About two hours later Hernandez said, ‘Fill that damn thing in! Someone’s going to fall in it. Just cover this up,’ and they gave me 20 pounds of C4. I carried that the rest of the time. So, that was my punishment.

SM: What do you mean the rest of the time?
SD: Well, the rest of my time in country until wounded.
SM: You carried 20 pounds of C4 at all times?
SD: Right. Well, it was usually rotated around because every time they went out they would always carry 20 pounds of C4 and most of it got used up in the field for cooking when we were out in the field because you could take a little bit of C4, make a C-ration oven, you put a piece about the size of a quarter, and you could cook your meal. The old gas tablets would take I guess about maybe up to 15 minutes to heat your meal, but the C4 would burn with a temperature of about like 1500 degrees or something like that. Don’t stamp on it or it will explode, but they would cook their meals with it so you’d wind up losing about a quarter to half of what you were carrying to cooking and then the people who were, okay, depending on the patrol you’d set off a stick of C4 with a team to wait to see if anybody came, so a certain amount was used every time.
One time when a patrol later when we went out there was an old church in the middle of nowhere. There probably was a village there many, many years ago and the church had quite a steeple to it and so the platoon commander was determined to bring the steeple down so we used most of the C4 trying to blow that up without much effect. But, that was the worst experience I had in Vietnam as far as my own personal action. It’s the thing that left the biggest impression on me. It never happened again. But, still, at that time in, what, the December/November in I Corps, there’d been more casualties from Marines shooting Marines than there had been for active enemy contact, or at least that’s what was said to me at this time. I was part of the problem.

SM: I’m sorry, go ahead.

SD: Anyway, the crux of the matter was, well, I loosed off a round. It didn’t show up on my records. They just took care of everything there in the company and when I wound up going to Japan later when I was promoted to corporal, there was nothing in the record about it. It was all in house, all in platoon as far as they cared.

SM: Good. Did you have any encounters with the enemy in a firefight, say from the time you got there until TET of ’68, end of January of ’68?

SD: No firefights.

SM: Enemy contact?

SD: No enemy contact whatsoever. It was like being at Camp Pendleton.

SM: Wow. So what happened? When did your first enemy contact experience occur?

SD: That was January 31st, the beginning of the TET Offensive. We had moved from Quang Tri. Well, moving from Quang Tri was sort of like a Boy Scout outing. Let me move back before TET. The 173rd [Airborne] Light Infantry Brigade had come up north and they were taking over our base, and they came in with all of their helicopters and fancy equipment and they had their music and everything and electricity going. We didn’t have electricity the whole time we were there as far as our tents. Every platoon had their electric generators going and everything. They were there for a long time. They were setting up the city. What made us laugh was that they put out their listening post that night inside our barbed wire so that didn’t make us feel very secure about how they were going to be protecting the outer perimeter.
That night I remember the company gunnery sergeant, he was a huge man, a little bit like Woody Strode, the black actor in the ‘60s, bald head, big and strong. He just took the Army staff sergeants to the cleaners in some poker. Everybody was sort of scavenging and trying to trade for things. For example, the fanny packs were hard to find from Marine supply but every Army soldier in their supply organization had them and so we were trying to see what we could get away with in terms of trading and whatnot.

From there we then took choppers and flew to Quang Tri...not Quang Tri, to Phu Bai which was just south of Hue City and that was the 31st and this was the first time I’d seen a real structure of any sort since going to Quang Tri because all we’d been living in was tents; no wooden structures whatsoever.

We settled in, we even got some beer that evening if I remember correctly, and then I went on perimeter watch that night. In the distance that night we could see a fire fight going, and then my time on watch was over and I came back to my tent or hooch, whatever you want to call it, and we got an alert that something much bigger was going down and to get ready.

A few minutes later rockets started to arrive and I remember the biggest panic was I couldn’t find my glasses because when I joined I had to sign basically a waiver because of my eyesight and if I couldn’t find my glasses, God only knows who I might shoot. So, I found my glasses, then finally made it into a hole.

Then, we were told to get ready to mount up. About daylight finally some of these people were getting things together and we were told to move out toward Hue City. Up to this point, it seemed like a lark, everything was sort of TV, rumblings and flashings in the distance. We moved out and finally we got off about I guess 45 minutes later we got off the trucks and there was an ARVN tank parked in front of what looked like a block house and as we walked up close to it, it was destroyed, had been burned out and out of the driver’s hatch was hanging the remains of the driver who had looked like he had been just cut in half sort of at a diagonal across his chest probably while he was trying to get out of the tank after it was first hit. It just blew up completely or there was a mine or whatever but he was just incinerated and cut in half and that was the first time I’d seen a dead person or anything like that.
We kept moving and we came to an intersection. We were getting right inside the
city. We were passing houses. There was still some people milling around in yards.
They didn't know what was going on either. All they’d heard was lots of noise and
shooting, not so much in their neighborhood. We moved further up. We came to a
circle, and it was strange because there was either an Esso or a Mobil station at one
corner of the circle and then there were houses going around the circle, but right sort of
dead in the center of the circle there was a dead NVA. I guess he was NVA. He had
fresh web gear, a chest pack where he carried grenades and magazines, all his clothes
looked new, and he was sort of crouched in the street with one arm pointing up. His
elbow on the ground, his hand pointing up like he had been holding his weapon, and he
died holding his weapon and someone took it away and you could just see his fingers still
sort of gripped like he’d been holding the front of the stock.

We moved on from there and there was a causeway that led into the city proper,
and we started moving along the causeway and then all hell broke loose up at our front.
We were all down on the bank of the causeway and then to our right were the rice
paddies. The battalion or company leadership, company commander, was Bachelor,
Captain Bachelor, had got caught in an ambush at the front of the column and he and
several, I guess about four, other people got killed. He wasn’t killed, no, but he was
severely wounded and we just kept moving up and moving up and I didn’t know what
was going on but finally when I…the people at the end of the causeway where it came to
houses again were laying evasive fire to the left and as they would open fire, then we
would make a dash across the street.

This is still fresh in my mind because I remember those were the first shots that I
fired. The irony is that while I’d never been that great a shot, when I fired, I saw where
all three rounds landed. There was a lamppost in front of this gate to the building where
the fire was coming from and I put all three rounds in about a three-inch circle in that
lamppost as I ran across the street. The whole senselessness of firing the gun sort of sunk
into me, but at the same time I had to do something at that time because I was scared.
But then knowing all four of them just destroyed that lamppost didn’t help me very much.
I wanted to do something more than that.
Now, we were in the downtown area and to our right there were buildings that were my image of Bourbon Street; stucco but balconies and wrought iron work everywhere, but still that Asian feel to it.

On the other side is a market and we…okay, let me back up. When we were moving into the city we met a column of tanks and construction equipment which was moving up to a base north of Phu Bai, and so we all joined together as one group heading for the MACV compound in the center of the south side of the city. We joined and got through what I was talking about before, and then from the right, from an open air market, there were RPGs and they came in and struck a tank and that took out the company radioman and that put that tank then…whether they panicked or damaged or wounded, I don’t know, but they drove into a wall.

I remember the radioman because there are people that just stick in your mind because they’re beautiful. He was every girl’s high school sweetheart dream; tall, blonde, handsome, always a good word, and he lost both his legs, and that was that. I remember leaving a canteen and someone gave me an empty one in return and I headed on in. When the RPG that hit his tank was fired, I saw a flash off to the right but we had people on both sides of the street and I couldn’t take a shot and yelled, ‘Down in the front!’ and when people went down, they were gone. It was, ‘Flash, bang, run,’ as far as they were concerned. We were still just making our way into town.

The rest of the day, the rest of the morning until early afternoon, moving in toward the MACV compound, there was some sniper fire but I didn’t experience any fire. Finally, when my squad worked up to where we were at point, we didn’t experience any firing at us at the point, but we could hear firing all around. Finally, just before we got to the MACV compound, the machine gun section actually walked point and who was it, Anthony was the gunner that I remember the most, there was Anthony and another fellow by the name of Charlie and I remember Charlie because we were in the same platoon, or same company at boot camp but not same platoon.

Anyway, they were at the point and I remember seeing the hotel which was the MACV compound and the Army guys there seemed quite happy to see us. There was nothing special about the place but it was just sandbagged to the limit that they could there to make it more secure, but it was just a regular hotel that you would think in a hot,
climate area with the very big open windows, great for throwing grenades into. These people were just really sweating bullets.

We got there. We entered the compound for a few moments and then moved on toward the river. At the river we stopped. At that moment we didn’t have any orders to move across.

My squad was put to the left of the bridge going across the river and looking across, and looking across you could see the Citadel and a main gate entering the Citadel from the bridge side and there was a huge NVA flag on top of that gate. We were put there and Golf Company of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines who had come in with us was given the order to go across the bridge. It was just madness. What we had met coming in and then a bridge, almost about 150 meters across, funneling a company of Marines, they had two platoons, a company of Marines going across there just seemed asinine at the moment. It’s one thing to go charging the front when you’ve got a wide front, but when you’ve got to put all your people in the space of about five meters and charge when you’re talking about automatic weapons, that’s insane. They went across.

We were laying down a base of fire and then the whole side of the river, the other side just disappeared in the smoke from the gunfire, RPGs, and then supporting fire from our side of the river as far as trying to tear up the walls and anything else or anywhere else that the fire could be coming from. That lasted until the evening. I would say they lost probably 80% if you think killed and wounded. That soured me because there was no need for that loss. The people who ordered the attack…okay, we’re Marines, that’s what we do, we did it. But, we don’t want to be wasted and that was a waste.

SM: Was that issue discussed much between you and other Marines?

SD: No, it wasn’t. It is something that we felt and we talked about later and later wound up being much later for me because I wound up getting Medevaced. But, it was a waste. I guess it had to be tried but it just was too set. It was an ambush, a classic Nelson ‘crossing the T’ type situation. It wasn’t a matter of having a fighting chance; it was just a matter of shooting fish in a barrel. That spirit, that…the orders are go, you go. Nobody hesitated. There are no resistors. So, off they went and many of them didn’t come back. That night it gets a little fuzzy here as far as where I was each night but I remember one night being at an LZ, the LZ by the river. It was either the first or the
second night and you could hear all sorts of shouting and shooting and it was bright on
the other side of the river inside the walls of the palace; not really a palace, it was a 17th
Century French style fortress, star fortress, a vaubin type fortress with the issues of the
interlocking…what is it?

SM: Fields of fire?

SD: Yeah, fields of fire, designed for the age of muskets so that you could put a
small group of people and rotate muskets to keep the walls clear and it was designed for
what happened there and the bridge just put everybody in a very narrow column coming
up there. Anyway, that night we watched them celebrating. Well, they were inside the
walls of the Citadel and they were enjoying their victory I guess the same way we would
have if it had been us, if the tables had been turned, ‘We have survived, we have
prevailed,’ and I guess for them it was even sweeter because Hue was a symbol of their
nationhood and the Citadel was a very important part of that concept.

The helicopters that came in that night and then the next day…I honestly don’t
remember any helicopters that night. The next day helicopters were taking out the
wounded. That day there was a high school right behind us and we were starting to run
out of fresh water and I made this, or someone made this suggestion about the school
might have some water in it because if they’ve got a chemistry classroom they might
have some water, some distilled water or whatever, and we also needed to check out the
building. So, someone opened the door. Creative way of opening doors; you use a 106
recoilless rifle, no understatement. But, inside the door they found near the steps going
upstairs they found three M-1 rifles, M-1 garands, so there’d been guards in there or
somebody’d been hiding in there and when everything started to turn sour they dropped
their guns and ran and tried to melt into the population. We roamed around. There was
nothing there that we could use. Then we pulled back out.

This would be the second day. I remember that night sleeping in the MACV
compound. Our platoon was pulled inside there and the sleeping in a secure place after
that previous day felt like the lap of luxury. That night I was still a new guy so I got
perimeter watch and I was sent with two other guys to a billet of the Army guys who
were there and they had what was, oh, it was a small building. Inside it seemed like a
Quonset hut, but it wasn’t a Quonset hut, just sort of a long, square building with one end
facing the outside and they had a sandbagged window and you could see the buildings
cross the street and I felt I was getting screwed this time because while everybody else
was in the center of the compound sleeping I came out here to stand watch. Suddenly I
wind up here. We’ve got Australians, US Army, all sorts of different advisors and it’s
more like a gourmet gathering instead of a fighting position. These people had lots of
food, beer, and everything else so we were the lucky ones. We came out and stood watch
with the gourmet club while the rest of the platoon was sleeping in the center in the
sandbag bunkers and we had proper cots with air mattresses. That night, that was the
only time I ever fired the M-79 in Vietnam. There was a building right across the street
and every once in a while you could see some movement in the windows and then some
firing from the windows, but whether what we did was effective or what they did was
ineffective, they didn’t attack that night so we were pleased. The next day there was a
fight over a church and again, the combat is just confusing. You don’t know what’s
going. Someone has to know what’s happening but you’re just not clear in terms of what
your place is. People are shooting, people are firing back, there’s noise, you hear a yell,
the only thing that you understand is either, ‘Go there,’ or ‘Come here!’ You just rattle
through it and try and keep your wits and your ears open so that you don’t get left behind.
At the church we had a recoilless rifle come up and there were enemy at the end of the
street. They brought the recoilless rifle up to fire across the street and then there was a
church manse behind the church and across the street and then the 106 team was taken
out by fire from across the street. Then, a firefight started between us trying to get the
106 people out of harm’s way and the people across the street.

I remember this because we were in the little garage type building just to the side
of the recoilless team. The fire team I was in was sent or told to run across the little
garden that was there and get to the far side of the fence and then start shooting from the
flank so that we could cover the people while they were getting the 106 crew in and then
also pulling back the 106. The first two people went. I was the third person and I hit a
tree root. I remember that. Again, I can still sometimes see myself hitting the ground
because it was like that tree root was just waiting there for me for eternity for my foot to
hit in the right place because I just went full spread eagle. Then, probably made the rest
of the way to where I was supposed to be on elbows and knees as fast as I would have if I
had run. The next person came, he didn't trip, and then we did our thing.

We laid down evasive fire, that slowed things down a bit. Finally, it started to get
a little darker, and we were able to get the people back but we were able to get the 106
back as well a little later. I was scared. The whole situation; those bastards were trying
to kill me, and that finally sunk in because until that time, there was always this sort of,
‘To whom it may concern,’ but now it was sort of getting up front and personal.

That same day or the next day we came back to a hospital that was across the
street from the church, toward the MACV compound, and this was part of the firefight
where Sergeant Hernandez got killed, and Hernandez was in another building. We were
facing an intersection and there was what looked like a hotel across the street and we had
set up to face and cover the opposite direction while the main thrust was going the other
way.

Our main thrust got bogged down in a firefight and then we started taking sniper
fire. We got word that the other side was getting machine gun fire from a building next
to ours and that’s when my having the C4 came in handy because we had some engineers
show up. They didn’t have any explosives left but I still had my 20 pounds and so they
took the whole satchel and they taped a hand grenade fuse to it. They got to the end of
the hall and the building that was joining there was the building that the machine gun fire
was supposed to be coming from so they took the C4, plugged in a detonator from a hand
grenade, and then just heaved the whole satchel. I can remember feeling…I was at the
other end of the building, the other end of the ward at that time but I can still remember
feeling the heat from the explosion when that thing went off as far as the heat coming
through the windows, and then someone yelling, ‘Grenades, grenades!’ At that time,
that’s when I had my maximum number of grenades and just start rolling them down to
the people that went up nearest to the window and they started dropping them in.

About an hour later we got downstairs and we found a machine gun but no people
at that time. I guess that was the closest I came to getting killed because when we were
checking out across the street evidently a sniper got a good look at my position and I was
trying to hide myself as best I can by looking around a window sill and about that time a
bullet struck at about head level, about three-four inches to the right into the wall and I
just remember dropping to the floor, scrambling around on elbows and knees to the inside wall of the ward, the hospital ward, and pulling out the drawers of the chest of drawers there and sticking my head in the dresser. I wanted to get as far away from there as I could and at the moment that dresser seemed the right place to get away to.

SM: How long did you stay there?

SD: We moved out probably not more than ten or 15 minutes later. It scared me. The unknown is far easier to deal with than when you hit and get something when you know, you can react. But, knowing that that guy had a bead on me really disturbed me. It wasn’t a, ‘Rat, tat, tat, tat,’ it was a single shot and he was trying, and that shook me.

SM: While you were working in this area, what was the size of the unit that was with you? Was it the whole battalion working in the same facility?

SD: This was company size. Okay, when we came down from Quang Tri, the battalion was still broken up and the platoon leadership had been sent to Da Nang for school. Two of the platoon commanders, a Lieutenant Courtney and Smith, Lieutenant Smith were sent down to Da Nang for school and being the logic of the Marine Corps here these two guys are combat veterans. They’re in this school basically to give them a break or do some things that are required for paperwork reasons, all hell breaks loose, the biggest battle of the damn war, and they got to stay in class. The same thing with my squad leader at that time. Reyna, I think it was Reyna, maybe it was someone else, but Corporal Reyna had also gone down to Da Nang for school. So they thought it was just going to be a change of base and so this was a time to get these people into these classes and whatnot.

So, we went into a city with our platoon, the platoon commander was Sergeant Hernandez. After the company commander got shot, really the company commander was the gunnery sergeant, and God, I can’t remember his name. Was it Smith? Smith was with the company. Courtney had gone down, and there was another lieutenant that had gone down to Da Nang for training. So, we had a gunnery sergeant in command of the company. Lieutenant Smith at that time just accepted the situation because the gunny was in the position to have the whole picture and Smith had to take care of his people, and Sergeant Hernandez in charge of our platoon.
That day when Sergeant Hernandez got killed, that just shook things up and there were other casualties, so there was a reorganization of the platoon. We had a sergeant who had been...he was one of these guys who saw the trucks and knew there was something happening in Hue City. He had been part of a CAP program someplace and I remember him because he was carrying one of these old M-3 grease guns. He just hopped on a truck and he wound up with our platoon. At that time he was there and he had the right rank, and so he filled in.

But, we had shrunk by about, oh, by that time probably 15 people, down by 15, and then the next day, that would have been the 4th, I got my first wound. We were checking out rooms in buildings near the hospital, and I was left at a corner to watch out toward the street while they went in and checked the rooms; getting a little more sophisticated as far as this, and you check the room with a hand grenade and then go in ready to shoot. So, I was outside. There was a door to the building that they went into and then along this little alleyway there was a wall enclosed so I had walls to my right and to my rear. We came in to the left and to my front was a street or the approach to the street and I was covering there if anything moved our way. A grenade landed in the garden and went off. I picked up a piece in the back of my left knee.

I was lucky. I should have had a lot more than that. I always assume that it was not someone throwing a grenade in the building and it went out the window because our standard frags would have left me with a lot more shrapnel. Anyway, I was walking wounded, so I was sent back to the MACV compound by myself. When I got there it was starting to get dark and so I went to the aid station in the MACV compound and they took care of me but I was not going to go looking for my unit in the dark with at least 700 trigger happy Marines and God only knows who else out there. So, I decided to stay at the MACV compound that night. I went back over to the people who had taken us in the night before and said, ‘Do you mind if I stand watch with you again?’ and they welcomed me in. We talked about what had happened. One of the men that I had met that other night was some sort of intelligence type and he had been roaming around out in the city with the regional militia and had gotten killed. I’m not sure if he was regular Army or at that time civilian. I remember him packing a .38 rather than a .45 and I don’t remember seeing him with a shoulder arm. But, he had just disappeared and someone told me that
his body had been found. It had been burned near the sports stadium that was nearby. I spent the night there. They felt a little bit of gratitude to me for just showing up the first night so they showed it again.

That next morning I was trying…I didn't know what the hell to do. They told me at the aid station to go to battalion rear. ‘Well where’s battalion rear? Is that Phu Bai?’ I figure, ‘Oh, I know how to figure out where battalion rear is; that’s where the battalion commander is.’ So the battalion commander was across the street. So, I walked across the street and I’ve got a hole about the size of a dime in the back of my knee. It didn’t come out, the metal’s still there. But, I go there and I explain my situation and for some reason, I don’t know why, I wound up in front of the battalion commander and he says some platitude, ‘Yes, son, okay, we’ll take care of you,’ and then, ‘Sergeant, take care of him,’ and they…

SM: Excuse me, sir?
SD: Yes?
SM: I’m sorry, I hate to interrupt. This is CD number two of the interview with Mr. Scott Dawson. I’m sorry, sir. Go ahead.

SD: That next morning I tried to figure out where battalion rear is and finally came to the decision that must be where the battalion commander is, and at that time the battalion commander was across the street.

So, I went across the street and I don’t know exactly how but I wound in front of the battalion commander, explained my situation, and he said, ‘Well we’ll take care of you, son, don’t worry,’ and he handed me off to some sergeant who then put me to passing out ammunition to people coming in.

About 45 minutes later my platoon came in. Now there’s about 16 people. The sergeant with the M-3 grease gun comes up and says, ‘You still here? We thought you were gone. Come on.’ Okay. I said goodbye and went back out with them, and I don’t really remember anything happening much that day. We just roamed around, moved around. My leg started getting stiffer and stiffer and the next morning, this would have been the 6th, there was some movement and then we were going to move across a rice paddy. There was some sort of bank or something. We were all lined up on the road, we were already ready to move into line and make our move, and then mortar rounds...
dropped down the middle of the street. No one was killed, but I picked up a second
wound and this one, piece of shrapnel, entered my left arm at about the inside of the
elbow and there was some nerve damage and my wrist just hung limp; it wouldn’t work.
So now I was both sort of gimpy and one hand didn’t work, so this wouldn’t work
anymore so they sent me back to get Medevaced.

I wound up back at the MACV for some first aid and then they sent me over to the
university buildings by the river, by the helipad where I’d spent the first night. I was
very insecure because the first thing they do when you get into a med center is first they
cut up all your clothes and take away your weapons and then after that they put you in the
middle of nowhere with no weapon and virtually no clothes and say, ‘Wait.’

So my fatigues were basically shredded from where they’d cut off the pant leg to
get to my wound behind my knee and then where they had checked for my shoulder. So,
one leg, one arm. I looked a disaster. They put me in another sort of holding facility for
people to be medevaced out. It was a triage situation where the most serious went out
first and then those who were more lightly wounded went out next, and we just had to
wait. So I wound up on I guess the fifth or sixth floor of the university building.

That night the NVA blew the Perfume River Bridge, and when they did, I know I
was awake because I remember the flash. Now we were facing the other side, the side
away from the bridge, but from the light, just the doors, and then also from the flash, you
could see the flash and you could hear the rumble and at that point in time I was scared
because I figure a nice big bang like that must be starting something bigger, and here I
am with virtually no clothes and no weapon. I was not happy at all. Nothing happened.
The bridge went down.

We’d heard from about two days before that the bridge behind us had been blown
so there were no bridges, no more heavy equipment could get in for a while. Everything
would come in by chopper or would have to be walked across the remains of the bridge
behind us. So, I was not happy about this at all. I went the next morning and they took
us downstairs to wait and this is the first time I’d been around South Vietnamese civilians
to speak of. In Quang Tri, communicated with the bushes those days, until then had no
contact really with civilians because the civilians had already pulled out of the places
where we were fighting, or those that hadn’t, they weren't talking to anybody. They were just scared shitless and hunkering down and I waited.

While I was waiting people asked me in and another guy with me to eat with them. Evidently it was a professor or somebody, spoke English, talked to us. They fed us. I hadn’t had a good meal, call it a home cooked meal or whatever the whole time, or since the week before. In hindsight I guess they were getting rumors about what was happening in the city, people disappearing and whatnot and if you spoke English and you were a professor and you were associated with the government in any way you were starting to worry, and suddenly I was not some imperialistic invader, but somebody who might be keeping the knock at the door at bay. But anyway, they were kind, they were civil, and they seemed appreciative.

I got bumped off the list for two choppers and then finally an Army chopper just dropped in. He had no flight plan, he just was flying around, looking for trouble, looking for something to do, and he gave a call to whoever was in charge of the landing zone there and they said, ‘Come on in,’ and they packed me and four or five other guys into the chopper. I wound up with my back facing the wind screen and the first thing I did when I got in there, the pilots, each one of them, shoulder holsters, hip holsters, and I said, ‘If they’ve got this much hardware, that means that they’ve got less confidence in their flying ability than I do.’ So the first thing that I did was grab onto a carbine that was in there and we took off. We took some parting shots from someone across the river as we banked around, and then I don’t think I saw an altitude higher than 20 feet the whole way back to Phu Bai. He was just hugging the ground and anybody that wanted to take a shot was going to have to duck before he would have a chance to aim.

We got back to Phu Bai and then it’s back to the same rigamoarole of med centers, debreeing, trying to take the shrapnel out. But, the first, the leg wound was three days old at that time and it started to close and heal. The shoulder wound, actually I’d picked up shrapnel in both shoulders. The elbow wound and the shoulder wound were now a day and a half old and he basically said, ‘Okay, I can go in, but if I go in and take it out, I’m going to have to tear out a lot. If you want it out, I’ll take it out. If not, you’re going to have some pains in your old age but it’ll be something to tell your grandchildren about.’ I said, ‘Leave it.’ So I’ve still got the shrapnel in the leg, elbow, and shoulder.
SM: When was it that you were injured the second time?
SD: The first one was February 4th, the second time February 6th, and then I was Medevaced I guess it was the afternoon of the 7th.
SM: What was the prognosis of your recovery, and especially given the nerve damage?
SD: Well, that was the problem, and the other problem was the hospital situation after the first week of the TET Offensive. Prognosis, nobody in Vietnam had any prognosis. If the nerve was severed, they would have to operate from wrist to armpit, find the nerve, and tie it back together and I might get 30 to 60% of wrist use and finger use back. There wasn’t anything they could do for me there, and the hospitals in the Philippines and Japan were full, and so I was sent back to Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii. The neurology people there thought the same as far as having to cut up my arm to try and tie it back together and they started putting me onto exercise therapy, put my hand in a brace to reduce tension on the nerve, and about two weeks later it started to come back. I started to get some feeling in my fingers and by four weeks it was back to normal. The only immediate damage of sorts as far as I was concerned was my loss of water discipline. Until that time I’d been able to go with a canteen a day. After that I was spoiled. When I got back, that was always a problem. The hospital was amazing, it was beautiful.
SM: How long were you there?
SD: I was in the hospital about five weeks. The most moving incident that I had, there was one guy, he’d been shot I heard seven times, he was still alive, they got him back, and after the second week I was ambulatory so I wound up being asked to help move this guy to the elevators and he was going up for an operation but at the same time his wife had shown up at the hospital and delivered their first child and they brought her and his child to the elevators to meet him so that to give him a little extra reason to want to pull through.
The funniest thing at the hospital was there was this one, how is the best way to describe him, loud mouth sergeant who had been in charge of officer’s club or some sort of club in Hue City and he had got shot through the thigh and the result was it had gone all the way through and it was like a window. You could look when they were changing
the dressings and he had his leg up in a position you could see daylight through the other
side of his leg. When he described his adventures and misadventures in Hue it sounded
like something out of a 1950s occupied Japan movies. He was there half complaining
that his scam or whatever was through, and then one day an officer came in and told him,
‘Your request to extend your tour of duty has been approved, and so as soon as you’re
better we’re sending you back,’ and I’ve never seen anybody scream, ‘Chaplain!’ so loud
or so fast in my life. He didn’t want to go back.

The nurses, very, very professional. The head nurse was a Captain Koski and
she’d just gotten promoted and she sort of had that in her mind whether she was going to
stay regular Army or not because she’s a captain and has to show her authority to all the
others. Most of the other nurses were more light hearted and trying to spread cheer while
at the same time maintain some discipline in the ward. Most of the people there were out
of Vietnam but then there were also a mixture of automobile accidents and other things in
there as well. A lot of time just chewing the fat.

My dad, I sent a little cryptic message because I didn’t have much time and just
put in an envelope, ‘Was wounded, am alright, will call,’ which immediately sets my
mother off like a rocket pad, ‘What did he lose? My God! The writing’s so terrible.’
From Hawaii I did call and try to put them at ease but that still didn’t do it so my dad got
in touch with a friend of his who then contacted an Air Force colonel, I don’t remember
his name, who came to the hospital to visit me. I remember Captain Koski was sort of
incredulous to this because the rest of the guys have girls visiting them or some buddies
from the barracks coming by to say hello, and here I’m getting an Air Force colonel,
‘What’s going on here? Who are you?’ type of feeling. So he came and then he and his
wife arranged to take me out to dinner one night and I guess being an Army brat has its
advantages after all. They even told me, I was able to get a little bit of intelligence. I
kept pumping him, and he asked if there was anything he could do for me, and, ‘I’d like
to know what happened to my unit and know that the guys are alright,’ and he was able to
tell me. I don’t know if that was a breach of security or whatnot, but he just basically
said that they had moved out of harm’s way and were now in a firebase north of Hue City
waiting for their next move.
SM: Before you were evacuated, how many from your squad and platoon had been wounded or killed?

SD: When I left, I left about 12 people and we went in with 44. Those killed would be about 12. I don’t remember the numbers. People would just disappear, but between eight and 12. When we first went in, we were the battalion, and for example, the battalion chaplain got killed and some of the corpsmen also were killed. Of the platoon, between eight and 12 and then the rest were by that time out of action because of wounds.

SM: When you were fighting during the TET Offensive, was your unit able to call in either air support or Naval gun support or anything?

SD: No, not in Hue City. The whole time I was there, I do not remember a tank firing. I remember the 106s were allowed and when, what do you call it, the Marines call it Ontos.

SM: Yes, the multiple 105?

SD: Yes, and that is a monster when it lets loose with all six 106 recoilless rifles. It’s a God-awful noise and a heavenly sight to behold when you’re clear away from the backflash and everything. It just tears everybody apart.

But, we saw, what is it, the prop. They were flying for the South Vietnamese Air Force. I used to know the plane designation, but it was a prop, a fighter-bomber, from the Korean days, and it would supposedly be able to carry more bombs than the airplane weighed, and they just hovered around the Citadel I remember one day and were firing rockets but there were no bombs dropped. So during that time in Hue city there was…what we had in hand was what we could use. So what we carried, we used. I don’t remember the tanks being able to fire. Those were orders from above.

There was one fiasco with tear gas. When we were moving, the third day, third or fourth day and moving against the hospital, and somebody found these looked like a fat briefcase and it was a multiple gas grenade launcher and they didn't quite know how to work it. Its like, ‘Someone find the manual and we’ll figure out how to shoot this thing,’ and they did figure out how to shoot it but the problem is nobody had a gas mask because one of the first things you find is very useless in jungle warfare is a gas mask, and so this boot cleared out about half a block of territory of Marines because of the gas. Once that cleared we went in and nobody else would come in. But, there was a learning curve; the
next time they used it, they didn’t screw it up. But still, that was a problem because city
fighting and what you do out in the boondocks are very, very different. Again, the city
basically became a free fire zone. It had to be because if you turned the corner you might
be face to face with somebody. You didn’t have time really to think. You just had to
react or maybe die. That was that. But, the gas was ultimately effective in moving and
getting the enemy to pull back as well. It was a little bit of a rough patch there for us as
far as the breathing was concerned. But, again, until I got medevaced, there were no
heavy weapons used. There were no air strikes.

SM: You couldn’t call in artillery?

SD: No heavy artillery, no. This was the south side of the city was…okay, use
the example of Wilmington, North Carolina, that old residential area down around
Market Street in there, warehouses, most of them two story, smaller than American style
but that kind of built up urban neighborhood and moving around, always coming around
the corner blind. You had to see what was happening or you had to react very, very
quickly.

SM: That of course increases the potential problem of friendly fire incidents. Did
any happen while you were there?

SD: If they did, I didn’t know it. We were, like I said before, the issue of the
grenade was that from inside, my personal feeling was that it wasn’t because the typical
US grenade is far more deadly as far as the shrapnel. That’s right. When there was an
attack on a power station in Hue city. During that time we were sent to the roof of the
high school I mentioned before. There was a flat space, flat roof up there, then going on
to a tile roof. We set up a machine gun there. We took up positions to provide support to
the people attacking either the power station or a bank building, and while we were up
there we got mortared. That was, okay, was it friendly fire or them? I don’t know. I
doubt if it was friendly because I don’t think we had our 81s with us yet. But, I
remember at that time when that happened, Sergeant Hernandez was very angry but his
anger was primarily based upon the fact that he dropped his shotgun and that fell off the
roof and broke. The mortars took out the machine gun team and also took out the ladder
that we had climbed to get up to there, so it was a hell of a time trying to get this guy
down.
An irony there was that I met this guy one more time on the Medevac flight and I think I may have saved his life because I was below him and when we were on the C-131 being Medevaced out of country, I had to go to the bathroom and I gripped his stretcher and I felt blood and his wounds had reopened and he was bleeding and his blood was filling the stretcher and I called the nurse and they got me out of the way and they were able to take care of him. But if that had just continued, I don’t know how long he’d have lasted.

SM: Well take you back one more time when you were doing the fighting in and around Hue City, do you know whether or not you were fighting against VC, NVA, or both?

SD: At that time I knew nothing. I’ve read some about what was going on and then supposedly they were all NVA. But, to be honest, I don’t know. The uniforms, the web gear, was new. These were fresh troops. If they’d been resupplied and trying to make them look fresh and starchy, then they may have been VC. But, there was no way I could tell the difference.

SM: Were you at all surprised by this attack when you guys moved to Hue?

SD: Was I surprised? Not really surprised because we were just surprised to go into Hue City. The fact that someone might shoot at us was a given for anywhere in the country. This was a new place for us and therefore the fact the people there might not like us was just expected. That we met with something as big as we did, we were surprised. I’m talking about at my level at that time. I don’t know about the people at company or battalion level, did they have inkling of anything coming? I was still a PFC, just trying to stay alive and make sure nobody forgot me when we moved out. So, there was no feeling of surprise but there was a knowledge that this was big. Did we know what was happening in Saigon or anywhere else that first night in the MACV and when I went to the MACV compound the second time? I heard the news, but that didn’t mean anything to me.

SM: Had you been receiving any kind of correspondence from home talking about what was going on?

SD: No, no. There were just letters, newsy letters, family letters, this sort of thing, but there was no discussion about protests or that sort of thing.
SM: How about newspapers or magazines? Did you have access to anything?
SD: I got two packages when I was in Vietnam before when we were in Quang Tri, and one came in a box for Rolling Rock beer and contained a Bible and four National Geographics. The other was the remains of a box filled with Underwood Deviled Chicken and Deviled Ham and different sort of canned condiments. The National Geographics I received, a little ironic because one of the Geographics had an article on Hue City, and when we went into Hue, we just stored all our gear into water proof bags and if I’d known where we were going, if I’d have kept that, I would have probably wound up the most popular person in the battalion command because I probably had more information about Hue City in the Geographic than they knew at all when we first went in. But magazines? No magazines, no newspapers. That first from December to early February, I don’t remember seeing a Stars and Stripes or anything like that, occasionally hearing Chris Noel on the radio, but no real communication with the outside world. This was my world.
SM: You mentioned listening to the radio. Did you hear broadcasts from the Hanoi Hannah broadcasts from North Vietnam or any of the subversive broadcasts out of South Vietnam?
SD: No.
SM: No? What about recreation though? What else besides perhaps listening to the radio did you have?
SD: Cards, played cards. It was just out of boredom. We got a – well it was later – but reading, I started. Folks would send me strange books. I wound up reading The Sand Pebbles which was really encouraging, and then someone sent me a book about Hasidic Jews, Chaim Potok and The Chosen, and I can still remember images from reading the book. I haven’t read it since, I haven’t looked at it since, but it just resonated with me at the time. But, there was no intellectual pursuit on the sidelines while I was there. There was no communication with the outside world so to speak.
SM: What about were there any movies?
SD: No.
SM: Did you guys ever get a chance to see a USO show, anything like that?
SD: No, not while I was with the unit, no USO. Like I said, when I first arrived there was word that Bob Hope was there, but I was going one way and he was going the other so we may have crossed paths but I never saw him. We didn’t meet those niceties. We just didn’t come across them. There was one conex container that was our PX and they carried some toiletries, shaving gear, that sort of thing, but I don’t remember any magazines and I just didn’t need it, didn’t look for it.

SM: Was there any alcohol use?

SD: Okay, there was beer distributed occasionally. Before TET, I did not…okay, there was no heavy drinking that I remember. I don’t remember seeing anyone completely drunk. Some people who didn’t drink when we had beer available would pass it to others and some guys would get a little tipsy and go to sleep quicker than others, but really drunk, no. Later, a staff sergeant who was assigned to the platoon seemed to have a drinking problem and seemed to be going through a bit of DTs because he couldn’t get anything to drink. But, the problem where we were was not that you might want to drink, but the problem was finding something to drink.

Like I said, at Quang Tri, I don’t know how long they were there but we had barbed wire, we had the perimeter, but there was nobody around us. There was no contact whatsoever. I never saw a civilian inside the perimeter and saw only that old lady out in the hills that one time. So, we might as well have been on exercise in Camp Pendleton. R&R while I was in service in Vietnam, I did not have an R&R. When I later was wounded again and I was in the battalion rear, the battalion first sergeant came to me and asked me if I knew of anyone who had been on R&R when I got my third wound because someone had sent a buddy of his on R&R instead of me. So, if I had not been there, then that meant I would have stayed there when I came back. The recreational facilities, I would say for me, were minimal and that was my deck of cards and the camaraderie of my friends.

SM: Well, after your hospitalization, how long was it before you went back to Vietnam?

SD: I was five weeks in the hospital and then I got back about three weeks later, so I got back mid-April.

SM: And you were fully functional at that point?
SD: Yeah. When I went back, I spent about a week at Pearl Harbor and then back to Okinawa. Okinawa, I was put into a security organization for while I was there and I was part of transit security while they were waiting to process my papers and send me back. At that time, Martin Luther King was assassinated and I remember whether it was a demonstration or a riot, the friend and I who were patrolling the barracks at that time decided to get out of the way of this mob that was moving toward the NCO club.

SM: What was the composition of this mob?

SD: They were all black. They were angry, and they were noisy, and at that time of the evening and being the only two white guys there we felt discretion was the better part of valor. Rather than continue our patrol we decided to get out of the way and look discretely from the inside of a doorway where they couldn’t see us and they moved on to one of the clubs. There was no news the next day about any altercations but there must have been some tension that night.

SM: Do you remember anything else about the reaction of Marines or other people you had contact with, perhaps more personalized types of reactions?

SD: No. To his assassination? There was general disbelief. Okay, we were a cross section of society. We were the Georgia crackers and the colonel’s sons and the Detroit ghetto blacks. We all came together. In the field we all worked together. But, we knew that we were different, and maybe that’s the issue you were trying to get before as far as tensions. But, you didn’t bring them out in the open. If you had those kinds of feelings, you were Marines first, and the first thing you got to do if you want to play games when you get home, good. First you’ve got to get home, and to get home, you’ve got to all work together.

SM: I was curious, in your first unit with the 2nd Platoon, Alpha Company…

SD: 3rd Platoon, 2nd Squad.

SM: I’m sorry, 3rd Platoon, 2nd Squad, and you were in Quang Tri, what was the morale of the unit like generally, both in the squad platoon company and then in battalion?

SD: It was good. We were happy Marines. We didn’t have to polish our shoes. We didn't have to worry about starching our covers. Depending on where you were,
saluting the officers was not a problem. So, Marines in a combat zone are at their
happiest. Follow orders, but you skip most of the bullshit.

SM: When you came back, what was your unit of assignment then?
SD: Returned to the same unit.
SM: Oh you did?
SD: That’s probably what was taking time because I came out of Vietnam
basically paperless, and so when I got back and I was coming back, it was a matter of
finding all the papers so that everybody could put their stamp of approval on in terms of
sending me back. So, that’s my assumption.

SM: Had anything changed or had much changed in the unit when you got back?
SD: When I returned, the unit was on Hill 861 outside of Khe Sanh. There’s a
series of hills on Khe Sanh in the valley, then there’s a series of hills, then you go down
into a plain again into Laos. It was 881, 861, then down the road a way, down the
ridgeline a way, 681, and we were at hill 861. At that time, when I arrived back, I knew
six people. Those who had rotated out, those who had been wounded and not come back,
and those who had been killed…I remember arriving at Phu Bai, going from Phu Bai to
Quang Tri, then going by helicopter to Khe Sanh. At Khe Sanh I spent one night and
remember being taken into the bunkers and told to find a place to sleep until tomorrow
and a helicopter would take me off and it was the image of World War I; underground
dark, heavy feeling, bright lights here and there sort of pinpointing places, but shadows
all over the place and spurts of activity.

The next day after leaving that whether it be a CP or barracks area or general
space, took a helicopter up and the only person who really remembered me was
Lieutenant Courtney, probably because I was that turkey that cranked off a round inside
the perimeter and said he was glad to see me back and I went back to 2nd Squad.
Corporal Reyna had been killed two days before in an action. The young black man that
I had mentioned before that we didn’t get along so well had also been killed. There was a
patrol, they got pinned down by a heavy machine gun from another slope. People were
lost trying to get out of the field of fire.

The next day, next day or day after that, we had a patrol planned. They were
going to do something different to avoid detection. 861 was really two hills; 861 and 861
Alpha. 861 Alpha had been abandoned because there was too much space for one company, so they decided that we would go out and through 861 Alpha and then go into the valley via that route.

That day Lieutenant Courtney was taking the point to get us through. He’d checked it out before evidently and he stepped on a mine, a bouncing Betty. He was killed. I wound up carrying him back and the damage there was horrendous. He was still moving, nerve reactions, whatever, contractions, whatever, it was…anyway. He died.

Then, that just sort of queered the whole day and the company commander called us back in. I don’t even know who the company commander was then because everything focused on the platoon. I remember Captain Bachelor from before, he never came back. Our new platoon commander, Lieutenant Bolen who had been rotated from battalion intelligence or whatever had come and he just seemed soft, but he was a good guy. Courtney had that…he had been one of us before, and Bolen came out of OCS, college and into Vietnam. So, there wasn’t the same sort of bravado about him, same sort of comradery. But, when Courtney was commander we called ourselves Courtney’s Thieves. So, when Bolen came in we wound up being Bolen’s Bandits and that sort of thing.

SM: In terms of nicknames, I was curious, did Hill 861 have a nickname?
SD: Not that I know of. We just referred to the numbers. 881 got a lot of news because there was quite a terrible assault there. We didn’t have any nicknames for it.

There was a low hill, came up to a peak, then came down again, a flat area which was then used as the landing zone and then at the end of the landing zone there was a 4.2 inch mortar. Four deuce probably was older than the battalion commander, maybe older than the 1st Marine Regiment if anything’s older than that. But, it was there and then that was the end of the perimeter there going around the hill.

SM: When did you arrive there just outside of Khe Sanh?
SD: It would be late April.

SM: And how long did you stay there in that area?
SD: I remember being there until early July.

SM: How much contact did your unit make while you were patrolling in that area?
SD: All right, while we were there, for a long time there’d been very, very little patrolling. Our Alpha Company was the first company out of 861 since the really heavy days of Khe Sanh began, to run a company sized patrol. Then we were the first to run platoon-sized patrols. Then, they balked at squad sized but we were the first, our company was the first, to run fire a team listening post. There was a very, very high level of insecurity there because of the proximity of the border. We checked the area around to avoid getting caught with our asses in a sling as we went out the gate, but there wasn’t as much patrolling probably as there should have been.

I remember when we ran our platoon patrol, we went up one of the adjoining hills and we found a crater full of bodies and there was a black man, one black soldier in the crater and there were a bunch of Vietnamese bodies. This struck me as strange because normally the Vietnamese were quite concerned about their bodies. The culture says that you’ve got to take care of the bodies, the Confucius concepts and the idea of past and future generations for showing respect. But what angered me was that when we made radio contact, the Army was able to identify who the soldier was, his rank, everything about him. He knew he was there, and the fact that the body had been left there irritated the hell out of us. One of the reasons you choose the Marines is everybody comes back, and we got proof of that a little later.

SM: What was the identification of the Vietnamese with this American?
SD: There was no identification. Whether they were Vietnamese and he was there as and advisor or whatnot, we had no information about that.

SM: Did the Army come and collect that body?
SD: They came and got him. Was he Special Forces? Were these tribesmen, whatever, we had absolutely no information. The hill, as it was, was just, well, it was our castle. We were sort of inside our walls and every once in a while we’d step outside to check the perimeter. Everybody knew that Khe Sanh was being evacuated and so no one wanted to be the last person to get shot at Khe Sanh. While we were carrying out patrols there was not aggressive patrolling to keep the area clear because the border meant that we might run into something a lot bigger than us.

SM: Did that ever happen?
SD: When we were pulling out of 861, over at Hill 681, whoever made those maps, why’d they all have to have 81? It’s confusing as hell. But, at 681 they were running a platoon-sized patrol. The NVA closed the ambush at the gate of their perimeter. The platoon was basically wiped out. A few people got back through the wire and back into the perimeter, but basically they were wiped out. To get things under control we were called over to 681. Now this was disconcerting because the days before that we had spent all of our time destroying our position and getting ready to evacuate. We had been using up all our ammunition on target practice so we wouldn’t have to carry it all out, destroying our bunkers, everything, and then here we’ve rendered our position useless and then were told to wait. We weren't happy about that.

That same day looking down at Khe Sanh, they blew the excess ammunition there and that’s the first time I ever saw a mushroom cloud. The ordinance they blew up was that much that it just created this huge ball of dust that then went up and spread like an atomic explosion. It was scary and awe inspiring in terms of the amount of firepower that they had had there. Anyway, we were sent over to 681 as a reaction force to support them and first we landed on…their position was the top of a saddle. There were two hills and there was a finger that went off from the north end of the saddle and we were placed on that finger to set up in that position as a temporary position.

That day we were taking fire from the valley and they brought in air strikes, napalm. They succeeded not only in whoever was down at the bottom of the hill, moving them away, but they also burned us off the top of the hill. They didn't bomb us, but the fires spread and we had to pull back toward the perimeter and then set up new positions and we were going to spend the night there. During the night they were attacked again and then we had to change our position and go back into the perimeter.

When I wrote to you before I talked about the power of the radio and that night we had a fire control observer with us at the tail end of our position and I was with our new platoon sergeant and this fire control officer and his radioman and I was with them as we pulled back. What I saw them doing with artillery and coordinating mortar fire, artillery, whatever else was available, I don’t know where it was coming from, but it was awesome. We pulled back into the perimeter and we were in position along the north hill of the saddle. The NVA made it inside and took positions inside our perimeter and
decided to hold or they were pinned down and they couldn’t escape. It was dark,
suddenly a flare would go up, I was tail end Charlie for our platoon and the connection
with the next platoon. Was it 2nd or 3rd? I don’t know. There were calls from in front of
us for help. They had wounded. The guy next to me who was connection point, he went
over and during that time, again, the cat calling, the yelling, ‘Who are you? Prove it!
Who was the 16th President of the United States?’ questions about football, questions
about this, that, and the other trying to prove that these guys are who they are. The guy
who went over the first time got shot. I went over and got into the hole and then I and
two other people carried him down and we took him over to the LZ at the saddle and then
came back. In the meantime the platoon had gotten the order, ‘Fix bayonets,’ and they
went over the top. When I got back to platoon they were back in the trenches and had
secured the perimeter.

The next day I wound up on the party cleaning the lines. When we were digging
out the NVA who had come in, they were kids. Well, hell, I was a kid. At that time I
was still 18, hadn’t turned 19 yet, but just the size difference, the lack of facial hair, the
build, they truly looked like junior high school kids to me and I remember one and he had
his arm sort of wrapped around a construction pole that he was holding like it was
comforting him and you could see the tear trails through the dust on his face. I wont say I
became a pacifist but the idea that there wasn’t that much difference between him and me
sort of sunk in. He was doing his thing for fatherland and freedom, and I was doing my
thing to save the world from communism.

Anyway, we had gotten different calls at different sides of the Pacific and there
we were. The bodies were taken and I think one of the reasons probably the Vietnamese
often feel so strongly about us is the way we did handle the bodies. The bodies were
burned because we had no way to bury them there, that hard clay, we couldn’t bury them,
no one’s going to send a chopper to pick them up. They had been stripped of anything of
value with regard to intelligence when we were getting the bodies ready to dispose of
them, looking at their wallets and effects, a little bit of cash, a picture of a girl, letters in
Vietnamese which would be of interest to the intelligence people, but there was no real
difference between what he had and what you would take from me if the tables were
turned. Again, that was something that left an impression on me.
We returned to position. Evidentially there’d been a penetration before because from the smell of it there was another body buried behind our line where we were on the perimeter, a foul smell, something you don’t forget. Backtracking, we’d had some new people join the platoon and one of them was a young Mexican kid. Usually you try to find someone to latch onto. Maybe when I talked about Asaycek before, he was the person, he was my contact point, he was the person I wanted to learn from. Okay, this kid latched on to me and when we set up on the lines there, it was the third or fourth day, every time there was movement on the top of the hill, we’d get mortared. This time a round dropped right into the trench in front of his hole. There was the trench but then the holes went horizontal into the hill so the blast, that part that was right in front of it, that part just focused right in there and he was literally killed by a combination of shrapnel and compression. That also got to me because we’d spent a lot of time talking and there was a girl he was going to marry, all these personal things, but we were just talking to each other to keep the time. We didn’t really develop that close of a friendship, but still, he had sort of chosen me to help him and I sort of felt it failed, I failed. I was depressed by that.

SM: How did his death affect the rest of the platoon?

SD: He was a new guy. No one really knew him that well. So, when Lieutenant Courtney was killed, even though there were only a small number of the original people back, the people that had come after us, he was the only one they had known and he had that roughness, that charisma, and again, you knew he’d been one of us. So when he died, it hurt. When the stranger buys it, ‘Oh, he’s gone. Someone else will come.’ That was that. Okay, back to the big picture again.

The ambush that originally brought us to this location, there were seven bodies beyond the gate that had not been retrieved, and command from I Corps was we do not leave without our dead. We all come back or we stay until we all can come back. We were there about a week and the last day before we left, that evening, or the afternoon of the day before, we abandoned the forward slope; in other words, the slope where the bodies would be. Heavy artillery, Army 175s, Marine 155s, whatever, were dropping rounds on the reverse slope. The area was bombed as well. The heat melted the ponchos that were left in the trenches or left covering holes, whatnot. That evening there were
gunships, the C-47s, Puff the Magic Dragon or whatever they were calling them then, were roaming the area, dropping flares, spraying rounds. There was artillery coming in at the same time. It was almost like the 4th of July. They picked a crew for going down. They issued rubber gloves and facemasks and then asked for volunteers for a reaction force. We sat up and waited for something to happen and then they brought eight bodies back. Some NVA had wound up in a hole as well so they weren't able to discriminate and they brought him back as well. The next day, we pulled off the hill.

To the best of my knowledge I was the last person on Hill 681 and that was only by a few seconds because I was beating feet as fast as the next day to get off that place and the next guy was about three meters in front of me, but I was tailend Charlie. As the helicopter pulled off about 20 seconds later artillery started to pour on the position because they wanted to make sure that the NVA didn’t get any souvenir photos to show how they had driven the Marines away. We pulled away and I don’t remember where we went that flight, but I do remember our next place that we went was a place called the Rockpile. That was almost like a vacation. It was these huge pillars of stone scattered about and on top of one of them was a radio reception facility for intelligence or communication, I don’t know. We were there for about two weeks. It was green, it was lush. So, it would have been a beautiful place to spend a summer vacation. That’s 681, how we got there and how we got off. That was that.

SM: Well, how much more time did you spend there? When you made contact, was this pretty much all NVA now?

SD: Yes. 681, again, we’re right there very, very close to the Laotian border and then Khe Sanh is only a couple of kilometers south of the DMZ. So, there’s no VC up in that area, that’s all NVA.

SM: Any civilians that you came across?

SD: No. From 861 looking into Laos, you could see the remains of a village in the distance and you could also see what looked like revetments for artillery pieces, but couldn’t see any artillery pieces.

SM: Where did you go after that? I’m sorry, go ahead.

SD: From the Rockpile, we went on an operation, and I guess this is my first real operation out in the bush. In Quang Tri it was just patrolling. We were taken in by
chopper. We were told the next day that Alpha Company and 3rd Platoon would be point
going up a hill that had been selected for assault. Whether it be by bad luck because
someone didn’t understand the roughness of the terrain or a map-reading mistake by
someone and we weren’t where we were supposed to be. I think it was Charlie Company
of 11 got to the start line before we did, and battalion gave them the permission to go up
the hill first. Their point squad got up to the hill and eight dead, four made it back down
the hill, all wounded, and for the grace of God, there go I because we were slated to go up
that but because we could not get there at the start off time, they sent Charlie Company.

That night early evening we spent clearing fields of fire in the elephant grass and
this was the first time that I had really been given…I was given the position of fire team
leader. I had four guys under me, counting myself. I was worried, I was hyper.
Anyway, we got ourselves set up, set out the claymores, distributed things the next
morning. That night, hearing noises, lots of noises out, hearing noises like people
moving, hearing sounds like equipment clicking, clanking, in the distance. Got
permission to throw grenades. We didn’t have any real fighting positions there. There
was no wire so they were operating under the assumption that the enemy didn’t really
know where we were, either, and so no firing of weapons unless you have a firm target.
Radio permission to use grenades, heaving grenades to the distance where I thought the
sounds were coming. Okay, no more sounds. Was someone out there? Were they trying
to avoid us? I don't know. Was I hyper and just scared? Probably. But, there were no
more noises.

The next morning one of our guys was burying his machine gun rounds because it
was too heavy for him and I got after him, the noise attracted the squad leader. Okay,
this was a black guy and neither the squad leader nor I were in a situation to get with him.
It was sort of the situation that we had before. He was a street tough, whether he joined
the Marine Corps because it was a situation some judge told him, ‘Go to the Marines or
go to jail,’ or whatever, I don’t know, but the only thing he ever talked about was his
experience shooting somebody in the Detroit riots. Whether he was trying to impress us
or not, I don’t know, but we didn’t want to have a situation here, like this, in the middle
of the field. So, he called down a corpsman from company headquarters and that was the
first time I had seen a…he really ragged this guy. The corpsman was black and he was
incensed because those machine gun rounds were basically to save his life. The machine
gun laid down a base of fire when the corpsman had to go to someone. If there were no
rounds, he was probably going to get killed because the enemy had nobody shooting at
him with enough firepower to force him to keep his head down. So, he just really tore
into this guy and gave him hell. There was no way I as a white lance corporal or the
white corporal could have done what this guy did to him and that was basically both scare
him, humiliate him, and tell him what his responsibilities were. That was that. We
moved out.

We went up the same hill where we’d had the firefight the day before. We took
the hill. There was no resistance. There were some people running, NVA running down
one path and there was some shooting there but no real return fire.

From the day before, the whole hill had been bombed mercilessly, artillery and
air, and it was just…what it looked like it had been clear cut by a chainsaw or just a
random chainsaw, just heavy splinters, broken, thick, heavy trees and two man, two,
three, four man bunkers built into the floor; nothing really standing high where you
would have a field of fire or where you could see it, but very, very low to the ground on
the top. Okay, I’m disjointed, sorry about that.

SM: That’s okay.
SD: When we came up the hill it really sort of spooked us because there were
stairs going up the hill and to the left and right of the stairs there were unmanned fighting
positions, and so you thought about the day before and the guys going up with that first
group. It must have been spooky and scary to them and they really walked into it.

SM: Any idea what their losses were?
SD: NVA losses?
SM: Both.
SD: I have no idea. We found no bodies on top of the hill. There were eight
dead, that whole first squad, was either dead or wounded, eight of them, and four
survivors. I didn’t hear about other casualties for the people still approaching the top of
the hill, but I don’t think there were any other fatalities. Nothing serious other than those
that first got up there to the top. We got up to the top. We kept moving on to another
hill.
I remember sitting on this hill and down at the bottom of the hill in the evening I
was in a hole with our corpsman and we could hear jingling in the distance and there was
a watering spot down at the bottom of the hill and we called for and got the starlight
scope and we could see movement there so we called in mortars and when I think back
about it, it was like we were playing a computer game and there was a detached feeling
about it. There wasn’t the fact that we were trying to kill people. It was sort of like we
were trying to contain something and so we got the mortars behind them and walked
them back toward our position, stopped, and then moved them back again. In hindsight
that’s always…I’ve thought about it a lot because I was trying to kill those guys and at
the time it was natural, there was no feeling, but in hindsight it’s always sort of bothered
me.

We finished our operation there and then we got orders for Con Thien. We
arrived at Con Thien. I don't remember how, but we were there. These huge bunkers,
like a platoon barracks except you were dealing with structures that had five-six foot
walls and four to five layer beds. Again, the image of World War I comes up as far as
what was there. The next day we were going to go out on our first patrol. We got our
equipment together, we mounted up, we got outside, and a helicopter came in, whether he
was delivering supplies and picking up people who were rotating out, and he landed. He
started to land to take off. He landed again, told somebody to get out. They got out. He
took off again, he landed again, called the guy back. He got on the helicopter. About this
time you could hear the tubes pop in the distance and the mortars. This time the
helicopter took off and got the hell out of there. The mortars landed on the LZ and about
six guys were wounded including me. I guess, I don't know, some guys didn’t have on
their flak jacket. I had my flak jacket on but I didn’t have it snapped because we were
still mounting up. You wanted the looseness, whatever.

Anyway, I caught a piece of shrapnel in the sternum and in the left knee. That
was number three, third Purple Heart. Department of the Navy had a policy; if you were
wounded on two occasions and hospitalized for more than 48 hours each occasion, or if
you were wounded on three occasions, you were removed from Vietnam. You were
given a choice of duty stations; the Philippines, Okinawa, which was not part of Japan at
that time, or Japan Proper, and I chose Japan. So, I was Medevaced out.
The battalion headquarters was still at Phu Bai. I spent a week or so at Phu Bai waiting for processing. At that time the first sergeant asked me if I wanted to stay in country with battalion headquarters. He looked at my record and obviously it didn’t say I was shooting off guns in the perimeter in the first week or two weeks I was there. He said he’d like me to stay and in the back of my mind I knew there was a standing order in 1st Marine Division that said anyone with an O311 MOS will be in the field. I was happy to get out of Vietnam, and the fact that they’d already hit me three times, you start to get superstitious. So, I said, ‘Sorry, top, but I’ll take my chances in Japan.’ So, went through the paperwork and out I came. There was one problem and that was that my first two wounds, they only had the tag for the second wound and so I had to chase down the corpsman who had treated me for the first wound. He was still there, and he verified that he had treated me on February 4th. So, that was three, and so I got my change of assignment to Japan.

I’d already been awarded the two Purple Hearts because they just operated on the issue of you reported to the hospital what had happened to you and so who was it, Crulak, who was Commander in Chief Pacific for the Marines, had presented me my first two Purple Hearts at the hospital and I remember being very surprised when he showed up because he’s about 5’2”. He was a lieutenant general in the Marine Corps, and when he was in the hospital talking to us, it was just all I remember is the softest, gentlest voice you could expect, soothing words, kind words, thoughtful words, and just sort of out of character for what I was expecting from him.

Anyway, I got my change of orders, change of assignment, and was sent to Okinawa again for papers to get straightened out, and there was also one other problem; you could not enter, at the moment, you could not enter Japan with open wounds and so I had to wait in Okinawa until my wounds were sufficiently healed that I could take care of myself to meet the standards or whatever it was for entry into Japan. I did my thing, they packed the wounds and I’d unpack them and dress them and whatnot. Everything got straightened away and then off I went to Japan. That was middle of August when I arrived in Japan. I was there until January, mid-January. The experience in Japan was very good, and to a certain extent that’s why I’m here now. I liked it here.

SM: How much time did you have left in your enlistment?
SD: I originally enlisted for three years so I had another year and a half to go. Well, to make a long story short, when I got back to the states the Marine Corps had so many people coming in and so many people coming back from Vietnam that they didn’t have enough beds in the states and so they gave me a choice of take the duty assignment of our choice, which might be Vietnam, go back to Vietnam, or get out. So, I chose the third option of taking an early discharge.

SM: What was the relationship like - you talked a little bit about your time in the Japan - the relationship between the Marines that were stationed there and the Japanese civilian population?

SD: There were no problems. Well, there were problems because they wanted our money and we wanted to get laid. So, there was friction. There were also people that did stupid things when they were there. I was assigned to the Provost Marshall’s office. I came from being a rifleman, and then suddenly I’m an MP, standing the gates at Iwakuni. So, I had some contact with civilians on an official basis at the gates, usually some NCO or some officer trying to smuggle a young lady into his quarters for the night. Off duty relations, if you were civil and polite, the Japanese were very, very kind to you. If you were a drunk and a lout, they were contemptuous.

I had situations where I’d be, on a Sunday, near Iwakuni base there is a popular tourist attraction, Kin Tai Bridge, and then there’s Iwakuni castle, and because my pay records were slow in catching up with me I didn’t have any money, so I’d walk to Kin Tai and just take in the sights of tourist places; cheap thrill for me. I’d just go there and sit near the bridge and you’d have school kids come up to you to practice their English. The adults didn’t bother you, but again, it was just pleasant. It was a civilized place in Asia, which I had not experienced up to that time. So when I arrived there I was not very sympathetic to things Asian and probably was a little hostile.

After being there a while I began to appreciate the differences, both in culture and the differences in lifestyle and could be a little more open about it. The people were kind to me. Working at the security gates, it was a little bizarre because at that time the treaty negotiations were going on between the United States and Japan about the return of Okinawa. There would be demonstrations out in front of the gates and before the demonstrations we would get information from the Japanese police about when the
demonstrators would arrive, how many demonstrators would arrive and demonstrate, and what time they would leave. Then, we were also told that there would be three levels of security; outside there would be Japanese police. The next level would be the base security guards, Japanese security guards. Then, finally, the MPs. Japanese police could hit Japanese. Japanese security guards can hit Japanese. Marines do not hit Japanese. No way this is to happen. If you get someone that for some reason makes it past those first two layers, do not lay a hand on him. You hold him firmly, do not – other than holding him and securing him until you can give him to quote ‘The proper authorities.’ Do not touch him. They don’t want a picture of some six-foot Marine laying out a five foot Japanese demonstrator with a Billy club. So, the orders there were very precise.

On the base, relations to Japanese? Okay, they were made more tense because in the barracks I was in with the Provost Marshall’s office. The Provost Marshall’s office would take temporary people from the other members of the Marine Air Wing stationed at Iwakuni and bring them into the organization for three months at a time. One of my roommates, a sergeant, before he came to the Provost Marshall’s office, had gotten drunk and come home by bicycle. The problem was, when he went out, he walked, but he came home by bicycle. Now being not so smart a guy, he finally decided, ‘Well, I’ll keep the bicycle.’ Well, not only did he keep it, then he also decided, ‘Well, to make sure no problems happen, I’ll paint the bicycle.’ So, he kept it, he painted it, and then he got caught and then we had to arrest him for petty theft and send him to the Brig. Now, this sort of thing did not help create good relations with the local populous. But, in the main, it was things like this were taken care of very quickly.

When I would go out, I had no problems with people. I’d go drinking. I would sometimes go drinking outside the quote…I’d go to the off limits areas because they had better bars. The bars at that time, number one, they were luxurious. You think of the old Busby Berkeley films, the rotating balls and the shiny walls and the girls in shimmering dresses and nobody challenged me when I went into these places. Now I don’t know if there was a cover charge, but I was this big gaijin, this big foreigner, and nobody was going to pick on me. I just go drink and then people would come and talk to me. I met one fellow who then I met again in Hiroshima and he worked for a department store and he showed me around Hiroshima. He was looking for someone to practice his English. I
met a truck driver who was just looking for someone to drink with. We’d talk, try to talk. I didn’t speak any Japanese and they didn’t speak much English but we’d drink and talk and the bartenders would pour absinthe on the counter and set it on fire and say, ‘Wow, hey, soda! How about this?’ I’d say, ‘Yeah, that’s pretty strong stuff.’ Then he’d give me a drink. It was, what, R rated fun in the bars. As long as you didn’t, like I said before, didn’t become obnoxious, then there were no problems. Did I go out in civil society? Did I go out to a church out in town or did I go to picnics for different festivals, celebrations? No. That was not what I was into in those days.

SM: Good enough. Well, when you left Japan, did you know you wanted to go back?

SD: To the States?

SM: No, back to Japan. Did you know that?

SD: I knew I wanted to continue…I didn’t know what I wanted to do at that time. I knew now I was going to go back to college. I’d made that decision. Now at that point in time, college was still at least a year and a half away, until the end of my enlistment, and so before I really made a firm commitment to coming back to Japan, well, I’d have to get out of the Marine Corps before I could do that. I enjoyed my experience. Did I want to come back? Yes. Could I come back? I was young, hungry for information, hungry for knowledge, and horny. Now, that combination leads to education and marriage. So, education would not stop me from coming back. Marriage probably would, and so thinking about that, did I want to come back? Yes. Would I come back? I had no idea.

SM: When you returned to the United States, where did you enter the United States and what was the reception like there?

SD: I reentered at Norton Air Force Base, which was about 12 miles from Redlands, California where I went to high school. While I didn’t go back to Redlands at that time, I got to Norton and the main thing they were worried about was drugs and guns. They were searching everybody, searching all seabags, all luggage of any sort to make sure there was no contraband. It was just very, I call it very strict, very severe. They wanted to make sure you knew that you were back in the civilian peacetime Marine Corps and that they were checking everything very carefully. If you had something and
you wanted to get rid of it, get rid of it over here, and if you don’t have anything, bring
your stuff here and let us inspect it.

I had leave and so immediately I went on leave to where my parents were and at
that time and at that time my dad was stationed at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. I flew across
the states to Virginia and then flew back to…well, I got another hop, and this time was
much less luxurious. It was a four engine, C-56 flown by an Air Force reserve unit. I
was getting very antsy because we took off three times and changed two planes before
they got one that they felt would make it all the way and then landed at Dulles Air Force
Base and then took the bus to Redlands, visited some people in Redlands, or tried to visit.
One person in particular disappointed me because he turned me away at the door.
Whether it was because I was in uniform or because he had just forgotten me, I don’t
know, but it was sort of a feeling, ‘I don't want anything to do with you.’

I visited the doctor that I had worked for at a short time as a test tube cleaner and
my mother had worked for him as a receptionist in their office, in the doctor’s office, and
he put me up for the night. Whether he had a…oh, he had served in the Coast Guard
during World War II and had served in the Pacific as a small boat operator, and I guess
he had some sympathy for my situation. Anyway, his wife had recently passed away,
and he let me stay in a room for the night and cooked me breakfast the next day. So, it
was pleasant and he and I talked for a while and then he went somewhere and I went to
sleep. The next day I went to Camp Pendleton, checked in, and while 1st Battalion, 1st
Marines sticks with me, I do not remember the regiment I was in at Pendleton.

But, I was regular infantry regiment and spent the next, what, four-five months
playing games in the hills, because of budget restrictions we didn’t fire blanks. We
yelled, ‘Bang, bang!’ and a couple of times played aggressor. That was great fun. I can
understand how the people can get off on that sort of thing. It was one, it was really
rather comic. We were playing aggressor and we were supposed to get caught. They
were supposed to run a night assault on our position so we had to sit on the top of the hill
and just wait for them around the bonfires and whatnot and hope that people didn't get
too worked up for some of the things we had done the day before. We were waiting and
the company commanders put their troops on line and they got everything going and they
marched their people into a ditch. There had been a ditch freshly dug, a trench, to lay
cable of some sort and they didn’t know about it so they had started on one side of thisoad, they started up, and then they just dropped their whole company into the ditch and
we’re sitting up the hill waiting for them to come and they never came, so I guess we
held them off.

The next morning they, instead of attacking us, had set up on a position on
another hill and so we said, ‘Okay. Let’s see how far we can push this,’ and we got the
slowest guy in our unit, not very smart, and we broke the rules. We brought a hard
helmet. We were supposed to only have soft covers. We had one helmet. We gave him
the helmet. He had his M-14 and we sent him down to where they were gathering water
with their canteens and we sent him down with a bunch of canteens as well and then he
just joined their people going back into their unit and walked up to their CP and went to
the company commander and said, ‘Excuse me, sir,’ and he turned around and then he
held his rifle into the air and started shooting off blanks. He then told the company
commander, ‘I’m sorry, sir, you’re dead,’ and from our position where we were watching
from the other hill through binoculars, it was really hilarious watching all the feathers fly
and the screaming and the yelling and the raising the arms and he’s just sort of standing
there oblivious to the whole thing. There were times that were fun.

Another time we got isolated on the base by a typhoon and heavy rains that
washed out the bridges and hungry Marines, when the mess halls are empty, are
desperate, and they wouldn’t let us go to the C-rations that they had stored away because
those were in case of an emergency and just because we’re hungry and we can’t get food
from the mess hall is not an emergency. So we had people out laying snares for rabbits,
chasing down snakes. One guy went to special services and checked out a bow and
arrow and went trying to hunt rabbit with no effect. But, those sorts of things at that
times seemed very funny, and made life stateside at least bearable.

SM: What was the food like in Vietnam?
SD: We had standard canned C-rations. I actually, I enjoyed ham and limas. The
worst thing going was the ham and eggs. A can of pineapple was pure gold. No matter
where you were, when you opened that can, that pineapple tasted cold. I remember one
time sort of after we left Quang Tri they set us down in a location and we had basically
what boiled down to a barbeque. We had steaks and beer and potatoes, and occasionally
something like that would come up. One time at 861 they delivered hot meals from
regiment or battalion or wherever, and I mean real hot meals, mess hall type stuff in the
containers, and distributed it. So, things like that would happen occasionally but mostly
canned C-rations. One time we got the LRRP rations, the dehydrated stuff. But, pretty
stable fare. You learned to make due. For example, you’d take the cocoa and the cream
substitute, a little bit of water, and make a chocolate syrup to put on your pound cake,
little garnishes to break the monotony of the food.

SM: Well when did you get out of the Marine Corps?
SD: I got out, it would be August, the first or second week of August of ’69.
Okay, immediately upon getting to the unit in California I asked to be transferred to the
east coast because my family was on the east coast then. Finally, I got accepted and I
was sent to the Marine barracks at Norfolk. I arrived at Norfolk and someone came down
the line, looked at my file, saw that I shot marksman, and was now sergeant, and I don’t
know what possessed him, but he sent me to the rifle range as a coach. So, my last three
and a half, four months, I was a rifle range coach at Damneck, Virginia and finished my
career in the Marine Corps being armed with an M-1 rifle. The base there, because we
taught both Navy and Coast Guardsmen marksmanship, and on Navy and Coast Guard
ships they were still using the M-1 Garand, we were also issued M-1s. So, the last time I
qualified for marksmanship, I qualified with the World War II weapon. Have you ever
used an M-1?
SM: Yes, sir.
SD: You’ve got the clip that you load in from the top and that was really a
challenge getting used to when working the range. We get crews coming down from
Quantico to qualify, and these guys were a real pain in the butt because most of them
were officers in staff jobs who came down often thinking they were God’s gift to
America and were not willing to take any advice whatsoever. Maybe I wasn’t the best
shot in the world but I could definitely read their spots in terms of what they were doing
and adjust and some would listen and some wouldn’t because they were determined to do
it their way. That was real fun.
People would come down and shoot for a week, would qualify on Friday
morning, and then to finish off the day on Friday afternoon we’d play softball for a keg of
beer, and of course all the people Friday morning would be wanting to go home and so
they’d leave us in the afternoon with about a half a keg of beer and there were only eight
of us left at the base of our detachment after that so we’d put away a lot of beer. It was
the greatest time that I ever had in the service.

Then, it came for me to make the decision about getting out. They came to me,
gave me my choices, back to Vietnam, duty assignment of our choice, or get out. When I
said, ‘Get out,’ then they immediately set me up for an interview with the career advisor
in Norfolk. I had to go down for an interview with him. There was a gunnery sergeant in
there, ramrod straight, lean, muscular, real Marine, and he looked at me and said, ‘Well,
son, what sort of plans do you have?’ and I said, ‘Well, I’m trying to get into college and
I sent off letters to see if I can get admitted even without transcripts and whatnot,’ and he
said, ‘That’s fine. Get out of here. You’ve got a better future than I can plan for you at
the moment. If you want to come back in a few years after some college, give us a call,’
and off I went. At that time I had been writing to a junior college near where my family
lived at Fort Lee, Virginia. The president of the university still used his old title, Colonel
Carson. So, I made an appointment with him, I showed up in uniform, and said I wanted
to get back to school but I had no transcripts, no recommendations, and no TOIC
scores…not TOIC…

SM: SAT?

SD: Yeah, that’s right, you remember, no SAT scores. He said, ‘Nice talking
with you, son. Follow me.’ He took me into the registration office and said, ‘This young
man is coming here this fall. Take care of him.’ And so they got me started and I spent a
year at Richard Bland College in Virginia and then transferred to University of North
Carolina at Wilmington, and then after Wilmington I got admitted into Duke. The first
three years of college I was regular GI Bill and then I made the transfer to vocational
rehabilitation. After getting out of the service, I was rated at 50% disability because I
retained all the metal and the doctor said that basically I would be developing an arthritic
type condition in the joints where I had wounds, and so that was one knee, one elbow,
and one shoulder. So, he was right. I’m starting to experience pain at this time of the
year. My shoulder and elbow are acting up, but no serious complaints. The thing that
was funny to me, while it can be a job risk, my profile was to avoid work that involves
prolonged sitting which I guess that means I’ll just be standing up in the classroom the
rest of my life.

SM: When you came back to the United States and as you were reintegrating
yourself into American society, did you have any difficulties?

SD: Did I have difficulties? Well my situation was unique in that I was coming
into a military family. I didn’t completely leave the military. I gave up my enlisted man
club privileges for O Club privileges because my father was an officer at Fort Lee,
Virginia. So the people that I often socialized with were military. I picked up a little
money working bartender at different parties for people. I’d always make a point of
wearing my Marine Tie pin. Someone at the party every night would be hanging around
the bar getting a drink and they’d say, ‘Where’d you get that?’ and I always used to smile
and say, ‘I earned it.’ There was a certain amount of respect that I felt, and so there
wasn’t a feeling that I was a criminal or guilty of something. They said, ‘You went, you
did, that’s okay. Good for you. Glad you got back.’

When I was at the junior college, probably 50% of the guys in the college were
avoiding the draft, and I knew one guy who had been in junior college for almost five
years and he was getting desperate because he needed to maintain his student status but
he was running out of courses. There were other people for other reasons who were there
but a lot of them were just to avoid the draft. If they could maintain their student status,
they would. When I got to Wilmington, at that time Wilmington had relocated I guess
about three or…no, not even two years before because you could still see marks on the
ground left from the construction period. There were just the three main buildings of the
campus and the library. I remember, I was a history major and my advisor suggested I
take a political science course. There were three political science professors. One should
have been retired, but he was a gentleman from Baltimore, graduated from John Hopkins,
and was teaching political science there. I was in his class. Okay, the chemistry was
wrong. I didn’t like him. The one thing he kept talking about all the time was his war
experience and that was working in the draft board in Baltimore and choosing these little
unlucky suckers who are going to go out and fight for their country and that sort of thing.
At the time of Kent State, it was a conservative campus. There were those there who
said, ‘Okay, these anti-war, pro-commie, protestors got what they deserved,’ and that sort
of thing, and that rattled me because I still had this image in my mind I went there to fight for something, an idea that was good. I hadn’t lost that. Shooting protestors on a university campus in the United States was the exact opposite of what my purposes were. This was not part of being American and this was nothing to revel in. I tried to make my point across but it was just sort of lost in the noise and the only other thing I could think to do at that moment was to drop the course. I wanted out of that course. I didn't want anything. My advisor said, ‘If you drop it now, you take an F. Put up with it.’ I did. I’ve been angry at myself every since because I felt I failed myself and I failed what I truly believed in.

SM: Could you tell any other differences in terms of the atmosphere of the country as compared to before you went to Vietnam, and then when you came back from Vietnam?

SD: No. As a high school student, I was politically naïve. When I got back to college, I was busy trying to catch up with a couple of years learning different vocabulary. I was just trying to catch up. I was a bit of a loner and so to a certain extent what was going on around me didn’t bother me and while I had the GI Bill I was also working and so I kept busy and kept to myself.

I did get involved with the church where I went to college in Wilmington there and I was advisor to a junior high school group. I created a bit of a stir there, because I didn’t really teach the Bible. I put them to work and had them doing programs at old folks’ homes. There were some kids that considered themselves playwrights, songwrights, and whatnot. Okay, then we’ll do something at an old folk’s home. When they finished they created a little bit of a stir because they bought me a case of beer, and that created a little bit of stink in the church because junior high school students are not supposed to buy their church advisors beer. But, I sort of stuck to myself. I got caught up in my own world. I didn't really worry about the war and what was happening because I was trying to achieve my own goals then. The war was part of my past, not part of my future.

When I got to Duke, that place was much more politically charged but there was nobody that had the same experience that I had among my peer group. So, they just looked at me as a curiosity. We talked a little but they didn't pursue it. Again, the
politics just sort of flew by me. At Duke, there were four Vietnamese students. There were two seemingly normal guys. There was one guy that seemed to be going crazy because he kept brushing his hair so often that he had a bald streak along the side of his head, and he was supposed to be some sort of mathematical genius, and then there was one guy in his late 30s who was in the political science department but by reputation was basically there to watch the other three. I used to talk to the older gentleman who was there because somewhere he found out that I had been in Vietnam and then he started talking to me. He came to me and started talking to me trying to find out where I was, where I did, and he had been a regional commander in the central highlands and when the country collapsed, it collapsed…this was ’75, in the spring of ’75, when south Vietnam just fell apart. He was going berserk, and he would sometimes come to me just to talk about if I’d heard anything, thinking I would have sources of information or anything. You saw he never gave a feeling that he would then let down or deserted, but there was a lot of tension in his voice and in what he was talking about.

SM: Did you ever encounter any kind of hostility as a Vietnam veteran on these various college campuses and elsewhere?

SD: No. Again, I didn’t wear it on my shoulder. If someone talked to me, they asked me about it and they raised the subject. I didn’t protest for the war, I didn’t protest against the war.

SM: Did you ever feel uncomfortable talking with anybody about your Vietnam experience?

SD: No. There weren't that many instances. Like I said, I didn’t actively bring it up. I wasn’t going to live in the past. So, if someone wanted to talk about it, if they knew it I was willing to talk. But, not that many people pushed it.

SM: Did you talk much about your experiences with your father?

SD: Not really. When we got back there was a different feeling, there was a different relationship between us before because I had come to the family kind of late and now I was coming back in a very much later situation and at a different level of maturity. So, we recognized this difference but we didn’t really talk about the war. He didn’t ask me about what I did. He knew what I was from the letters that I had sent back. They were always addressed to him and my mother, so he read all the letters that I sent back
and so he knew what was happening, and then from his contacts he was able to find out information about me when I was in the hospital.

SM: How did you feel about some of the exchanges and policies that occurred, for instance, with the Johnson administration leaving and Nixon coming in, you had Vietnamization, of course eventually the complete American withdrawal, and then the fall of Saigon. How did these things effect you, and did you think about them much as they were occurring?

SD: I thought about it when I was at Duke because at that same time I was having this interaction with the Vietnamese students there. I felt we had deserted an ally, we had left them high and dry. That didn’t mean I thought the war was one that we could win. We could win if we’d had the determination, if we’d been willing to realize what kind of war it was. It was a Civil War. It was not World War I. It was not war in the trenches to be won by massive firepower. It was a Civil War in which you had to fight using your brain and you had to fight getting the cooperation of the people on the ground. You could not be the enemy of all Asians. You had to be the friend. People just didn’t understand this. You don’t win friends by basing your war on a body count system. I felt we were poorly led, that it was a domestic policy driven war by politicians who didn’t understand what was happening and by generals who in the main were fighting the last war. I’ve read things about the Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons and people saying that was the way to go, but I don’t know. My only contact with civilians in Vietnam was really that one instance in Hue City. They treated me civilly; they treated me like we were fellow human beings in an island of chaos. They were kind to me. I didn't have this feeling of superiority or this feeling of, ‘Why can’t you fight your own war?’ We invited ourselves in and by doing that we had a responsibility to see it through. We didn’t do that. I think that much of the distress that individuals have felt is…the fact that we didn’t win, that we came away and there was no honor in the way we came away. You fight and you are proud of what you achieved. We fought, and we were proud of our ability, our skill, and the fact that maybe we saved some of our friends. But, we walked away with very little honor with regard to the result of the war. SM: What did you take away from your experiences in Vietnam that’s most important to you?
SD: I grew up. I grew up very, very quickly. I learned my limits, I learned what I could expect of other people, but more than anything else I just grew up. That served me well. I enjoy life. I’m always looking for something new, something that will excite me a little, will keep me on edge because I’ve walked close to the other side and I know I can enjoy life because nobody’s going to shoot at me anymore. I think this sort of relaxed feeling has served me well, this sort of contentment that I sense from being able to walk away. I’m proud of what I did. I’m proud of my experience. I’m proud of my friends. But, I also have doubts about did I really do my best. When you come out of a life and death situation, you come out and you’re okay. Was there anything that you did that caused pain to someone else? Did you fail a buddy? Was there something that you did that caused someone else to get hurt? That worries you. I still sometimes wonder. So, there’s a sense of satisfaction that I brought away. There’s also a sense of doubt.

Well, the other thing that brought away, it kept my interest in Asia, and in part if I had never gone to Vietnam I would have never really come to Japan. I would have never experienced this culture. That also got me started. So, it’s still very much…it changed my life and I guess in the long run it’s made my life better because I remember one time running into a junior high school friend in North Carolina, and he was so narrow. There was no left or right to be interpreted. There was no flexibility in his thinking and he didn’t have a sense of difference in the world. I’m glad I didn’t become like that. I didn’t want to become just a one way, one path individual, America right or wrong, love it or leave it. I made the decision that followed that path, but the whole experience expanded my horizons and made me look at both sides of the street. One of my professors accused me of being a closet communist. He says, ‘Your actions basically seem like that of a neo-conservative, but your philosophy would be more in tune with the streets of Leningrad in 1917.’ So, I don’t know where that puts me now.

SM: What did you think when this professor said that to you?

SD: I thought he was off his rocker. I really hadn’t thought that much about it. But okay, it started some thinking. At that time, I was reading E.H. Norman who was a socialist commentator in Japan in the 1930s and Norman was making great sense about class distinction and feudalism in Meiji Japan leading to the militarism of the 20th century and all of this class activism was resonating. My rhetoric at that time seemed to follow
that sort of philosophizing. But, again, my actions normally lean more toward the
conservative.
SM: You mentioned earlier that you had some thoughts about how the war was
fought, in particular the body count, the war of attrition. How much of those thoughts
occurred to you at the time, versus how much of that has been hindsight and your
reflection?
SD: At the time, it’s all reflection. I was just another jarhead, only thinking one
day to the next and hoping I could get out of the place in one piece. In hindsight, we lost
the war at nighttime. We never controlled the night. That’s what guerillas thrive upon;
the darkness and the movement. If they can’t move, they can’t collect taxes. If they
can’t move, they can’t ambush you. So, we never stopped that movement at night.
We became spoiled by the helicopter. The helicopter got us in and got us out, but
the idea of physically moving through an area and then coming back, making the total
sweep, that’s a much different process in terms of maintaining control on the ground. So
the helicopter was both a boon when you needed speed, but it also created a situation
where the enemy knew that you came, you flew away, and now the area was totally free.
There was usually no doubt. You retreated to your little firebase and left the space where
you’d just fought over empty again and theirs again. The war, Marines make very poor
martyrs and civil wars need martyrs and heroes, not body counts. You don’t win the
people, and that’s who you had to win. Really it wasn’t our job to win the people, it was
the ARVN’s job to win the people. But if we could have established that we are not the
bad guys. We are here to help you, not to be your new leaders, then I think many things
could have been achieved. But, geography, and the determination of the enemy, and the
lack of will of the people in Washington, basically said, ‘Sorry, we’ll let you swing in the
wind. We’ll go home and mull about this for the next 30 years.’
SM: Is there anything that you think we as a nation should take away from the
Vietnam War in addition to some of the things you’ve already mentioned?
SD: As a nation, we’ve got to fight our own ignorance. There’s always this talk
about isolationism and internationalism. It’s not really an issue because we’ve always
been isolationists. In the main, we’ve always had these two wide oceans and they
separate us from the news and as a general population we ignore news that is not local.
We’ve got to be more sensitive to other cultures, more sensitive to other people. We’ve got to study and if we study then and if we learn, then there’s a possibility of understanding when the next situation comes to play, such as what we’re experiencing now in Afghanistan.

I pray that we’re not being driven by our ignorance and not willing to learn by the experiences of the others, because the French played the same game we did and we had French people capable of advising us and we were not willing to take that advice or to make good use of it. You had people like Bernard Fall who wound up getting killed with a patrol of Marines near Da Nang I think, who had a lot of skill, a lot of know how, and in their work they tried to give it to us and we rejected it because we felt we knew better. That arrogance based upon a past victory…

SM: This is CD number three of the interview with Mr. Scott Dawson. Okay, sir, you were just saying that in terms of your perspective now, the value of American life, and I just wanted to cover a moment back what you said since the other CD ended so abruptly, but basically, if you would, say that one more time, that your feelings now are that although American life is precious…

SD: When you put your uniformed, when you put your soldiers, your Army, Air Force, Marines, in harm’s way, you’ve got to expect casualties. The main thing is, when you put them in harm’s way you’ve got to put them there for a reason, a just reason, a good reason. If the motivation is good, the people will support you and the soldiers and Marines and sailors and whatnot will put out their best and they will bring you home a victory. The political will in Vietnam was lacking. The military skill on the field was never lacking. So, when you come home, the thing you want most is respect. I never felt the feeling I wanted people coming up and shaking my hands and saying, ‘Good job,’ but I wanted too feel a sense that people cared, that people did not hold me and those others who served with me in contempt, and when you put people in the line of fire they’ve got to know that the country loves them, too, not that they just sacrifice because they love their country, but the country loves them too, that they should be…they want that respect. If you’re going to put people in the line of fire, you’ve got to be willing to back them up, both morally and politically, and hoping that both, the moral and political path is the same.
SM: Did you ever feel that people here in the United States upon your return didn’t treat you that way?

SD: I felt tension at times, but I never was...like I kept saying before, I didn’t wear my experiences on my sleeve. Someone really had to sort of search for them if they wanted. And so I was disturbed over what I sometimes saw on the news, but it never really hit me. I left. I graduated from...finished my Master’s at Duke in ’76 and came to Japan. So, after ’76 that was sort of out of the picture for me.

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss today?

SD: No, I guess that about covers it. The main thing would be that, okay, I served, I pride in my service, I have some dissatisfaction in the way my country behaved, but okay, I’m a survivor. I look back at it with a feeling of no regrets. I have no regrets about what I was involved in and the people that I fought with and I have no animosity about the people I fought against. It was a straight knock down fight and we seemed to take heavier punches than they do, not in terms of lives lost but in terms of the results.

SM: Have you been back to Vietnam since the end of the war?

SD: No, I haven’t. I’ve looked at tours coming from Japan, going from Japan to there, looking for the option. My wife isn’t very excited about that. But, if the right chance comes up, I’ll go.

SM: And what do you think about the way the US policy has evolved in terms of normalizing relations with Vietnam?

SD: It is basically a mirror of domestic politics. There needed to be a time of cooling down on both sides. The reopening has basically been opened by domestic politics, not diplomacy, and I would like to see an opening between the two countries. I’d like to see, also, a softening of relationships, not so much dogma on both sides.

SM: Thank you very much.

SD: Thank you very much.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Scott Dawson.