Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Ted Mataxis Jr. on the 13th of April 2002 at approximately 11:05 Lubbock time. We are in the Convention Center in Lubbock, Texas and this oral history is part of the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Thank you sir and why don’t we begin with a brief introduction when and where you were born, where you grew up?

Theodore Mataxis Jr.: Okay, that’s not as easy as it sounds, but we’ll go ahead and kick it off. I’m Ted Mataxis Jr, not to be confused with my dad who’s the general. I was born in Seattle, Washington 6 September 1944. At that time we were in Seattle for a very, very brief period. And then from there we bounced all around as I was growing up to basically went one over the world sort of coverage. We moved from Seattle just after a few months out to New York and from New York over to Germany when my dad participated in the occupation there (immediately after World War II). Then from there back to the States, Ft. Benning and other places. Then for first grade we bounced out to India so I lived in India for a year. So, during my youth and growing up depending on what grade I was in I was in a different country or a different school, practically every other year for a long period of time. My high school first two years were in Germany and my last two were in Bethesda, Maryland because my dad was (assigned to) in the Pentagon at that time working for General Taylor. So, I had an eclectic background growing up. Varied between Europe (six years), India (one year) and all around the
States, the States basically being New York, Pennsylvania (Colorado, Maryland) and Ft. Benning, Georgia.

SM: What year did you graduate from high school?

SM: What was it like growing up in that type of an atmosphere where you’re pretty much almost always on the go, always ready to move, always experiencing a new culture, a new environment a new community? How did that affect you growing up?
TM: Well, I think what it did first and foremost was it was very maturing process for you, but it wasn’t anything that was unusual because everyone that you knew went through exactly the same thing. It’s totally different than society for civilians where you make a move it’s normally a move and you go into a community and you’re the only new person there. In a military environment when they had the bases overseas and had rotations like that if you were there more than four or five months you were no longer the new person, but the old person there. So, as a group of people you got very used to change, and meeting people. Then over time you would find that the same people you’d known six, nine years ago come back again. It’s just like when you get in the military and cycle through various units. It’s a good parallel, it prepares you for that I think rather adequately.

SM: As you were growing up, how old were you when you finally realized that maybe the military was a career path for you?
TM: I probably didn’t think it was a career path for me until I got to Vietnam. I’d say that would be pretty safe. Another thing the moving did in addition to the culture is it also gave you a good capability to understand different cultures and pick up their languages. Like Mom and Dad were rather active after the war and their little futsfrau (German Maid) raised us, I spoke German as well as English just as a little kid. I didn’t retain the skill, but then the same in India a little bit of the dialects there. So, that’s something that gives you a little exposure when you do get up (older) and mature and go out, you’re willing to try other languages and stuff a little bit more readily. I think that was probably a big plus.

SM: What was it like in India? What do you remember about that? How did they react to Americans then?
TM: Oh, absolutely great. In fact, friendships you make there have been on my dad’s part, not my part because my gosh, that was in the early fifties so I was about (six) or (eight) years old. My memories (were) wrap(ped) around the monkeys in the yard and living in a house with a dozen servants, but no running water and outside toilets. We did have electricity and the sense of community that they Indian Army had as well as the other foreign exchange officers. General Jameson, who was an Australian, was someone I knew in India as a kid and then later had a chance to talk to him. I didn’t work with him in Vietnam, but had a chance to get up with him in Vietnam years later. Still when we got married he sent us something as a nice gift and I just talked to him about a year ago. So, a lot of those contacts continue over time.

SM: That’s the military relationship, what about the relationship with the civilian Indian population?

TM: There wasn’t really a lot of that other than the people that took care of you. Because it’s a caste system over there anyway, but we were part of the military structure, so there’s not a lot of interfacing with civilians. Like in Germany later when I was in the seventh, eighth and ninth grade or eighth, ninth and tenth grade in Germany there was a lot of intermixing there because if the age. You could go down and talk to the natives and sneak a beer or do whatever kids did. You know when you’re (12) or (15) years old, come on now, that’s about Cub Scout time (laughs).

SM: Did that happen? I understand in Germany especially and in Europe generally there’s really no restriction on drinking.

TM: Oh, no of course not. That’s the environment; it’s a cultural thing. I mean if you look at McDonald’s today in France they serve wine. It was accepted routine. It’s not like it is in the States where you have age limits and you’re trying to beat something. It’s just a different culture and you have to go with the flow wherever you are.

SM: You mentioned Germany, India. Other foreign countries that you were in as a child?

TM: In as opposed to living in?

SM: Well, did you visit quite a few? Did you travel a lot?

TM: Well, for example just taking the Indian Vignette—as an example we took an (ocean) cruise for three months going there from California all out through Hong
Kong and that area. Covered something like, good gosh, I think the total cruise was something like sixty-three different countries that we visited. So we spent three months going out, a year in India and three months coming back the other way through the Suez and everything. So, it was virtually one over the world coverage. In Germany when I was in high school for example we were there for the three years I was very active in scouting. One summer we pedaled bicycles around Germany, Holland, and that area on the Rhine and caught an old coal boat. Another summer went to England to travel around (and visited the first Boy Scout camp). Another summer as a Scout we went on the Mediterranean cruise and worked on a military ship all the way around the Mediterranean and got to see all the ports there. In that respect it was very interesting and very unique, great opportunity.

SM: What was the relationship like between American kids and German kids while you were there in Germany?

TM: Oh, excellent. You have to keep in mind when I was there the first time it was probably ’46, ’47 because my little sister was born there. Then back again probably ’59, ’60, ’61 and since then I’ve been back many, many time over the years. It’s interesting to watch how that culture has changed. Because the first time we were there the Americans were the only ones with anything. There was still a black market going because they were just looking for the basic necessities of life. Second time we go back the mark was 4.20 to a dollar. So that was relatively good. The buying power from an American perspective was very good. So there was a little bit of resentment at that time with the German kids because we had access to more than they did. You know it wasn’t anything significant by any stretch. Than later on when I went back to visit my sister living there with her husband who was in the Service and my nephew the rate was really just the opposite. The Americans were the ones who no longer had the economic fluency and the Germans were taking care of them. For example young NCOs sometimes lived in German homes where before it was just the opposite. So, the roles have sort of reversed economically over time.

SM: During your times in Germany did you ever get a sense of residual resentment over the defeat in World War II?
TM: Not at all. Let me qualify that. I could speak the language a little bit. Anytime you can speak anything a little bit it makes all the difference in the world. So as long as you make an effort to try they accept you on a totally different plane than if you come in as just an American. We have people that travel the world and stay in Holiday Inns or the Hyatt Hotels around the world and think they’ve been somewhere and seen something. They haven’t got a clue. So, if you get out and get into the culture people accept people as individuals rather than generalizations. That’s the way I prefer to travel.

SM: Did your parents foster that in you, that interest in other cultures, other languages?

TM: I wouldn’t say they necessarily fostered it. I would say as a result of the exposure it was accessible and you picked up on it. Things are presented to you and you take advantage of them or you don’t. Because at the same time there were kids, contemporaries of mine in seventh, eighth, ninth grade who would no longer talk German, or do anything else (with them). They were very egocentric and very oriented just on the American culture. I would think it was to their loss. Maybe by their frame of reference it wasn’t. Who knows because we’re all a little bit different.

SM: When you were interacting with German people did you ever get a chance to talk to some of the older, maybe veterans of World War II, the German veterans?

TM: No, I really didn’t talk too much to them because at that time and place in life that was not very high on my priority list.

SM: You were talking to young women (laughs)?

TM: Yes. Why not? I mean you’re only young once. If you miss it I’d hate to think I’d have to be doing that now. Did rather well with that, enjoyed it.

SM: The traveling that you did in Europe, did you ever travel very much into France or maybe make a trip across the channel to England and that kind of stuff?

TM: Oh, that’s what I was saying. Every summer, did that for multiple weeks. I mean not just a little bit. And what would happen then I was an Eagle Scout so I worked at Camp Freedom, which was the (American) Scout camp. So, I’d go to the Scout camp for half the summer and be on the staff there. Then the other half, go out and do the (traveling). What a wonderful opportunity it really was. When we got to go over to
England and travel around England. (Camp) Baden Powel where scouting started. It was really great, good experience.

SM: How were you received in France when you visited France?
TM: (laughs) The French are probably the ones that are the biggest rub in Europe and I don’t think it’s changed much. At the same time in fairness (we) have some very dear French friends. I’m talking about as a society in general. That’s right and that’s always the case. But an overgeneralization would be you know Frenchmen would only speak English or tell you he spoke English if he wanted to talk to you where anyone else would normally go the extra mile.

SM: When you graduated from high school in 1963, you were already part of the Reserves? How did you work that?
TM: You’re confused, I can tell.
SM: No I’m not confused. I assume you turned eighteen.
TM: No, you’re young. What’s October 20th 1962?
SM: Cuban Missile Crisis.
TM: Cuban Missile Crisis. I was in high school and the Cuban Crisis went down and I wanted to be part of that. I figured we were going to war at that time. The Reserves would let you join early and then give you a deferent until you graduated so I joined October of my senior year. The day after I graduated I reported in the military for active duty through the (U.S.) Special Forces Reserves. That six months active duty period at that time, which would have been June through the end of ’63 was for basic, advanced and then jump school at Fort Benning. Then since I had extra time there I was attached to the Pathfinder Committee down there to work with Major Peterson who was someone we’d known previously. That was very interesting. As a young private I had some very good opportunities because what I was able to do then is when I started back to college every summer I could go on active duty for a different course or different types of training so that it was like a part time job for me. I went back one summer and had Special Forces training. A couple of different summers went back and was able to have sniper school one time, mountain climbing school, stuff like that. So, I was able to really make the Reserves interesting and at the same time very developmental in what I wanted
to do later, which was go for a commission when I finally got enough credits to get up to
be in a senior ROTC class. That was a struggle.

SM: Quick question going back to your childhood.

TM: When I said a struggle let me follow up on that. As you pointed out I
graduated from high school in 1963. I graduated with a four-year degree from college in
1974. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to realize that’s sort of a long course.

SM: But you were doing a lot in between.

TM: Well that’s exactly what happened.

SM: You went to Vietnam in between. You were doing a lot.

TM: I quit college twenty hours short of graduating because of Tet of ’68. I was
afraid what’d happen at that time. Use the word afraid. What had happened at that time
was I was going to miss the war. So, I said, ‘Who needs college? I can always get that
later,’ and I quit and subsequently was commissioned in January of ’69 so I could get to
Vietnam. I immediately volunteered for Vietnam and made it over to Vietnam in ’69.
Then extended in Vietnam multiple times for ’69, ’70, ’71. Came back (from Vietnam)
in ’72. So I was there that entire time.

SM: I want to follow up with that. We’re going to talk a lot about that. But
before I do, the Cold War atmosphere, I think is an important aspect of this whole
experience for you. I wanted to find out from you, what do you remember about when
you were in Germany in particular, and maybe other places? What do you remember
most in terms of this ever present, ever looming potential struggle between the United
States and the Soviet Union?

TM: That was alive and well. In fact, during that same time frame the Berlin
Wall went up. And (who would) have ever guessed when that went up I never would
have believed in my lifetime that it would be coming down. (Look at) the changes that
have taken place. At that time I was sort of a spoiled kid I guess you could say in as
much as my dad was an O-6. There weren’t a lot of generals then, like there are now. He
had (commanded) the 505 (Battle Group), the premiere unit in Europe which so we knew
a lot of people over there and had friends that we had lived with multiple times over the
years that had moved to Germany also. When we were able to go to Berlin we had a very
good friend there, whose dad was in charge of the Berlin element, and that’s about the
time the wall went up. We went over and we made an effort to get behind the wall,
which we succeeded in just because kids will be kids. I won’t tell you who he is right
now because he’s a sink (laughs).

SM: Wouldn’t want that on the record for now.

TM: He’s a hoot, too.

SM: What do you remember about certain specific crisis that emerged in the
fifties in particular? For instance, do you recall where you were during the Hungarian
uprising? Did your dad talk to you about those kinds of things as you were growing up
very much?

TM: Not really, not a lot. But I was very familiar with that because when I
joined Special Forces Reserves in ’62 our area of orientation at that particular time and
place was Hungary. We learned Hungarian, (or) tried to learn it at the time. I was aware
of what was going on there.

SM: What group was that? What Special Forces group, do you remember? I
know this is going back.

TM: No, I honestly don’t. It was 20th SF group. It was out of the Washington
(D.C.) area. At that time whichever one it was it was located very close to the D.C. area.
Ft. Myer I think is where we were located at that time. I had a lot of paramilitary people
out of the agency that were affiliated with that particular organization at that time. I
crossed over and went off to college and when I went to college I transferred down to a
unit in Alabama, which is still there right by Columbus, Georgia. Used to commute for
that and then used to drive back to Washington D.C. (from) North Georgia and Athens
(Georgia) to make the jumps and meetings. So we sort of bounced in between units at
that time.

SM: What led you to Special Forces Reserve as opposed to just standard
conventional Reserves?

TM: Oh, that’s an easy fix. I’d mentioned that we lived in Mainz, Germany. All
I’d ever been exposed to were really impressive young officers and NCOs. All of which
at that time and place in growing up, if you didn’t have a CIB with a star on it, chances
are you were a putz. Or not in that MOS field. Because everyone at that time, I mean
keep in mind it’s the mid fifties. There were World War II veterans and also veterans of
the Korean conflict. At that time (in the mid fifties) I would submit the Army was probably as professional as it had been because of the experiences that they’d had and also the development of both the officer corps and NCO corps. I think when I grew up and watched that and those guys were sort of role models. There were some very good people. You know Airborne is a way of life and you sort of get sucked into that real quick, but that’s why (I went in Special Forces Reserves).

SM: When you were growing up in Germany do you remember in school and stuff like that drills? Going through any kind of drills for anything?

TM: No, not really. Other than the proverbial fire drill and I don’t think we had tornado drills. I don’t remember anything along those lines.

SM: Duck and cover drills, atomic drills, nuclear drills, that kind of stuff.

TM: I remember going through that I think in the States, but I don’t remember it in Germany.

SM: But you do remember here in the United States?

TM: It was big time when they came out with the little bomb shelters here. Scares and everybody wanted one and whatever. So it all ebbs and flows.

SM: The Cuban Missile Crisis, I guess actually before that the Bay of Pigs Invasion, when these events were unfolding and these types of things were occurring as a teenager how cognizant were you of them? Did you pay much attention to that kind of stuff growing up?

TM: Well the Bay of Pigs and stuff I was old enough where that was on my radar screen. So I was very much aware of that, very much aware of the promises that were made that weren’t kept as far as the air cover and stuff like that. Should have thought about that a little bit more.

SM: What did you think about the emergence of President Kennedy in this? Of course there’s a lot of mystique that surrounds him as our former president. I’m curious as a young military person or a member of a military family?

TM: That was just prior to that. Because the day Kennedy was shot I was in Ft. Benning in jump school. I had just graduated and was pushing other people through at the reception center there. So I mean that was very real. I thought even back then as a high school kid Kennedy was very impressive. I mean he was a sort of a guy’s guy. He
spoke very well, was very much of a visionary when you look at what he talked about. Very much so because keep in mind I had already made the decision in ’62 and was part of Special Forces. So, that framed everything I looked at. As you know wasn’t shortly thereafter that he came down (to Ft. Bragg, NC and) General Yarbrough hosted (him) around with the troops in the Green Beret. (The Green Beret was adopted shortly after that). Barry Saddler came out with his song a summer or two later. There was a movie by one of the (John Wayne) people going out the same. It really had a lot of PR (public relation) that heightened Special Forces at the time. So, all that was very much aware of that, at the same time also aware of the initiatives he was taking with the Peace Corps and other things. I think the thing that probably got the Peace Corps people to volunteer was probably the same speech that got the military people to volunteer. ‘It’s not what you can do for your country,’ and that sort of thing. I think he was a very effective and very dynamic person. I think for my generation he probably had a significant impact on. I would be surprised if a significant number of people, don’t have any data on it, but that was just based on my experience I would think so.

SM: What did you know about say 1962 when you joined the Reserves and 1963 when you graduated what did you know about Indo-China and Vietnam and the American presence there and the Advisory effort? Did you know anything?

TM: Oh, of course. The reason I did, remember I said we lived in India. That was the early fifties. Remember I said we got there, went out for three months and came back for three months (by ship). Six months around the world looking at different countries, but more important than that when we came back from India we went to live in Denver, Colorado, but my dad did not come back with us. He was shanghaied or knowing him volunteered for the Kashmir UN peacekeeping team there in Kashmir. (He) went out and sat on the border for a year there. Then the government gave him thirty days leave and for his thirty days leave he went to Indo-China and visited the French Army during that time frame. So his first visit to Vietnam was as early as ’52. I remember that because we couldn’t go and I wanted to. Later when I headed up the project in El Salvador I brought all my kids down just so they could get a good perspective of what a war was all about.

SM: Did he talk to you much about what he did up in the Kashmir?
TM: Oh, yeah not much. That was not a high adventure sort of thing.
SM: Yes that was pretty much a static defense type of thing.
TM: That’s what I’m saying. As a UN advisor your role is somewhat different.
He used to blow smoke up my skirt all the time about World War II and Korea. That’s something I hadn’t realized until just now. But things get indelibly inscribed and sometimes you never pin the tail quite in the donkey (know when you are developing your values). One of the things that really I had access to as a child was weapons so chances are I had it or had exposure to it. I grew up around weapons at that time in place it’s totally different than the Army of today. Everyone had war souvenirs. I grew up knowing a lot of the sub machine guns and machine guns of Second World War because they were in the library at home. That’s interesting. They were all registered through D. Watson all that, tobacco boats and donated to the museum.
SM: Did you get much time in terms of actually firing weapons like that?
TM: No, there was no firing. Other than at that time the weapons you fired we were all in the National Rifle Association (at Ft. Benning, GA). They used to have a little expert badge where you could go get your bars (awards) and all that stuff (shoot competitively). So every Saturday morning at Benning between scouting and the NRA those were actively consuming your time.
SM: Did you hunt much growing up?
TM: My dad did. I was always exposed to it. I did a little bit, but not a lot. I wasn’t an avid hunter, but I did some. (I was a competitive pistol shooter and went to sniper school. Guns have always been my favorite toys).
SM: What do you remember most about the Cuban Missile Crisis? What was your father doing at the time and what information were you getting do you think that maybe was not in public consumption at the time?
TM: Absolutely none. My dad has always been a very straight shooter. So we were (never) open to whatever was going on. He was working for General Taylor at the time. As he showed Ellesberg yesterday, about the time I went to join the Reserves he had a card where he was supposed to leave his family and go up and be in the big hole up there in Pennsylvania in case of nuclear attack. But I hadn’t heard that until multiple years later, he played that straight. It is incredible with what I’ve heard since. I think
that’s important for people to realize. Because I’ve read several declassified things (documents) about the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Russian ground tactical commanders had release authority for tacular nucs during that (time). If there was ever time we came close (to nuclear war) that was the time. I understand also that the Cubans were very proactive along those lines. Why put those things in my country if you don’t want to use them? Then you look at what (terrorism) they exported later. It was a very tight time for us. But it wasn’t meant to be the time.

SM: Along those lines just so the information is there. Of course there were actually tactical nucs available?

TM: Oh, yes.

SM: They could have used them and they were ready to be fired. Your initial exposure when you first signed up with the SFR (Reserves) with the delayed entry you went in, why don’t you go ahead and if you would describe where you went to basic training and some of those experiences? Your first exposure to the full time active duty Army.

TM: I haven’t thought about it in a hundred years (laughs). I remember some things, but not a lot. The longer I sit here, the more I can think of, kind of get there. I remember the day after I graduated (from high school) I went off to basic training and don’t remember any of the particular details there other than arriving at the reception center at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Ft. Knox, Kentucky had ‘Agony and Misery Hills’ and lot of long marches back there. It was a typical training environment. You got there and they told you how little you knew and you’re lower than whale shit for all intensive purposes. That was back during the time and all this ebbs and flows. It’s back at the time when everybody screamed and shouted at you, were in your face all the time, none of which would work with the soldiers I worked with later, even when I was a second lieutenant six, seven years later. I mean things just change. I went through basic training in the Army when it had what I would consider a Marine mentality to it for whatever that’s worth.

SM: The instructors there, do you remember if they were wartime veterans?

Maybe Korea, probably not World War II, but maybe Korean veterans.
TM: The NCOs were almost exclusively (ran basic training). If you were an E-
in the military about that time or higher or a captain or higher and it wasn’t infantry basic
training chances are they did all have CIBs and were decorated (combat veterans) along
those lines. But that’s something in growing up around that environment I just thought
everybody did. Because our culture, everyone we worked with the families as we moved
from place to place were basically those who were so inclined being an infantry (officers
and NCOs) from my father. That’s the group with which we grew up. I grew up thinking
everybody did this stuff.

SM: You went straight from basic into advanced infantry?

TM: Yes, basic then was detailed for my MOS.

SM: What was that?

TM: It was quarter master because the Special Forces at the time you could not
go in directly without going, because the Special Forces doesn’t need any ones, two, or
threes. So, you had to take a branch like that to get in (as a private). It did then provide
you jump school immediately thereafter. That was sort of the glide slope that I had,
because jump school is what I wanted to get to.

SM: When you went through the advanced infantry training that was at Ft. Knox
as well?

TM: Yes, I think so.

SM: Do you recall what the emphasis was there as far as weapons training and
stuff like that? I know it’s a long time ago.

TM: No, I really don’t. In fact I want to say I think we were all transitioning
from M-1 to the M-14 at the time. There was a lot of range firing stuff, but I don’t
remember the M-203s or anything like that out of basic. I think that was a little later in,
but I’m sort of blurred on what exposure was when.

SM: And you had a lot of weapons exposure before that.

TM: I took Special Forces training during the summers after that. So, I had a lot
of an eclectic schedule (week-end drills, summer camps).

SM: But when you went in for the initial training, you did go to basic, advanced
and then quarter master straight or did you have breaks in between them as well?
TM: In fact I’m trying to remember. I think the way it worked and I’m not sure, but you could dig all that up. I think they had a basic course and an abbreviated advanced course. If I remember right the training for logistics was there at Knox also, as was armor as was some others. So, you went through like a quick basic, a little extended basic or advanced in to basic and then you went to whatever your MOS would be. But I don’t remember anyone at the time where they went from there to the infantry (For me that was a quarter-master). I think what they did was use that as a staging for other support MOSs or armor which was right there at Knox. But I’m not positive on that.

SM: Now, when you went back after your initial training, you were in school between ’62 and ’69.

TM: Yes, in high school. I was high school ’62 and ’63.

SM: And then college.

TM: Then June of ’63 to December of ’63 was my six months active duty that we just finished talking about. In January of ’64 I went off to North Georgia Military College in Dahlonega, Georgia.

SM: Mountain phase of Ranger school.

TM: Yes, revisited. That’s a nice area. Got to know a lot of the natives in there. They’re pretty tough up that way. So, when I went to Ranger school later it was back home. But I was not much of a student at North Georgia. I’ll own up to that.

SM: You weren’t much?

TM: Weren’t much (of a student) (laughs).

SM: Ok, what made you decide that school?

TM: Well, that’s a good question. Not real sure. I mean I was not much of a student. There were several options that were available and that was the one I picked out of those of where I could go (that I was accepted to).

SM: Did you have a particular subject interest in terms of your high school experience?

TM: Yes, the same subject interest I had when I lived in Germany was in high school.

SM: History or military?
TM: No, young ladies (laughing). So, I went to North Georgia for two semesters. First semester I passed ROTC. That was it. Second semester I took all the courses I took first semester, other than ROTC I think I passed history that semester. So, I became a history major. I was wrestling with my dad at that time. I wanted to be active duty right now, go. He said, ‘No, get a commission.’ So, we were wrestling back and forth. After my second semester I think I about wore him out. He told me I could do whatever I cared to one way or another, but that was a hoot. But then I decided to focus a little bit more. I went from there because my grades really were poor. Not that I’m alibing by any chance, but I was also dyslexic and never knew that until 1978 when I went to Monterrey, California to take Farsi (Persian). After sitting in class the instructor after two days said, ‘Hey captain, you’ve got a problem.’ I said, ‘Tell me what it might be. I’m married, got a couple kids and a pregnant Golden Retriever. What do you think my problem is? Vietnam vet, huh?’ But it turned out I was a dyslexic. So, after North Georgia the only place I could go was a junior college. So, I went to Barnesville, Georgia to Gordon Military College where there I finally decided to get with the program. So, I went through two years in two years. What a concept. Then transferred to the University of Georgia from there. It’s at the University of Georgia that I stayed during that time. Got my commission through ROTC and quit twenty hours short of graduating.

SM: To get to Vietnam?

TM: Yes.

SM: During those years that you were in school, your father served over in Vietnam, correct?


SM: Did you have much chance to talk with him about his experiences before you went over?

TM: It’s ironic you would ask (laughs) because I just recently and I must say recently, within the last year went and found all the tapes (with pictures). He used to send me these little reel-to-reel tapes and would send one a month for about ninety minutes of dialogue on that. We just gave one of them to the Center (TTU Archives). That one pertained to the boat incident and what was going on in ’65. I’ve got eight of those tapes at home. I sort of grew up sort of listening to fireside chats sort of. Then in
growing up we always talked about military and World War II and Korea and that sort of stuff. That was commonplace.

SM: Speaking of that, back to the issue of growing up in Europe in particular. Did you guys go on terrain walks and things like that? Looking at some of the battlefields and talking about all that happened.

TM: Oh, shit, there’s not a battlefield in Europe or Pennsylvania that we did not visit. My dad’s idea of a good time would be go off to Normandy and sleep in the bunker and revisit you know?

SM: That’s cool.

TM: Well, it’s cool now (laughs). That’s why I say at the time and it’s all relative. ‘Oh, shit, here we go again. Another battlefield. Having fun now aren’t we, Dad? I hear in California they’ve got Disneyland or something.’ You know what I’m saying so it’s all perspective. I just had a great time with Dad. Wouldn’t trade any of it. I say that tongue and cheek, but you’ve got to frame it where you were at that time, not where you are right now.

SM: I guess back to the issue of Vietnam when you went over you had a perspective of what your dad had seen. He sent it back on tape (and with supporting pictures).

TM: Exposure. Part of that, too. One thing I think was a real swart for me early on as I mentioned earlier I was not a student. Never pretended to be. When I went on to get my doctorate it was just why not? Now, I’ve got two masters, an education specialist degree and a doctorate now, but I was ready for it. I decided once I got married and decided to have a family and settle down that I needed to get the other to get where you wanted to go. So, then it became very easy. But prior to that I didn’t have much focus worth mentioning. But where I did focus and was my field of excelling so to speak was in shooting through the NRA that I’d mentioned previously. But also through scouting. Make a long story short I was an Eagle Scout at age twelve. Had bronze, gold and silver palms shortly thereafter. Was a Scout instructor over in Europe for the three years that we were there in spite of my age. I went on in the explorer program. Got the Silver Award, which would be the equivalent of Eagle Scout, the explorer at an upper level program, which they don’t have now. They’re talking about brining that back. And then
the Order of the Arrow and all that other stuff. So I had a lot of experience. You know
you’d ask the hunting question with the camp and you know the other sorts of things.
There’s a very natural crosswalk between the scouting organization and military
operations. I mean the structure and the system. I guess that’s probably one of the
reasons I enjoyed the military. Used to love the little pins and badges, go anywhere for
them. But I was young and impressionable.
SM: The training that you received while you were in college, you stayed in the
SF, SF Reserves. If you would why don’t you talk about when you finally did get to go
to the Q-course and what your specialization was and what that training was like for you?
TM: Well, I didn’t go to the Q-course. That has changed over time. I went
through phase one and phase three. Phase two at that time was the MOS training, which
was based on the functions of an (Operation ‘A’ Team). Remember I said earlier I was a
quartermaster. I went in as a private and was a corporal when I went into the ROTC
program. So, my MOS was that of a quartermaster. (I worked in) the supply room with
the cross training and all that you’ve got to participate with the demo range and the
shooting and all that. It was not on an A-team during that time frame because of the rank.
You had to get there over time. So, phases (one and three) were at Ft. Bragg and that was
in ’65. It was just like they do now. It was field experience where you went out and
actually worked with guerrilla bands in constituted groups.
SM: You mean like Robin Sage?
TM: It’s equivalent thereof. Did all that. That was a lot of fun.
SM: What about the initial school, phase one?
TM: That was there also. You know it’s the same thing.
SM: How long was it? Do you recall?
TM: No, I don’t. It was maybe eight weeks or so. Eight or twelve. I’m not sure.
(Phase one focused on tactics and methods of instruction).
SM: Any of that stuff challenging for you? Any particular challenges you
remember, things that were difficult besides maybe some of the academics (laughs)?
TM: That’s fair. I would say that really it’s a process. As you go through it
doesn’t matter if it’s in basic training or advanced or jump school. You can look back in
hindsight and say, ‘Nothing to it.’ But at that time, given where you are and what your
exposure has been I don’t think I’ve been to many military courses that weren’t challenging n their own right except for perhaps the quartermaster school that I was sentenced to. That’s because you have to know how big a pallet is and what the airspace is etc. But that didn’t tickle me too much. I would say that almost everything I went through I found challenging at that particular time and place. It was not that any of it was a bore. None of it I knew already. You had exposure but that just enabled you to get a little bit more out of it. I would say it was all challenging in its own right given where I was and at the age I was. You know, developmentally appropriate (it was all good, clean fun).

SM: In terms of—back to the academic issue, because a lot of military training does involve academic work—

TM: But that’s not a problem or wasn’t for me. Where I had my problems basically was math and with numbers and stuff. So I’ve always been able to do anything but I had to work at it. My only problem was when I was in college I chose not to work at it. For the military I had focus and focus has been the key.

SM: Well, with regard to your dyslexia did that have any kind of a negative impact on learning, things like map reading?

TM: No, not at all. See I didn’t even know I had it. You work out forms of compensation, didn’t even know what they are at the time. It had absolutely no impact there. But not only did I have dyslexia but my eyes are 420-400. That’s one of the reasons I also went in the Reserves. Because the Reserves at that time and place, criteria was different than regular Army. So, I got a waiver for jump school. I’ve always been a short cut along those lines. So, I’ve always worked around that.

SM: How about if you would, what you remember about some of the other course you went through? You mentioned that you eventually were—did you go through pathfinder training as well?

TM: Not at that time. I was attached at that time (to the Pathfinder school). I don’t even remember. Jump school was in October or November or some time and I finished out. Jump school was three weeks. Went home for Christmas, but just prior to whenever they broke for Christmas down there. So I was attached to the Pathfinder Committee and worked with them, not as a student there, but they were running a class
that was finishing up by Christmas so I saw the last part of that class. They let me play
with them somewhat. We just went out on the field exercises and drops. For the most
part what they were doing then was they were working on low-level extraction with the
AC-130 and the Caribou. That’s (when) you eject a (para)chute and that (para)chute
would then pull out your load for re-supply (from the aircraft). That was a (re-supply)
strategy they were looking for the camps and stuff for Vietnam because that’s how they
supplied a lot of the camps over there. So, had exposure to that. But I was not a student
in the course. I didn’t go through the Pathfinder course until sometime later when I was
at Benning and as an instructor with the Ranger department. I think I went during that
time frame or with Special Forces. I don’t even remember.

SM: You said you went through a number of other different schools as well.

TM: Yes we went and some of those what they were the Reserve units would
also conduct courses. They’d put together a curriculum and you go off for a couple
weeks with a different unit and take special training along those lines. That was the
mountain climbing. The sniper school was I don’t even remember probably (five) weeks
or (six) weeks. What happened there, the sniper school was being conducted by I believe
the 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne division. They were getting ready to deploy to Vietnam at that time.

In fact, I was the only one in the class that did not deploy to Vietnam (with the 82\textsuperscript{nd}).
Colonel Clealand was the (battalion) commander that headed that thing up. That was a
very good course. At that time it was very primitive. We had the old M-1 with the M-84
scope and a little leather cheek pad. But the weapons were glassed. We had an
opportunity to just go out and really hone the skills. It was excellent. The thing about
that is it’s something that takes extreme patience. A lot of the training there is just not
the weapons side but also getting in position getting out of position, (route selection,)
camouflage and sheer patience. That was one of my favorite courses. I really enjoyed
that.

SM: What kind of final exercise did you have to pass that course?

TM: At sniper school? We had some maneuver exercises, but the final thing was
the (points) on your scores with your marksmanship and percent of capability. I don’t
remember what the cut-offs were but I remember what I used to shoot with iron sights I’d
be happy to hit with a scope nowadays. But that’s changed. But the weapons have
changed too. The M-1 was a good platform for a sniper. You could really reach out
there, even with iron sights. Where the M-16 just doesn’t afford itself to it.

SM: Now at that time did they have any silencing equipment?
TM: In the sniper schools we didn’t use any silenced equipment at all. Later on
in Vietnam and all that’s when you got into that stuff. But during the training phase not
that I remember. I don’t remember anymore.

SM: Or even subsonic ammunition or anything like that?
TM: They had a special ammo that we used.

SM: Match grade.
TM: Yes, it was national match. Some of the instructors had some that they
tweaked themselves a little bit. I can remember we sit there and you watch your vapor
trails go out. A long time ago that was a great course. I absolutely loved it.

SM: Now during this time you were going to school doing a lot of military
training in the summers, what kind of information were you paying attention to in the
news about Vietnam? How much?
TM: Not a lot. My dad was there, friends were there. At that time the focus
would have been probably less. Say we had been in a military community it might have
been different, then I would have been saturated with it. But that’s the lives people lived
I was saying growing up. But when you’re off at college and the fraternity stuff and the
ballgames and all that other stuff the focus was not there too much except for what you
received in ROTC. And ROTC obviously that was their primary focus and a great part of
what they would talk to you about. In ROTC I had one instructor particular, which is one
of the reasons I went to Georgia, by the name of Tony Herbert, who was the guy that
wrote Soldier, the book. He was the most decorated (NCO) in the Korean War. He was
one of my instructors there at the University of Georgia, really good fellow, really tough
man physically. He and Colonel Hackworth were probably, out of the Vietnam era too,
the ones that were very well decorated and did everything, but he ultimately broke his
sword or had his sword broken (I am not sure which).

SM: Did you ever know him?
TM: Who?
SM: Hackworth?

TM: Yes, I’ve talked to him many times. He’s a good friend of my dad’s.

SM: I’d like to get back to talk to you about Hackworth, especially his books and some of his outspokenness.

TM: I just know of him. Don’t think I’d have a lot to contribute along that line, but a few opinions. I’ve always liked him.

SM: While you’re there at-

TM: University of Georgia in Athens. I bounced around North Georgia, Gordon Military College, University of Georgia and then later got a masters from Georgia State. If it was in Georgia I went there probably.

SM: Was there much going on especially at the University of Georgia with regard to the war, the war activity, anti-war activity and that kind of stuff?

TM: There were two camps on campus, those who were willing and those who weren’t. No different than Texas Tech University’s conference right here. I don’t think any of us have changed our mind one way or the other since. That was an element there, as was a lot of other things. Civil rights was becoming an issue. That was a turbulent time for our nation as a whole when you look you know ’65 through—well I quit in ’69 because I went overseas and left that stuff behind me for a couple of years. That was a very trying time I think for everyone growing up in it. It didn’t matter if it was a college environment or high school environment. Our nation was really struggling with a lot at that time. Everyone was sort of polarized on their own camp, whatever camp that might be. We all knew we had the right one.

SM: What about race relations? What were they like down there in Georgia?

TM: They were growing, going through it. Georgia at that time never experienced anything along those lines. I don’t even remember if there were separate washrooms or fountains. I don’t remember any of that. I do earlier when I lived in Columbus as a child. You know ’52 through ‘56ish, or ’55 in there. But by the time I was off at college I think a lot of that had worked through. But I really was oblivious to it all.

SM: Was there a very large black population, student population that you remember?
TM: You know I couldn’t even tell you.

SM: What about maybe classes that focused on Vietnam while you were there at University of Georgia, any that you remember?

TM: Other than ROTC the only ones that were there because most universities are on the liberal side. There was one course, I was a history major ironically, one course where we had to read the book *The Other Side* and listen to the professor along those lines. So, he was sort of, if Jane Fonda had been datable he would have dated her I’m sure. I’ll leave it at that.

SM: How about Vietnam history and the history of Indo-China and that kind of stuff?

TM: No, not through the university thing but my dad had a very good library, Bernard Fall and all that. In fact I just catalogued his library for him this last year. He had 5,500 books and got them all by Bernard Fall and Vietnam and hundreds of things that we’ve collected over the years because I also collect. That part of it I was very much aware of. I was very, very much aware of all cultures and the diversity of cultures and the difference between cultures and languages just because of the exposure that I had as a kid. So, that was a plus. Then that’s automatically reinforced because that’s how Special Forces is Special Forces. They understand the (need for) language capability. They understand the cultural dimensions and train everyone along those lines. I don’t give a hoot if you’re a private or if you’re the main guy in charge. That is the primary stuff that you need to understand and believe in before you can be affected with any of the other cultures. When I went over I was very comfortable (in that environment).

SM: Well, coming from an unconventional training background especially with all the Reserve schooling you did, what did you think about the heavy emphasis placed on the conventional in Vietnam and the large battalion sweeps and the conventional operations, attrition strategy? Were these things you gave much thought to before you went to Vietnam? Were they discussed much in an ROTC environment, other military people you came into contact with, the Reservists that you served with?

TM: Not that I recall. I remember I always tried the unconventional route. I went to Vietnam and went to the 101st (Airborne Division) as my first assignment, which was just converting from Airborne to Air Mobile. So, I wanted to go there or the 173rd
because of the airborne. So, I tried and made a deliberate effort my whole career to stay
away from the regular Army and look at either Airborne Ranger or Special Forces, which
was more along my inclinations.

SM: Even the employment of airborne (assaults) or air assaults or airmobile
assets in Vietnam, the application was still more along a conventional framework within
the strategy of attrition. Was that ever discussed whether or not this was a winnable
strategy? That in Vietnam we were going to be able to kill our way to victory?

TM: No and we all got sucked into that body count. You know how do you keep
score and what’s success? If you don’t define success going in, total quality
management, begin with the end in sight. Well, shit at the end we didn’t know where the
end was. I mean that was just missed by everybody. No one I don’t think thought the
body count was the way. The other part of it I think everybody there knew. Because you
really had to have respect for the other side. Because whenever I worked in the
mountains or valleys, I can’t ever remember as a platoon leader not going to a position,
setting up and having your people dig in where you didn’t dig something (or someone) up
where some poor person had been out there before you. So, I mean what they went
through, their exposure year in, year out air strikes, malaria, the sickness, the diet,
carrying a round of ammo all the way down (to South Vietnam). They worked very hard
and you have to appreciate (and respect them for) that. That gave them something that
we as a military did not have. It’s like World War II when you went over for the duration
or you flew x number of missions or got shot x number of times and you were eligible to
rotate. Well they didn’t rotate too much. Well, we got in that one year cycle. A few
people like myself extended multiple times there. Even I fell in that. When I extended
each time I wanted a different experience than I did the first time (or time before). I was
able to be exposed to a wide variety of different types of organizations and everything
there. But if you think of unit effectiveness, if it stayed in one place with the same people
throughout that time it probably would have been a much more cohesive and better if one
knows what better is.

SM: You said the pivotal point for you to make the decision to get in there as
quickly as you could was Tet of ’68?

TM: Absolutely.
SM: When you learned of Tet—I’m sorry, go ahead.

TM: I was already aware of Tet of ’65, which it is not well known. I lived through the accounts of all that and all the newspaper articles. I was very totally immersed in that. So we went from that to ’68. I thought, ‘You know it can’t be long now.’

SM: When you say that, what did you think was going to happen? In terms of what was going to happen after Tet?

TM: I don’t know.

SM: Would you say it can’t be long now, it can’t be long until the United States withdraws?

TM: Closure.

SM: Until the U.S. pulls out or when?

TM: Closure. Didn’t know.

SM: But you figured it’s probably not going to last too much longer.

TM: That I knew. How and which way it would go or what would transpire, I was probably clueless.

SM: Didn’t have a gut reaction on what you thought might happen?

TM: Not that I recall.

SM: After you made the decision after Tet, when Johnson decided not to run for re-election in May of ’68, did that give you an indication of maybe where it was going to go?

TM: At that time it didn’t matter. I was there.

SM: Okay, you were already in country at that point?

TM: Yes, wait. No, not May of ’69, no.

SM: So, May ’68.

TM: No, ’68 I was not in country. I don’t think that had any impact.

SM: When you heard about Johnson’s decision not to run, what did you think?

Or did you think anything?

TM: Nothing. Probably, I don’t recall.

SM: You went ahead and I guess in 1968 after Tet you made the decision you’re going to go active duty.
TM: I was commissioned sometime that semester between September and December. Then took some leave in December and reported for active duty in January of ’69.

SM: Of ’69 and then you went straight to Vietnam?

TM: No, in January of ’69 all lieutenants at that time had to go through IOBC (Infantry Officers Basic Course), which was at Benning. I have no idea how long that one was either. Eight, twelve weeks, I don’t remember. I must flush all that stuff. That was the first hurdle you had to go to en route. At that time I went through IOBC with a couple of my contemporaries from the University of Georgia. We did the same thing together. Then from there when I finished IOBC, I went to Ranger school, which is the best thing I ever did I thought. I looked at that as a life insurance policy for Vietnam, which it really was (It was and still is the best small unit leadership course available). I also remember one of my most vivid memories in Ranger school was here was this guy going through with us with a CIB (Combat Infantry Badge). He was probably the dumbest shit I ever met. I couldn’t figure out how you could have a CIB and be dumb, but I later learned (laughs). Ranger school at that time was probably the singular thing that I felt of all the things I’d experienced prior that would help to be prepared. Knowing that I was a second lieutenant at that time and knowing that my focus was not going to be anything with Special Forces, I was just a tent peg there (in the Reserves). But at platoon level and patrolling operations it was the best thing I ever did for preparation for Vietnam. I sincerely believe that. I feel it’s a great course and everybody ought to go through because all it is a psychology course that teaches you how you and other people react under real pressure. I mean they do that on multiple planes because everyone has different hot buttons. Some people can’t do without sleep, some can’t do without food, some can’t do long march. Everyone’s got different buttons. Ranger school is structured so that it can push everyone’s buttons (at one time or another). So that you, if you sit back and watch, you can also see how people respond in different sets of circumstances under different stressors. To me, that lesson was as important as anything that I got prior to going over (to be an effective combat leader at any level you have to be able to understand and read people).
SM: The patrolling aspect and the training aspect of Ranger school, did they focus on at all Vietnam?

TM: Oh, that’s all it was.

SM: And Vietnam specific things?

TM: Oh, everything, like IOBC. Exactly the mock village out there with the tunnels, booby traps, and the punji pits. It was total emersion in 1969 any military training focused on RVN. There was no Gap (like in Germany). You had to wait until you come back to look at it in the mid 1970s. It was totally immersed in RVN. They did talk about culture and history and a little bit of language, but it was enough to say it was there. You can’t pick the language up or understand any of that in an hour or two. I mean (it was a broad overview for information only).

SM: When you go to Vietnam, I don’t want to talk about the trip over, we’ll save that for later, but when you got there and then you looked back on that training, how effective was it?

TM: Ranger school?

SM: In terms of what they were applying and what they were talking about Vietnam. How close were they to the reality that you experienced?

TM: Lot of it very, very realistic. And the realistic parts came in the villages with land mines and booby traps were very high there (and use the same tactics and techniques used in RVN). In Vietnam they were responsible for a very significant portion of your casualties. And having a demolition background in Special Forces, just a minimal exposure that I did, that was something my comfort level was always there. Maybe that’s why I thought it was so good because I focused on that stuff, took it to heart. That part was really worthwhile. It was later I was able to really refine those skills. So, that part was all very, very effective. After I finished Ranger school the Army wouldn’t send you over (to RVN). They had to assign you to a unit first. So, I went to the 82nd Airborne division, the 1/504 Airborne battalion just in time to go to West Point to be an instructor up there for their summer program. As soon as I went to the 82nd Airborne division I volunteered for RVN. I don’t remember maybe sixty or ninety days was all I was there (for approximately five months), enough to say, ‘He’s certified to go on.’ My West Point experience and my 82nd experience basically was Camp Natural
Bridge up in West Point, teaching tactics, of which none of the kids or students wanted to
hear about. You know I had a Ranger tab on and they all wanted to talk about Ranger
school because that was real to them (and that was where they wanted to go). I had no
Vietnam experience. That was real to them. The rest of it they weren’t too interested in.
Then from there we went and (my unit) deployed by a jump into Turkey on a long-range
(deployment) operation. I went on leave from Turkey and went to Vietnam at that time
frame.

SM: You went to Turkey? You went to Vietnam via Turkey?
TM: Yes, I wanted to go over there and jump in Turkey and do all that. I met my
parents in Turkey and then I went to Vietnam directly after that.

SM: Did you get your Turkish jump wings? It wasn’t a jump with the Turkish?
TM: No, it wasn’t a jump with the Turks at that time, but it was inland deploying
(at that time long range deployment-the flight and the jump). It was high-speed back
then. It was interesting and that was an experience I didn’t want to miss. (I’ve always
enjoyed new experiences).

SM: This will end the interview with Lieutenant Colonel Ted Mataxis.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Lieutenant Colonel Ted
Theodore Mataxis, Jr. on the 17th of September 2002 at approximately 8:30 Lubbock
time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas and Lieutenant Colonel Mataxis is in Southern Pines, North
Carolina. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and begin today’s interview by discussing you
Vietnam service? If you would go ahead and describe first when you received the orders
that you would be assigned to Vietnam, that you would be serving in Vietnam and the
preparation that you undertook for your service in Vietnam?

TM: You want me to do that now?

SM: Yes, sir.

TM: Ok, basically what happened I was commissioned in January of 1969 and
was commissioned in infantry branch. As a result I started the Infantry Officer Basic
Course (IOBC) at Ft. Benning, Georgia in January of 1969. That was I believe about a
nine week or eleven week course at the time. It was conducted there at Benning as well
as Ranger school and all the other brand new second lieutenants coming into the infantry
branch at that time (reported to Ft. Benning or as we affectionately call it ‘Ft.
Beginning’). It (IOBC) basically was just an introduction and overview of what the
duties and responsibilities would be for you as a platoon leader. That’s basically what
they focused on. The training was weapons systems, land navigation, a little bit of
leadership and tactical training at platoon and company levels. That basically was all
using Vietnam scenarios, they had a little Vietnam village there at Ft. Benning that you
could use for training. It showed you how to establish cordon around the villages and
how to search and clear certain types of venues. For example they had one that was for
booby traps. You walked down the lane and they had different types of booby traps there
to familiarize you with that. Another was how to inspect the hooches that they had there,
it showed hide sights like under fire places, tunnels and stuff like that. So, most of the
training during that time at Benning, was in fact focused on Vietnam and scenarios.
Almost all the instructors, not almost, they were all combat veterans. You could tell by
the CIBs on their uniforms. They were sharing not only their experiences with you, but
also the other lessons that had been learned by other people there. So, that was pretty
interesting and totally focused on Vietnam. That was the Infantry Officers Basic Course
(IOBC). When I completed that I’d already been through jump school during my enlisted
time. So, I volunteered at that time for Ranger school, which was a nine-week course,
which was initially started at Ft. Benning Georgia. Then you went up to Dahlonega,
north Georgia for the mountain phase II of it. Then you went down by Herbert Field in
Florida for the swamp phase III of training. The leadership is a key to what they teach at
Ranger school. They use patrolling as a vehicle to put you in a series of different
leadership positions to see how you respond under duress from lack of sleep, lack of food
an extreme fatigue. It shows you as a leader the different stress points and breaking
points of people. I found that Ranger school was probably the best training I ever
received. It was most helpful for me as a combat leader in Vietnam. I don’t really
remember many time is Vietnam where I was as tired or strung out as I was at Ranger
school, because it would have been bad form in combat to abuse your men to that extent.
Because (in combat) you always had to be prepared for whatever contingency might pop
up. The key to survival there was sort of keeping your eyed open and continually factor
all possible scenarios that could happen to you. You pretty much stayed on top of it if
you did that. Ranger school was designed to wear you out and show you how people
work (when totally exhausted) under different stressors. I thought Ranger school was the
best psychology course I’ve ever had. After the Ranger school I was assigned very
briefly to the 82nd Airborne Division where I was a platoon leader for the first of the 504
there. I volunteered at that time immediately to go to Vietnam. So, I was only with the
504 for about a three-month period Stateside. I didn’t take any leave en route to Vietnam
because I wanted to go with my unit. They were jumping on a combined exercise
Operation Furlough. They were leaving from Ft. Bragg and jumping into Turkey and I
wanted to be a part of that because I’d never been to that part of the world and hadn’t
been on a long-range deployed airborne assault. I thought that would be very interesting
and it was. My parents at that time were living in Iran, so I was able to get a day off at
the end of the exercise and my parents came down to Istanbul. We got together for a day
prior to and then I went directly form there to Vietnam without any leave en route. That
was good gosh, probably about the 22nd of November ’69 is when I arrived in Vietnam
(we flew over on Tiger Airlines). What we did there basically arrived at Bien Hoa, which
is outside of Saigon. It was pretty much routine. It’s sort of hurry up and wait with
everything you did there as you were waiting to be issued your gear and everything. You
did not get your weapons issued. In fact, weapons weren’t issued until you actually got
down to the unit that you were going to be assigned with. There wasn’t a lot going on. I
remember we were mortared (and rocketed) a time or two. It seemed rather mundane
given my expectation level if what I’d envisioned of combat. I had much more the World
War II and the Korean models in my mind where I thought it was every day just grinding
away. As it turns out was hardly the case, but it’s enough to keep you busy. No doubt
about it. But you spend just a couple days in processing, hurrying up and waiting. Then
you go off to your unit. I moved on the 30th, I think up to Phu Bai, which was 101st area.
That’s when I started to process in with the 101st. In fact it was a little bit earlier than
that because I went to what they called SERTs training, which the 101st was airborne,
airmobile division at that time. And SERTs stood for Screaming Eagle Replacement
Training. Basically what this training was are you there?

SM: Yes, sir I’m here.

TM: I heard a click and didn’t know what happened.

SM: I did too. No, I’m here.
TM: Basically this training was five days, the first days that you had training basically was range training where you looked at the M-16, M-60, M-72, 45 pistol, laws machine guns, hand grenades (and claymore mines). Then that evening you did some night firing with the different starlight scopes and different weapons systems. So, that was real interesting first day. Second day you basically reviewed all radio procedures. This was for the officers and NCOs because in all wars the radio really becomes your lifeline. Because you need it for your supplies, your medevac, your tactical air as well as your artillery fire support and everything. Without coms you’re not much. So, they hit that pretty good. They also talked about the secure means because we had something called a KY-33, was just a really heavy piece of equipment that you carried around that gave you secure commos. Then days three four and five basically were just search and clear operations (and various types of patrols and ambushes). They took you out on patrols during the day and during the night and actually led you in patrols the first night. Then had different people lead the patrols after that in their training areas, but all were live firing zones. Every now and then people got shot at, you got to shoot back a little bit during that training. It was a really good training. I was a commander for the class there just because I was the senior ranking guy as a result of my prior service. That’s basically the training we got at SERTs. From there it was then moving up to Phu Bai, which was the 101st division headquarters. At Phu Bai once again you sit around a little bit while the G-1 figured out who needs what people and what experience they’re trying to send at each location. At that time I had an interview with General Hennesy, who was the 101st division commander. I think the interview was just because he had worked with my dad in the Korean War. General Hennesy was a real fine guy. So, I went by and saw him and ended up down in the 3rd Brigade under a Gentleman by the name of Colonel Bob Siequist, big old man, looked like a bear always rocking back and forth so we used to call him Rocking Bear. But not to his face. Siequist was a really good guy. He was the brigade commander and then I was assigned at that time down to the 3rd battalion the 187 Regiment wanted to make the transition from regiments at that time. It was called the Rakkassons. At that time Colonel Steinberg I believe was the battalion commander, but he didn’t stay there very long after I got there. It traded over. (Commanders were there for a six month cycle.) So, once I got down to the battalion I
met the battalion staff, spent a day or so with them just finding out what each staff officer
does so this helped you understand when you go out to the field who you really need to
coordinate with for whatever action or activity you may need. So, that sort of helped you
or made you aware of the capabilities of the S-2 (S-1, S-3, S-4, S-5), but at the same time
also made you understand the situation reports and other reports that you had to turn in.
They had little cards that you had for caches and for enemy contact and (medevac)
everything like this. Because at the time I didn’t realize the importance of good detailed
intelligence. It always seemed to me when we were out there trying to bring closure to a
fire fight they’d always want to interrupt you and try and get up dates on everything when
we though we should be focusing on what was there. But it’s really a blend of both,
because timely intelligence is something that will really serve the unit well when done
right. So, that was the purpose of staying at the battalion staff for a day or so just to
understand the battalion’s capabilities (and how the staff sections worked together).

SM: yes, sir. Let me ask a couple of quick follow up questions for you. In terms
of the training that you received at Ft. Benning before you went over, how did that when
you go to Vietnam and you started working with the 101st, how did that Benning,
Vietnam village training mock up compare to reality in Vietnam when you go there?

TM: Actually they were incredibly good. In fact, they were more complete back
at Benning than they were in the field sometimes. Because what happened was they used
some of those sights for movies. Remember John Wayne, *Green Beret* was filmed down
there. The Army inherited a lot of what they did for that movie. What happened was you
had people coming from all over Vietnam back to Ft. Benning. So, if you had something
in I corps it may not have been in II corps. You may not have seen it in IV corps. They
may have had something totally different. So, what Benning did was sort of take a cross
cut of everybody’s experiences and things they found out, booby traps for example.
Often booby traps would be regional. In one part they’d mark their booby traps a little bit
different than they would at another. So, at Benning it was really good because it was sort
of eclectic. You had more exposure to Benning than you actually did in Vietnam. You
see what I mean? That was a broader picture. It’s sort of like a video camera watching
something. In Vietnam itself you’re almost like a Polaroid picture. Do you see what I
mean as far as depth and everything?
SM: After you arrived in Vietnam and after you went through your SERTs training and I guess maybe even during that initial processing period at Bien Hoa and then going through SERTs and the briefings you received or the period you received in process in to the 101st at Phu Bai, what kind of specified briefings did you received about activities in country? Interacting with the Vietnamese people, that kind of stuff, anything?

TM: I’m trying to remember. I know all that was covered at Benning. They did a lot on the culture (and a little language). In fact, they even gave you a little mini phrasebook-like and everything. In fact I know because I have a copy of the program instruction in front of me here. I know that there was no cultural training at SERTs training. It was all focused on tactical and this was designed for Joe Tentpeg through everybody. The other training was in the States. Some people even went to the MATA language courses. If you were going to an American unit, you didn’t need the language training in spite of the fact it would have been very, very helpful. Because shortly thereafter I started working with the indigenous people, just as soon as I got to the field with the 101st. So language training would have been very helpful. I had a lot of the cultural stuff more from my Special Forces time, enlisted than actually at the IOBC or at the SERTs training itself.

SM: Now what did you draw on from your enlisted Special Forces experience that helped you as platoon most, that you can remember?

TM: You can’t say one thing in specific. I think the easiest thing there would probably be keeping in mind I went in Special Forces reserves in ’62 and we’re now in ’69. I had five years of being an enlisted soldier so that I understood and when I gave orders I could relate to how the people were interpreting him and what it actual did for them. I wouldn’t ask anyone to do anything without doing it myself first. I was told I shouldn’t do a lot of what I did like walking point, stuff like that. But I just discounted that stuff because I feel if you can’t do it, you don’t need to be telling someone else to do it. That was just my personal thing there. I think it really helped my connection (leadership style) with the young NCOs and officers. It gave me a little more experience to draw from, which gives you a little bit more confidence. I don’t know how you can
measure any of that. (The key to leadership is understanding yourself first and your men next).

SM: In terms of the morale of the unit when you first arrived, how would you describe it?

TM: Morale is a funny thing. There’s a couple different continuums on morale. One is what’s happening to you right now. Right on the spot, you know? The other is the overall sensing. I’ll share two stories with you that will sort of answer your question there. The first thing that I did when I got there was call my young platoon sergeant, a young E-6 by the name of Woods over. He was going to give me an update on the equipment, positions, the people, capabilities and all those sorts of things. I recall back as you well know I’ve been raised around the military all my life. My dad has had multiple combat tours. He always told me that “Son, you’ve go tot listen to those NCOs. They’re the salt of the earth. They (are the backbone and) make the Army run. They’re experienced and they’ve done it for years and years”. And that was his best advice to me at the time. Well, when he was there in ’65, the NCOs that he had some of them had World War II (and the Korean War) experience, as the officers did. Some of them had the Korean experience. They were an Army that was very, very professional and very well trained and disciplined. By the time I got there in ’69 those NCOs were on their second or third tour and were spread mighty thin. So, when you got out to a platoon like I did I called over my NCO and my first question to him was “how long have you been in Vietnam”? Keep in mind this is an E-6. He said “six months sir”. I said, “well that’s great”. Half way through his tour, he’s still here. He’s very positive. Those were all good things. So then the following question was “now, how long have you been in the Army”? His response to me was, “a total of nine months”. You know he was a civilian one-day, went to basic training, went to the NCO course, “Shake and Bake”. The instant E-5 was honor graduate out of that so made an E-6. So in 90 days this guy went from a civilian to an E-6. That was the first indicator there. He was a fine man. I’m not banging the program, but it’s very fair to say that good people that went through the program continued to be good people. However, in a 90-day sort like that you really can’t make an NCO. You can teach him what needs to be done, but so much of it’s hands on and actually working with people to make it happen. So, the good ones were really
good. They rally to it after they got some experience just like second lieutenants, just like myself. You learn by doing. They did let some of the ones slip through that didn’t have the ability. They did it a lot. For example several of my NCOs like Sergeant Foley who was my platoon sergeant later was a college grad. My radio guy (Radio Teletype Operator, RTO) was a college grad (Pet Newland). They didn’t want to be commissioned and they very easily could have been you know given the time. But they both had gone through the “Shake and Bake” (NCO course) and were just outstanding. They both had really good technical skills (were level headed and just outstanding young Americans). I valued their contributions to the organization. But that’s how that difference was from just ’65 to ’69. I thought that was interesting. Another thing was I was assigned to the 3187 as I mentioned earlier, but if you go back and look, they were the unit that was assigned some of the bloodiest fighting there with Hamburger Hill. So the guys in my third platoon (B Company)and later D-company of 3/187 were the same guys that had been up on Hamburger Hill. So they had what I call the 100-mile stare. I mean I looked at those guys tired and just the look in their eye. You look at them and wonder if you’ll ever even make a year. You know it seems like a long way down the road. In that respect they were tired and they were hardened, but their morale was not bad at all. The morale in the field it’s what you make it at the time. If you take care of the troops, which is the only way to do and then you all hang in there (and make the best of whatever comes along), that was my overarching strength. I just had a sense on when things were going to get hot. Was able to as a result of that not lose many people. We were a pretty steady flow of incidents taking place.

SM: Now after your arrival 22 November’69, well first of all what were you initial impressions when you walked off the aircraft in Vietnam? What do you remember most?

TM: I don’t even have to get off the aircraft. As soon as they opened that damn door it’s just like you’re in a steam bath and someone wraps you in a wool, wet blanket. Just that hot muggy thing. It’s just something that hits your skin and stays with you until you get out of country. The overwhelming heat. In fact I was naive at the time and I thought things can’t get any hotter. Well, lessons learned in Vietnam, things can always get hotter.
SM: Especially from November until say May, June, July.

TM: Oh, no. It’s just amazing.

SM: When you first arrived to your unit was there very much talk? You mentioned Hamburger Hill. I think that’s a very significant battle to briefly discuss in terms of the effects that it had on the unit upon your arrival. It happened in May, just the May prior to your arrival. Was there very much talk about the battle still going on within the unit itself?

TM: Not a lot. You know the soldiers some of them would be quick to tell you that they were there. Normally those who were the quickest to tell you were the ones who did the least. When I took over Delta Company at the end of my tour, the company commander a couple before me, had received the Medal of Honor for his actions at Hamburger Hill. From that respect as a new company commander and I was the only lieutenant in the division at the time if I remember correctly that was in fact a company commander. I extended a few months to stay there and command that company. But that’s pretty heavy shoes to follow when you’ve got people of that caliber there. So, yeah there was some talk. On the part of the troops they felt a real leadership void. The colonel that was responsible for Hamburger Hill they felt was doing it more for himself than anything else. It was a tough one, it really was.

SM: You mentioned your platoon sergeant, what about your squad leaders? How would you evaluate them in terms of their preparation for and ability to handle the responsibilities they faced?

TM: Well, they were all shake and bake. In fact, I think company wide probably the field first was probably the only one that had been a combat Veteran from the Korean War. At that time, in the 101st pretty much all new (younger and inexperienced) officers and new NCOs at the platoon and company level. Now you just start ratcheting up when you go up tot a battalion staff and you’ve got some that have a broader experience base. As soon as you go to brigade that increases proportionally and in division because of the rank structure and the time in grade and the experience. But the rule of thumb at that time was if you were assigned to a unit basically for the officers they’d put you in the field for a six month period of time and then if you made it through six months they sometimes would rotate you back to a staff position in the rear. So, that you’d increase
your odds of getting home. But once again that was just depending on where you were. Some of the battalions at the firebases, wasn’t much of a trade off there compared to the old boys in Saigon who are running the PXs. You know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

TM: But that’s one thing they did. They were not able to do that with the NCOs to the same degree. Because if you just look at the platoon structure you know and you count all your squad leaders and platoon sergeants and stuff like that versus the one officer, you know you establish that ratio. You are able to do it, but to limited degrees with the NCOs. So, the experience base was not a lot, but you did the best you could. A lot of it was also sort of on the job training from whoever had been there the longest, who was a good man (and developed the skills and finesse it takes to stay alive). You know what I mean. Because if you’ve had someone that walks point or was good with booby traps they would sort of mentor someone else on how to identify booby traps, how to disarm them and stuff like that. So, as a platoon leader, squad leader, anything you always planning what to do in the event of the worst case scenario. And often you had to do that anyway just because you never know who was going to be there when. So, you always trained up a job or two with all your folks. So, if you had a rifleman he needed to know how to be a machine gunner (or with an M-79) and you needed to know what the assistant squad leader did, because you may be one. You know assistant squad leaders need to know what the squad leader does and platoon sergeant because they may be one at the end of the day. You know so that sort of training took place.

SM: Cross training?

TM: Right, but it wasn’t formal as much as in the mentoring role. But there was structure to it so you had all your bases covered. (New people were assigned someone to work with them and take care of them).

SM: When you first arrived and you got with your platoon, you mentioned that one of the things that you did as a leader was to portray to them was that you’re not going to ask them to do something you yourself are not willing to do. You did such things as walk point. How did that effect, did you notice any kind of an effect on the men in your unit? In particular maybe the NCOs responded to you after that or the men responded to you after that?
TM: I don’t know. We just had a really good group and we all bonded. That’s one thing time collapses down so quickly. After your first firefight, you get everyone through it and they realize what your style’s going to be. That you’re not going to get anyone wasted for no need. Let you work through the issues and you take control and are willing to demonstrate in firefights what you expect of them. It’s not a problem at all. I think that’s a critical dimension for any leader. But at the same time it’s also all that mocks, nicks stuff (attention to detail) that gets people killed. You know like the equipment checks. I made a statement of charges out on a couple of the guys who’d been using their claymore mines to pop off the back and use the C-4 to heat their C-rations. So, I made them pay form them just as a teaching point. The claymore is a system that you rely on. You can’t think you’ve got 14 of them and only have two or none because everyone wants to heat rations with them. (You also had to continually check the two small wires going into the blasting cap since they broke so easily). So, you’ve go to do that sort of thing. Same thing with the claymore and I use that’s an example because it was such a good system. We relied on them in series and individually quite a bit. We really got good with the claymore booby traps we used to set. Had a lot of success with those things also. (This was the sort of skill that would be passed from one soldier ot the next).

SM: Now was this for defensive perimeter, ambushes or both?

TM: Both and stay behind (ambushes also). You know so that claymore was a really awesome weapon. It really did the job. The sensitive part about the claymores right at the blasting cap when you run your wire up there, there are two little copper wires that go into your cap. Right there would invariably over time with the cap being taken out and put back in you know every time you set up your claymore they would have to be checked out. So, you always had to watch those. Because nothing’s worse than just like cleaning equipment. Always had to stay on them for the weapons and everything. Even with something as simple as feet. You know immersion paddy feet. You didn’t want immersion foot over there so we changed the name (to paddy feet). As the division staff officer I’m sure he got a good award for that one. You know you’d physically have to check your men. Because if you didn’t check them there would be someone that would let it slide and in some cases even let it fester so that one day they could come up and say,
“oh, look at me. Now, I need to go to the rear”. That part of it is equally important.
Leadership is the attention to details. The things that you wont tolerate like no drugs and
no sleeping during guard because everyone’s in it together. That’s just the way you’ve
got to get everyone to look at it.

SM: Right. First of all, exactly where did you as a platoon leader operate within
Phu Bai area?

TM: What happened when we got to Phu Bai we were at Camp Evans, which
was one of the firebases there. Right outside of Camp Evans was the little village by the
name of Phong Dien. What we did from the time I arrived and all through the end of
November, first part of December up until about the sixth of January we were in the low
area (along Highway 1) there in the sand flats up by the cities themselves. That’s because
we were still sort of rebuilding after Hamburger Hill. We were going to be deployed out
back in to the A Shaw area (theatre of operations) in the mountains, but they were
building us up first. During that time we were working on the Vietnamization in late ‘69.
We had the RFUs (Regional Force Units) and PFUs (Popular Force Units) that were
assigned to my platoon. We had a platoon of indig that were with us. We used to do
combined operations and what we called little “Tiger Patrols”. So that was a real good
thing. Anytime you were training others it helps your guys. If you really want to learn
something you’ve got to teach it. That was a real good thing. It also gave us a chance.
That’s when the cultural training sort of started when you’ve got a chance to meet these
people as people. That to me was a very valuable experience. We did that through the
first part of January in the low lands. In fact the area we were working out of there were
dfive Finger Lakes up there and that’s the exact area where Bernard Fall hit the booby trap
when he was killed. He wrote about Street without Joy in his earlier publications. That’s
the AO that we were stomping about. (I did a paper for TTU Vietnam Conference 21-22
April 2001. I go over this in detail there. It is in the Archives).

SM: In that area you were encountering a mixture of NVA and VC or more than
one of the other?

TM: No at that time there were very limited NVA coming through there. There
were mostly and I’ve forgotten the year of designation. I used to know that stuff. They
were the local and they weren’t the NVA. Only one time during my stay with the 101st the NVA penetrated into the lowland that resulted in about 120 NVA KIAs).

SM: SO, VC and LNOL. Also with regard to the combined operations that you conducted with Rough Puffs, did you have an interpreter to help you or counterpart an ARVN counterpart that helped you coordinate with them? How did that work?

TM: That’s why I went with the language thing. It would have been helpful. We picked up a little bit as we went. Everyone had to have an interpreter or someone that spoke English. They had some of their Vietnamese that spoke very good English. That was very helpful that they did. Otherwise it was no different than when I was in El Salvador. If you don’t have the language you haven’t got much (at battalion level they had a combined Tactical Operation Center).

SM: Now were any of the members of the Rough Puffs or the interpreters were any of the Hoi Chan? That is the guys that come up form the Chieu Hoi program?

TM: No, but we did have assigned to our platoons in the 101st Hoi Chans. And I had, but I didn’t mention that I had one almost the whole time I was there.

SM: Was he a Kit Carson scout?

TM: Kit Carson was the name but they were the Chieu Hoi. They were very impressive because it will make a believer out of you. I felt like you never knew which side this guy was on. You know you thought you did, but we never knew. It was Vietnam what can I say? But they bring them out to the firebases and they do a critique and then when you put your wire in all you booby traps and stuff out there they’d do a daylight demonstration on just how they could scout a path through (thickest defensive positions). Those people were just absolutely incredible. I have never felt animosity towards any of the North Vietnamese or anything. They, like us, were just doing their job from their perspective. I had nothing but respect for them. The suffering they went through. We had a one-year window. We had an R&R break. If we needed to go somewhere, someplace (for an emergency leave, it was possible). Where those poor people paid the price through the suffering and exposure. What they went through was just absolutely incredible.

SM: Did you ever personally doubt the loyalty of your Kit Carson scout?

TM: Yes, probably.
SM: How about any of the other Vietnamese that you might have worked with?

TM: No, I think I’m not sure if it’s doubting or intuition. You know there are
sometimes when things make sense and sometimes when things don’t make sense. I
believed in them and worked with them and put my life in their hands. You know what I
mean. You never really knew. That’s the same way later when I was with the
montagnards on later extension. Up there, the estimates were probably 10% of the people
there were on both sides. Out of a battalion of 1,600 that’s 160 of them puppies running
around your camp. So, I mean that was something you always had to factor in. (When
we were there they would support us when we would leave they would support the other
side. All they were doing was trying to stay alive).

SM: Speaking of manpower what was the strength of your platoon when you
arrived?

TM: Well, the combat TOE at the time I think was 30-32 men. We were
probably about 20-24 range in there. It ebbed and flowed just depending on casualties
(DEROS, etc).

SM: What was the state of your unit, of your platoon with regard to drug use and
alcohol use?

TM: We didn’t put up with drugs. There was alcohol there. Then they’d bring
me a beer to the field. A guy would have a beer or two. In the field it’s a non-issue.
Back in the rear when you were doing stand down everyone drank quite a bit.

SM: You said drugs were not allowed. Did you have a system set up, urinalysis?
Periodic urinalysis, how did you handle it?

TM: No, you just worked through your NCOs and if you heard anyone who was
so inclined. Druggers can smell each other. I don’t know how they do it, but they always
seemed to run in little cliques. You just monitor that stuff and keep tight on them. I
don’t think and I may be wrong. I don’t ever remember a urinalysis in Vietnam until I
myself was leaving and had to stand there and piss in a tube before I left. In the field I
don’t think there was any of that.

SM: You didn’t have a spot urinalysis or anything?

TM: No, no. Logistically.
SM: It would have been impossible. Along with logistics, how much responsibility did you have over I guess making a specific request for chow, ammunition, additional ordinance, that kind of stuff? Or was that all handled at the company level?

TM: You submit up through squad platoon leader to company level. It’s almost cookie cutter. You had your basic load of equipment with the ammo, hand grenades and smoke grenades, Willie Pete’s and claymore mines. So, as you consumed you were just back filled. Then if you were doing something specific like one time I remember when we were going into a very intense bunker complex you know we all had more frags than we would normally just because we knew where we were. We knew where we were going. We knew what the demand for grenades was going to be high. You wouldn’t carry that many around normally because it would just wear you out. So it was situational driven. (Another example was when they started to ambush HLZs as you were leaving at that time we were issued M-72 laws to fire just as you were being picked up).

SM: Yes, sir. Another question about the Rough Puffs. The combined operations and the training that you conducted with them. What did you think about this of course was part of Vietnamization as you already noted. What did you think about the Vietnamization? How did you feel about working with the Rough Puffs?

TM: I loved it. It’s their country. I really enjoyed them. In fact that’s why I extended one time after my exposure just to the Rough Puffs. I wanted to see how the real Vietnamese soldiers did. So, I extended and went to the Vietnamese Airborne Division, which was the immediate reaction force and has just a sterling combat record. (I was on Advisory Team 162) and was able to participate with them form our side of the border for Lam Sam 719, which was the incursion in to Vietnam or excuse me Laos form Vietnam, up in I corps. I really enjoyed that part of it. I also extended and went to the montagnards after that just to see that dimension of it. (I was assigned to the Border Ranger Camps which were left over from the Special Forces days). So, I’ve always been indig and enjoyed it. What we did in the 101st was Task Force Phong Dien, which was the 3/187 rakkasson battalion and the local people. We had a combined TOC (tactical operations center) with our battalion commander, and their unit commander would be right there with the local police, where we shared intelligence and everything. So, that
was a good model. That is what the battalion was doing at that time in the Phong Dien area of operation. I mentioned it was a Street Without Joy area. Phong Dien, which was the district they were trying to resettle 33,000 people back in the area that they had been forced out of years ago. That was a very worthwhile thing. That’s what happened in January of that year (1970). We did a combined ops back out to the low lands. That was probably the worst time I had in Vietnam and probably the most intense time that I had in Vietnam. Because for a six week period of time. Well not even six weeks it was 5 January through 11 February we were out near the Finger Lakes and were clearing that area. In that area there had been some places mined by the French for their old forts and defensives. Then the Vietnamese mined some and put booby traps out there to keep the VC out and the VC came in and they put more out there to keep us out. It was just a land of mines and booby traps. On the 5th we were going to do a combined operation going into that area. The ARVN’s went in on the first Chinook and they had four people I think it was that were killed immediately. Or four wounded and two killed. As soon as they got off they started hitting mines and booby traps. My platoon was a point platoon for that. It took us that five weeks or so just to clear probably two and a half kilometers of a little road that went into the old village there. I mean we just did everything with mine detectors and visual detection. Had all kinds of casualties. Someone was killed almost everyday, which is really intense when you’re trying to do that. I remember one of my medics Doc. Love saved many people prior to himself getting messed up. These were bad things because some of the booby traps were (U.S.) 105mm artillery rounds and everything. They weren’t the little toe poppers. We lost a lot of people doing that. We tried flame drops on that stuff. We tried the little daisy cutters, but you just couldn’t get them all. We recovered hundreds of booby traps during that time frame.

SM: Did you have any engineer support for this?

TM: Yes we did. Not initially. They brought in the (engineers) “pick and shovel teams”. One time the engineers with my platoon we had five guys wounded. Another time we had one killed and three wounded. So, they weren’t much better off than we were. The problem was even getting medevacs and then the medevacs didn’t particularly want to come in unless you swept an area. All we were doing was securing where we were at the time. It was as hard as anything I have ever had to do. The same time the VC
were there. They’d come up about every second day and shoot some AKs and RPGs at
you, and try to mortar you. You know just playing games, none of it real intense contacts
at that time. But the other part of it was intense enough trust me.

SM: Yes, sir. What was the purpose of clearing this area?

TM: So that they could resettle the refugees in there. Then like I said the goal
was I think something like 33,000 people were going to be settled back in their homeland.

SM: So that was approximately 5 January to 11 February of 1970. So this is
immediately or actually it seems like this is during part of your work with the Rough
Puffs?

TM: Yes, we took them out there with us. After that time frame we moved from
there back into the mountains. Then we left them out in the land that we were doing
(what we had done together). What we were trying to do is cut down infiltration and
everything. Once we had trained them to do that they took over that missions. Then we
went back out to Rocket Ridge and back out into the major areas of operation out here (in
the mountains and jungles).

SM: Is this when you moved back to the A Shaw valley?

TM: Yes, real close to the A-Shaw at that time. It was right by Camp Evans.
The Rocket Ridge and the different valleys in there (that AO). A Shaw was a little bit
further out (towards and Laos and to the South).

SM: That would have been I guess the middle of February time frame. If you
would describe for me and it probably occurred before, obviously before your move back
to Camp Evans. Describe for me your first initiation into combat there in Viet with your
platoon. What was your first firefight? What was it like?

TM: It wasn’t much. First time good gosh that was in December. We had our
perimeters probed a couple times and trip wire went off. Exchanged ammo, found a
coupe blood trails. Not a lot to it. Like I said earlier every other day they’d RPG us or
something. We’d send out patrols and you’d catch people in small ambushes and stuff
but nothing really big.

SM: What would you say was the largest unit you encountered during those first
three months in country?
TM: I would say out there probably a reinforced squad would have been about as high as it got. You know in the sand flats just because of lack of cover and everything else (concealment was hard to working large numbers without detection).

SM: How about when you moved out to Camp Evans and started conducting more operations in the mountains?

TM: Evans was there in the (rolling hills east) of the sand flats.

SM: Out further?

TM: Let’s see I’m trying to remember what time frame. I never have and that’s one of the things I want to do. I want to go get the 101st records and figure out where the hell I was with at that time. But in March of 1970, we were cross-attached. I think we were cross attached to the 2nd of the 506th or the 1st of the 506th. What had happened they had just had eight killed and 14 wounded? They came in one afternoon and gave our company map sheets and said, “here’s where you’re going”. We didn’t have a clue. We were going in to reinforce or take the pressure off the 506th who was in there getting beat up a little bit. That was a shit kicker. I remember going in I was on the lead bird. (Cobra gun ships were on our flanks and prepped the HLZ before we landed. It was a classic Hot Air Assault). Had AR-15 on the back and had a frag in one hand and a red smoke in the other hand. I was on the first bird at in there and we got shot up pretty bad. So we went red smoke on that thing and stacked some people in there and we just continued to fight our way out of that one. That was a heavy engagement.

SM: Who was the unit going up against?

TM: I don’t know. It’s one of those things that I don’t know a lot about the operation because we were cross attached and put out someplace. We were out there good gosh, probably a week a week and a half. We were only supposed to be there a couple of days, but the weather socked us in and we ran out of food and just about out of ammo. We used to play games if you stood up real quick, you’d pass out. For comic relief you’d jump up and pass out. Life was good. It was a very intense period of time.

SM: I would say so (laughs).

TM: I picked up a couple of Valor awards during that time for what all we had going on. It was interesting. I never knew who we were attached to. I remember one of the units, they were really getting waxed pretty good where our casualties weren’t bad at
The VC captured a radio and told them to bring in another medevac (after they shot down the first medevac), they wanted to shoot it down. So they brought in another medevac and they shot it down also. They said hey that was fun, bring in another one. But that’s the level of intensity there. That’s why I wanted to get the record out and see what all was going on. Because I just knew my little part of the world and that was it (at platoon level).

SM: Yes, you think that this was again mostly VC and not as many NVA?

TM: No, we were right in the middle of them (the NVA). It was a training camp down there and bunker complexes we overran just had all kinds of stuff. In fact it was interesting because we ultimately worked our way up to the position where they’d been engaging the aircraft, you know at the LZ. They had it perfect. (I could not have picked a better position). I mean this little finger sat out there in their fields of fire and everything. (We uncovered six bodies at that time and a series of blood trails). Just very, very well thought out. All their interlocking trenches and their overlapping firing positions and stuff. We just were lucky it went the way it did. It was one of those things also where you have nothing but respect for those guys. That’s another thing that you make people do. That’s dig in. A lot of people take short cuts. That’s what hurt people. Every time you dig in a platoon position you’d invariable dig up somebody. When you talk about suffering and what they bore, just absolutely incredible.

SM: When you go into that bunker complex, what was the cache like? Did you uncover very many supplies?

TM: Rice and medical stuff. I think it was a hospital area there. I’ve forgotten what weapons we had, but we had a little stack of stuff. It was really amazing just to see. I remember part of it was training and we found some old cans that had the American flag on it and the handshake that was provided by our government. Cooking oil and stuff like that down in there. We found a lot of the tips of the rocket pods (from Cobra gun ships). You know when you shoot nails out of the Cobras and stuff they leave a little cone out front well they used to save that stuff. It was really intense firing stuff. We went against machine gun bunkers and stuff like that. (One of the training aids was rope between two trees with the silhouettes of different types of helicopters. They were used to show how to lead a chopper when firing at it).
SM: Did they have any kind of mortar or artillery support?
TM: Yes, it wasn’t artillery. It was mortars.
SM: How about you, when you came in on the first birds to provide relief did you bring with you some inability to bring in artillery and airstrikes and things like that?
TM: Yes, we had all that back there. We’re trying to bring it in. Prior to doing that it was a standard we knew where we were going. We were paralleled by the little pink teams which was the little Lochs and Cobra gun ships and we did artillery barrage on it. You know just by the textbook, the rolling barrage through there. The gun ships cranking. It was an absolute hoot. It was more fun. It was neat.
SM: What about the body count?
TM: I’m trying to remember and I don’t really remember the numbers. I know we killed probably half a dozen I think at our location. But the real fighting we were on the outskirts of it. The real fighting was a unit we were attached to. That’s why I want to go back and get the records out of that time frame.
SM: How long did this last this particular operation?
TM: It was about a seven-day period of time. One of the things, talk about stupid. We were getting fired up pretty good at the LZ. So, I decided well I’ll get my guys going here. So I took my M-16 set it down on the ground and said anyone can kill one of these fuckers with an M-16. I’m going to be the first to get one with an AK. So, I picked one up off a body, took out all his magazines and was going to carry an AK. So, I took running down this trail by myself and my RTO and my platoon sergeant behind me. Everyone would follow along eventually. We took off and we went running down where we thought they’d gone. There was this little clearing there. As soon as I stepped in that clearing I said, “oh, shit”. You know I just knew. My guys were right behind me and I’ll never forget that because I had my AK across my chest with my right hand on the pistol grip and my left on the upper receiver end at a 45 degree angle to my right foot. I heard this crack. I told my RTO I said the guys got a beat on me. He’s at my right angle 45 degrees. I don’t know if it’s 10 yards or 30, but that’s basically where he is. He has me right now. I’m going to continue to talk and as I turn around as soon as I drop my muzzle barrel you all start firing. So, I was talking. About the time got my rifle half way down. Keep in mind this was an AK and I was being a smart ass. I was trying to motivate the
troop. He shot me and it ricocheted right off the receiver of my AK right where my heart
was. I think my feet stayed straight and I think my body turned about three times around
and he knocked me down. Then we go the rest of the platoon up there went through and
killed him and a couple others. But that was my doing stupid story. But it was one of
those things you know when you try to get people rolling and everything. With that
clearing then we sort of slowed it down a little bit, got methodical about it. Had he shot
me he probably wouldn’t have hurt me as bad because that’s something that has
continued to bother me is my back. Some days it works real good and other days it
doesn’t. But it’s all thanks to that little fellow.

SM: Well, he got a beat on you and you deflected it with your rifle.
TM: Yes.
SM: How lucky!
TM: He just missed his shot.
SM: Unbelievable.
TM: But you’re like that. I can remember as we were moving out that day it’s
sort of comical because B-52s had been in there too and had beat up the area and there
were a lot of craters and stuff like that (part of our mission was Bomb Damage
Assessment, BDA). My RTO (Pete Newland) was the guy behind me. He was always
right there with me. Good man, old Newland never let you down. But he was right there.
We just were maneuvering forward as they were firing at us and stuff. We’d go form one
big old B-52 hole to another. So, about the time we were moving up through and I don’t
even remember what day in the thing it was, but it all sort of ran together. So, we’re
sitting there and we’re just sweating our ass off, but we actually had our steel pots on
because it was heavy (contact). We get in those hole and yell for frags and guys in the
back in the hole behind us. We run out of frags as we were clearing the bunker. My old
RTO took his helmet off and had his old bandana that everyone used to carry around their
necks for sweat had just wiped his head off. About this time we’d yelled for frags and
here came about a dozen frags. One hit him right on top of the head. Knocked him cold
as a cucumber. It was a hoot.

SM: Did he recover all right?
TM: Yes, it was funny. He just had a big old knot there and we all laughed about it. Jesus, I’m sure glad they remember to keep the pins in (laughs).

SM: Invariably where there were bunkers there were tunnels. That operation where you were clearing those bunkers did you come across any tunnels?

TM: Yes, sure did. In fact that’s were we found a lot of the bodies that were buried back in the tunnels. Like that one little finger overlooking us. I used to do tunnels too. I sort of became an expert on booby traps as a result of being stuck in that one situation in January. I remember one time we uncovered a booby trap that was three different layers. It started off with a simple hand grenade or two and then went down and had another (U.S. artillery) round in there. Then below that was a series of daisy chain .61mm mortars. So, I’m a quick study and was able to figure that stuff out. After that time sort of specialized in booby traps and explosives and stuff like that. We had real good aerial rocket support there (with Cobra gun ships). I can remember one time just lying down next to an iron tree. We were on one side and they were on the other. I just marked my position there. Aerial guys came right down the other side of the trees, just cleared it all out for us. Those helicopter pilots they were just really, really good fellows. All of them.

SM: Well, after that weeklong operation where you’re providing support in a bunker complex area where did you go after that?

TM: I have to stop and think about that because it sort of was tame after that for a while. I mean that was a very intense thing. Then we just sort of, let me try and figure out what we did next. I’m trying to remember that stuff. Parts I remember very well and other parts I don’t. I think then we went back and out another firebase or two in closer to the Rocket Ridge. We weren’t out as far. I think for that operation we were right in the A–Shaw best I can figure out. (It was an amazing place at night you would see ribbons of white light moving down the trails. They were out of artillery range and did not care a bit in the world we were there).

SM: During this period, for instance for the four or five weeks where you were clearing that mine area (in the sand flats). Then when you went and helped with that bunker complex, what kind of system of reinforcements for your platoon was in place?
You mentioned you were losing quite a few men during the mine clearing operation. Were you getting a steady stream of replacements for your wounded and killed?

TM: Not exactly a steady stream. I didn’t really want and I don’t remember if I actually said that or not. It seemed to me we were trying to make do with what we had. A new guy in that environment wouldn’t have helped you any. The lessons learned were very slow and very painful. So, I think we were probably down about as low as we ever got during that time frame with the mines and booby traps.

SM: About what strength were you at that point you think?

TM: Good gosh one time we were down into the teens. But then I’m trying to remember. Because it seems about the main time frame and that’s why I want to go get the history out. I know one of the firebases when we were there we were putting in a new firebase (next to the Finger Lakes). I think it was firebase Henderson was overrun at that time. Which was a firebase over and they had 30 U.S. killed if I remember right. It was a big one too. The fact that the battalion S-3 I think was wounded at that time, Major (Tex) Turner was an old guy I worked with later.

SM: Out of curiosity one of the things that is covered in the history of the Vietnam War is Hamburger Hill, the battle at Hamburger Hill was a pretty significant battle in 1969 for the Nixon administration. Of course, the battle received an awful lot of negative publicity back on the home front. Arguably obviously Vietnamization was already in place and it was a question of just stepping up the process of turning over the war to the Vietnamese and having them do more of the fighting. Also my understanding is that Nixon actually tried to issue or did issue a directive to General Abrahams. Ok, we’re going to be turning the war over to the Vietnamese let’s keep American casualties to a minimum as much as possible. Did that trickle down to your level at all? That idea that yeah, we’re still in this war, but at the same time we’ve got to try and minimize our casualties?

TM: Not at the 101st and not at that time. Keep in mind this is May and they’re still decisively engaged or trying the pacification or the resettlement out on the coastal area. They’re trying to take the pressure off in the mountain area there in I corps. All this was in I corps, very close to the DMZ there. This was sort of setting the stage for Lam Son 719 it kicked in. (That was the Vietnamese) incursion into Laos. Right down
through that same area. So, they were sort of keeping the pressure on there. Where I saw the draw down (of American) and no one wanted to be the last one shot was a little bit later in my tour. It was my third extension when I went to the border ranger camps. What they had done there they had exile Special Forces from Vietnam as a result of some incidents and some stuff. The only things they (Special Force) had were the small cross border projects and special operations there. The (5th SFG) group itself was not there. What they did then bring and staff officer decided well with all these Special Forces camps in II corps and I corps that held the borders there we could cut down now that we’ve gotten rid of Special Forces. Rather than have a 12-man team there we can put a three-man Ranger team and just change the name, rather than having an A-team with me I went out there with two other people. I was a captain, one lieutenant and one NCO where before I would have had the support of an A-team (consisting of 12 men) but that was very deliberate. In case those got overrun well my gosh we’ve cut casualties 75%.

SM: In March of 1970, after you finished your support there at the bunker complex you said that there was kind of a lull. Was that a period where you did receive more replacements and were able to get your men maybe a little more rest and training and things like that?

TM: The lull was we went back and opened up a firebase on the Rocket Ridge there, compared to tromping around the jungle was a lull. About the April time frame which would be about six months mark I was moved from the platoon up into a battalion staff as the S-5, which is psychological operations and civil affairs. The reason I was willing to take that job is because I was sort of selective about what I took and what I did was what we were doing the Pacification like I mentioned earlier in the Phong Dien district. The (same) area that we’d cleaned out of the mines and booby traps. I’d established some relationships with the indigenous people when we were doing that. These were the people I was working at trying to get resettled in their villages.

SM: So, you continued working with the same people?

TM: Yes, the same town guys (that were on the battalion) staff when I was platoon leader now they became my contemporaries. I was the battalion S-5 for April, May and part of June. During which time we just did relocations and built projectss, schools and wells and stuff like that. Now, they bring my RTO back, Pete Newland with
me, (and he) became my driver. We did that sort of stuff until about June time frame.
Then I had the opportunity to become the battalion intelligence officer S-2. So, I really
enjoyed that because during the time was S-2 I was then coordinating we used to have
what we call Night Hawk operations where you go out and use infrared. You would be
running the rivers and roads and stuff looking for people trying to draw fire so the gun
ship would have a target. So, I got to do that for evening entertainment. It was just a
very interesting perspective as the S-2 on battalion staff. Because the S-5 job was more
oriented on the Pacification and not the tactical dimension, you know as the build up of
the area and working with the indeg. Where as the S-2 you were responsible for
designing programs for the recon platoons (radar team, and ground sensors), all your
support systems and lifts air deciding what tactical operation should take place next. So
that was a very interesting job.

SM: Well, as the S-5 did you have a specific staff dedicated to certain types of
operations whether they be psychological operations or civil affairs or was it just a
blanket staff that you worked with and they did everything.

TM: It was blanket. What happened was the MACV had people in the area also
so, we’d coordinate through them. As a battalion, combat battalion for the 101 we didn’t
have any assets at all. The five shop was too deep (just psychological). Myself and my
driver. Then there were division support, if you wanted to do tapes or something you
could request some of that support through division, we did it that way. In fact, I gave
you all (TTU) a copy of the scripts form the cyop tapes and everything a few years back
out there that we used during that time frame. (This was a xeroxed copy of the
psychological operation tape narratives).

SM: Were there any particular psychological operations that you remember as
being effective?

TM: Well, they were all pretty much the same. What we did a lot of that time
combined with tactical operations either by the indig or by our unit, we’d go in and
cordon off villages. And when the villages were quardoned off they’d screen it for
possible VC or NVA. At the same time you’d have the medical packet there that would
be doing stuff for them. You’re providing them cooking oils that sort of psyops stuff.
Then the helicopters with the themes playing (flyers were passed out offering money for guns and munitions). None of it was real high speed.

SM: How about Chieu Hois as the S-5 do you recall there being a very significant flow?

TM: We had some Chieu Hois but we had more (active) than the Chieu Hoi we had a cash program for weapons and booby traps and stuff. There was a lot of that stuff going on. It was that same area. That place had so many booby traps it was just unbelievable. In fact in my packet I think one page that I sent you when I sent all that stuff, I think I just Xeroxed off all the coordinates of all the booby traps to give you a feel for the intensity (listed the coordinates and types of booby traps). I mean it’s single spaced, full typed.

SM: So, you would give Vietnamese people money of they brought in either weapons or booby traps or any kind of ordinance. Was that to include broken weapons or was it mostly for just functional weapons. You didn’t want to discourage anyone so you wouldn’t give them much for an old piece of rusty stuff. You know because they could go out and dig up old stuff. It was a graduated scale. It used to be on the leaflettes that were dropped. Bring this, bring that, you know Chieu Hoi we give you this. Chieu Hoi with your weapon we give that. Chieu Hoi with your weapon and you let us go get your buddies we give you this. But that was on the cards that they dropped and left around.

SM: So, it wasn’t one price for everything?

TM: No, it was a graduated scale. Anytime and that sort of stuff you always try and cultivate and build on what you’ve got.

SM: Was there very much coordination when you were the S-5? Was there very much coordination with the combat units where you would I guess coordinate a psychological operation with a ground assault into a particular area?

TM: No and the reason being, if you just go back to the geography of the place, if you look there’s a choke point up there in I corps. You’ve got the low land regions where the Rough Puffs were. You’ve got your first chain of mountains, which was Rocket Ridge, which they used to set up to shoot (rockets) into the flat lands. Then you’ve got your mountain ranges out going up towards the A Shaw. You see what I mean?
SM: Yes.

TM: The unit was operating out in that, Camp Evans and Eagle both were in the back lower part. We worked out on the base camp at the rear while our battalion could sometimes be deployed well forward.

SM: So, you spent three months as S-5 and then moved from 5-2 intelligence shopping. Well, before we talk about your time as the S-2 when you were both working as a platoon leader and then as the S-5, how effective from your perspective was the intelligence you were receiving?

TM: Some of it was good. Some of it was not. You go on some wild goose chases. The wild goose chases were more when we were trying to chase people around the flatlands. By the time the word would percolate down it’d be old news. But you’d run off and march all night and get in position on a quardon. You know pull your quardon and then do your screen in the morning. And then on the way back those that were killed as VC escaping or whatever would just be laid there on the side of the road for their families to come in and claim. It goes down in the old fog of war. You know none of it’s real time intelligence. We didn’t have much, if any at all that I remember signal intelligence, radio intercepts, stuff like that. Which are normally a really good source for you. (The ground radars were very good at tracking infiltrators).

SM: When you became the S-2 how did you perspective on collecting, disseminating and using intelligence change if at all?

TM: I understood how it all flows. It’d be working both with the regional forces there as well as division, higher levels in brigade and everything. It’s all flows down at battalion level. That’s the lowest common denominator. Basically you’re more in the input mode than you are the receive mode. What we would do is study the terrain. We did the little 10x10 grids. I don’t know if you’re familiar with those. Each 10x10 kilometer grid you would cut up a map sheet and then have (a system) where you could track all the activities in there. For example, one time I remember we had a little firefight with one of the platoons and they really felt like they killed a couple people, but they found blood trails but nothing else. Well, with this 10x10 grid about six weeks later another group was in the area and came across two bodies, right at the same coordinates and everything. You could use it to document stuff like that also. But as far as so and so
is going to be here tonight we weren’t that sophisticated. (The enemy had a very definite
cycle to things based on the wet and dry seasons).

SM: How many people did you have working in the S-2 shop with you?
TM: There were probably three of four of us at the time. Between myself, an
NCO, a driver and one other person. I’m not even sure what function they had.

SM: Maybe a clerk or something?
TM: Yes, that would be it. One of the things we did there was like I mentioned
was the Night Hawks where we’d go around (in a Huey) with the infrared spotlight and
crew served night scope and machine guns and back up birds (Loch gun ships). We did
the pink teams, which was a gun ship and Loch as well. That was a pretty interesting
time.

SM: As a battalionist S-2, did you have any operations that you worked jointly
with either sister services, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy personnel? Well I guess not
many Navy people were there.

TM: Not at that time in that unit. We did later when I had a Ranger company
because we had Naval gunfire support and stuff like that. But the 101st was the 101st. It
basically worked unto itself.

SM: How about with civilians?
TM: No, there weren’t any in the AO out there. The only civilians were back in
the sand flat areas, but not in the tactical part. Of course, sort of the tactical zone was a
“free fire” zone.

SM: Not even CIA personnel?
TM: No, no exposure at all to CIA at that time and place.

SM: You mentioned that you would go out on operations as the S-2. Why don’t
you describe what the purpose behind those were and then some of the operations?

TM: I’m sorry, would you repeat that?

SM: Sure, you mentioned that as the S-2 you’d go out in the field I guess and
collect as some of your duty to collect intelligence. Would you describe the process of
doing that and what was involved?

TM: Well, what we had for each one of the platoon leaders and squad leaders we
had little 3x5 cards that would be for example if you came across a cache there was a list
of questions it would ask. How did you discover were there any tell tale signs that led
you to it? What was in it? What’s the state of equipment? Any unit identification?
Things of that nature. Then same with booby traps. How did you detect it? Did you
detect it and disarm it? Did you trip it? What were the casualties? How was it set up?
Were there any near signs, far signs? So, what we were looking for was trends and
patterns. (For example), when I mentioned that one time we were totally immersed in
that stuff (mines and booby traps) in January time frame they (NVA and VC) used
cooking fires is what I figured out to let you know a booby trap was ahead. You’d see
these small fires by the side of the road. Within probably 15 meters there’d be a booby
trap. Other places used sticks and some used grass. There’s always a flag (of osme kinds
to let people know the area had booby traps. You know you just have to figure out what
it is. So that was the good part of it looking for commonality of these or trends.

SM: By flag you man something that would tip of a fellow VC?

TM: Absolutely right. Anyone working in the area knew this was your sign. Just
like a far recognition signal. You may have a pair of jockey shorts, a bad example it’s
not an indicative to the area out on your wash line if you’re being watched. So, those
sorts of things (let everyone know the area had mines or booby traps).

SM: Very interesting. Were there any other, you mentioned fire sticks grass
anything else come to mind as a recognition signal as yeah, there’s a booby trap ahead?

TM: It varied from place to place. In the old French mine fields if you look at it
visually you could see how stuff had grown up over time. That would almost be an
indicator. It’s just a function of eliminating what’s not normal. You know normal is a
big scale out there. When you’re in one area it doesn’t take long to realize what’s normal
and what’s not. If you’re looking for what I used to call exceptional data. What’s
different about this?

SM: When you collected that data, was there a mechanism used to disseminate
that intelligence down to the units?

TM: It went through the company commanders from the battalion staff. They
pretty much worked with the company commanders and the company pulled his team
together which were his platoon leaders out there. That’s the way it worked.

SM: Was this in a weekly or whatever briefings?
TM: There were daily briefings and sit-reps every time something happened you’d keep everything appraised as to what was going on.
SM: So as it happened?
TM: No, it’s almost real time.
SM: Real time of dissemination. Any other interesting lessons that you learned from either your time as the S-5 or the S-2?
TM: Well, we did stupid one day. There’s a lot of that in combat. You’ve got to keep your sense of humor. Battalion commander and I were arguing. That’s the wrong choice of words. I would never argue with my battalion commander. Anyway I told him where we were between the firebase because we were about two ridgelines in. Rocket Ridge I felt that there was a build up of (enemy) troops down in that area and that I’d like to put a recon team in there, just a real small element see if they could pick them up because they (the enemy) were between American elements. I just intuitively knew they were there. So, we were flying back to Camp Evans just on a larc and larcas are expensive sometimes. This one certainly was. We got on a little Loch, which is a four passenger aircraft. The pilot was in the front left seat, battalion commander in the front right seat. S-3 air in the back left seat and myself in the back right seat. So he’d say, “now just where do you think these folks are?” I said, “there down there, in the little draw”. So the chopper drops down. We dropped down real low and we didn’t see any signs it was tall elephant grass there. I said, “Well, I still believe they’re here.” He said, ”well I don’t see any signs” You know we’ll just put something in here any way. Well the old pilot said well, “here watch this. I can make that grass blow side to side”. You know lay it (the grass) down so you can see what’s there. So he canted the little airframe and laid this grass flat. Right there lying on his back with his big old eyes was one man with one AK. I mean he was no more than five feet from us. He just closed his eyes, pointed his gun at the helicopter and shot all his rounds. Here’s what that guy did. The first shot hit the pilot. It split his face open on the right hand side. Went between his goggles and his skull. Just gave him a good clean gash there. That’s on the right hand side right next to the stick. If you can visualize that. Right next to that the battalion commander was sitting and he got hit in the left elbow and it came out the back part of his shoulder. The S-3 air lost the cheek of his ass. Actually I bandaged him up and the colonel up and we
medevaced them out of there. The S-3 Air died en route that was relieved and came back to life when they go to the medical thing (field hospital). I found that out years later.

There was one young man always very nice to my father. On day one at one of the think tanks in Washington, I’ve forgotten which one it was. Dad asked him “why do you always just go above and beyond for me”? He said “well isn’t your son the captain in Vietnam”? He said “yes, well he saved my dads life”. So he remembered that all those years. That’s why this kid was good to my dad. So, he (S-3 Air) was relieved and came back and then the bird was about shot up. (The pilot) had enough to get it up and crash it into the next ridgeline, which was about half way home. So there was just something we were out looking around and this one guy probably had the best-shot group of the entire war. No doubt about it. Three out of four of us and in one bird with a .20 round magazine?

SM: And you didn’t get hit at all?

TM: What happened with me I thought I had been hit, because I couldn’t move. But the metal seat on the back had been split and that went in my fatigues. So when I took off my seatbelt I was trying to pull forward and couldn’t pull. I thought I’d been hit, but it just went in my shirt and that was it. I was very lucky many times.

SM: Yes, sir you were. Wow!

TM: With the engineer that time there was one time there were four of us and the two guys in front of me were killed and the guy behind me wounded. I was just knocked out and blinded for a period of time. And my hearing (My ears were messed up) I’ve got that constant ringing ever since then. But that was in the January time frame. So, we were around a lot. It just happens and things have a way of working out.

SM: You still have ringing in your ears?

TM: Yes. It will not ever go away.

SM: How long was the battalion commander out of commission?

TM: He took a pretty heavy hit on that one. Then I think he was relieved shortly thereafter for other things, not for that.

SM: Any other interesting outings?

TM: Well, we had one I called my worst day in Vietnam. That’s only because I thought it was personal. I mean I had some bad days. It was all a balance. Early
September of ’70, I had received a call and I was out in the field and had to come back to Camp Evans. Came back in about 11:00. It was a call from the Red Cross. So, Red Cross which means but one thing: someone’s dead. So, I got back there and the old Red Cross guy was out to lunch. So, I sat around for probably an hour and a half while he did whatever Red Cross people do at lunch. I just intuitively knew that it was my father, because he was an assistant division commander and spent all his time in helicopters flying around. He’s sort of a curious fellow. So, I’d always worried about him. I thought it was my dad that had been shot down was what I’d worked through it. My dad gets the same message, but his immediate response was it must have been me. Being a young lieutenant in the field and he’s a general officer at the headquarters I guess. But he immediately found out that it was his mother, my grandmother who had died. We both went through the same mental process. Each one thinking it was the other one. So for both of us that was an interesting and difficult day.

SM: Did you take leave for that?

TM: Yes, I did. I think it was five days. We flew back to Seattle together and then came right back.

SM: What were things like when you came back to Seattle?

TM: In what way?

SM: Anything in particular stand out as far as the atmosphere in the United States? The attitude of people that you encountered?

TM: No, basically it was just a shitty job. That was probably ‘70ish because I came back several times over the years. I got to the point where I just wouldn’t even wear a uniform anymore. It’s not worth it. You’d get harassed every place you go and everything. It was bad enough just looking like a military guy with the haircut. So, I just didn’t do that much anymore.

SM: Did you get leave or did you take R&R during your first tour?

TM: Yes.

SM: Where did you go for that?

TM: Good, gosh. They all sort of run together. No, because R&R sites, keep in mind I was there a while. I hit Bangkok in Thailand, Hong Kong, which was the last one I had because I just wanted to buy all the stereo stuff. Your catalog stuff there. Then
Sydney, Australia one time and then I also got into Cambodia several times. Just because later when I had a couple days slack I could always catch a hop over to Cambodia. Because later my dad was the guy in Cambodia. He used to go do things for them.

SM: After you went to Vietnam for the first time and late ’69, when was your first trip back to the United States? Was it at that point when your grandmother had died?

TM: Yes, it was that time which would have been September, about 10 months or so. So, I’d already been on R&R first time out of the field I think was probably about the 90-day mark when I was out there as a lieutenant. My parents were in Iran and dad was coming to Vietnam at that time. So, they flew through Saigon on their way. I was able to take a weekend pass and go down to Saigon and meet with my parents. That’s when I met General Vinloc, for the first time (Dad was his senior advisor in II corps in 1965). He gave me a guy to go out with me. Basically the instructions were whatever the young man wanted we were able to do because we kept the club open all night. Had a great time.

SM: During your first year, from the time you arrived to the time I guess you decided to extend did you notice any significant differences from the time you arrived to the time you extended for your second tour?

TM: No, not really because I was with the same unit the whole time. As S-2 what happened then about I think we got a new battalion commander in October who was really just an outstanding colonel by the name of LTC J.B. Sutton. It turns out he was later killed in March of the following year during Lam Son 719 with the S-3 air Major Shoreburg. When they were out doing support for us. I was with the Vietnamese airborne division there (at that time). But he was a real good guy and I really enjoyed working for him so I extended a couple of months. When in October they relieved the company commander because they were in a booby-trapped area and he wasn’t doing what they were supposed to be doing. I understood all that stuff having been there before. What had happened the battalion commander and everyone else had been out (in the AO). We had a rather good firefight going on. I was the S-2, but I was in the TOC, Tactical Operations Center for the battalion by myself with a couple of NCOs. The thing was going down and I was writing down what you’re supposed to. Just doing my job is
all. General Berry who was the ADC at that time or CG, I don’t know came in and I gave
him a briefing on where we were when we launched artillery and what we’ve done to
respond to it and everything. General Berry was very impressed with all that. So he
offered me his aid’s job. I said with all do respect General, I didn’t come to Vietnam to
be an aid. If we were in the States that might be interesting. You know if I had my
choice I’d rather have a company”. So, a few days later this guy had done stupid and was
relieved. So they put me as a first lieutenant at the time, out. I was the commander of D-
Company for a period of time then. So, I extended a couple months to keep that position
a little bit longer.

SM: Well, why don’t you describe what the experience was like? Your first
company, not only your first company, but in combat.

TM: Well, it wasn’t a lot. It’s the same AO. Basically the same battalion, you
know what I mean. I had many things going for me having been in country probably
eight, ten months at the time. Knew the people, knew the AO, knew how things worked.
So, then it was just a function of the same thing that you do at platoon level, you do at
company level. The difference because you’ve got a lot more logistical and intelligence
support. You attend a lot more of the higher headquarters briefings and are in on the
planning rather than just the reacting like you were as a platoon leader. But it’s the same
thing in dealing with people. You know you just got to get to know you’re people, know
what their dreams are, what their experiences are. What they want out of life, where they
are going and everything. Then you try and do the best you can for them, given whatever
you’re dealing with (at the time). So as a company commander it was pretty much the
same. The difference became my interface (number of people to deal with) then I had a
series of five lieutenants that worked for me and I was a lieutenant. The guy I replaced
was a senior captain and he was very popular with the troop. The very reason he was
popular was the very reason he was relieved. He was sort of slack. You’ve got to get
people to do what they need to do for their own survivability. You know people basically
take short cuts if possible. It’s your job to ensure that doesn’t happen. (The devil is in
the details).

SM: When you took over the company what strength was the company?

TM: I think we were probably sitting at 95 to 100. I have an 11:30 appointment
So I’m going to have to pop smoke right now.

SM: Understood. Let me put a quick ending to this interview for today. Thank you very much sir.

TM: Then we’ll pick it up Thursday.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Colonel Ted Mataxis on the 19th of September 2002 at approximately 8:35 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas; Colonel Mataxis is in North Carolina. Sir, why don’t we pick up this morning’s interview with your decision to volunteer for a second tour of duty in Vietnam? What led you to that decision to volunteer for a second tour and then of course where you were assigned?

TM: I was still with the 101st 3/187 as a 1st lieutenant at that time. Everyone got promoted automatically after a year to 1st lieutenant. Then after a year as a 1st lieutenant they promoted you to captain at that time and place. (If you did not get promoted you had screwed up along the way). I had been in country, this is about October time when I was finishing up as the S-2, was due to head home in November. What had happened at that time, early October I had been the S-2 and was enjoying what I was doing, but I really missed the field. What sort of happened then was I think it was about the 13th of October, 1970 the battalion commander we had at that time was Lieutenant Colonel Bland who was a multiple tour veteran from Vietnam. Had been both on the American unit and the MACV side. Was relieved of command of something that we never were made privy to. We got a brand new battalion commander. That new battalion commander (LTC B.J. Sutton) was a very aggressive, very powerful person. He was just a really good leader. One of the best leaders I’d served with there. (So I extended to command A company for him). He assumed command of the battalion October 15th. That’s about the 11th month for me. I really enjoyed working with him. His S-3 was the guy by the name of (Major) Shanburger. Regrettably they were both killed in a Loch shoot down in Lam Son 719. I guess probably about five months later. But I did work with them when I extended and went to the (ARVN) airborne division. I enjoyed working with the staff and everything. What had happened we had one of the line company’s; it was D-company that had been out about the same time. I mean the colonel got in one day and they hit a booby trap that day and had four wounded and one
killed. The next day one of their Vietnamese with them a young captain, lost a leg. Then on the 18th or so they took a lot of mortar fire with their TOC and everything. So basically things weren’t going too well with them. That’s when I mentioned a little bit about being the only one in the command post at the time when General Berry came by and asked me to be an aid. I said, “oh, I’d rather be in the field”. As it turns out it wasn’t too long after that they said, “well, if you’d like a company we’ll get you one. Why don’t you go out and take D-Company”? They’re having some real difficult times right now. They’re sort of bogged down and aren’t responding quite like they should. I thought that would be a real challenge. I said “well, if you’ve only got a month left, if you give me the company I’ll be glad to extend for a few more months just to have a little time in the saddle there”. That’s essentially what made me decide to go ahead and extend the first time to get some company command experience.

SM: What were the greatest challenges you faced as a company commander in combat?

TM: As a company commander and every situation is different. That’s the one constant thing for Vietnam, because it all changed and was different for everyone. Everyone had a little different war there. It was almost like it was personalized. You had to keep in mind that the company that I took over was D-company. They had been on Hamburger Hill. The previous company commander about four removed had received a Medal of Honor for the actions up there at that time. They had some experienced people there. What had happened with the rotation of company commanders since the current one that was relieved was very popular, well liked by the people but being popular doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re doing all the right things for the troops. They were having more casualties than they should have. So, in taking over that company at that time, I took over from what was perceived as a multi-tour guy. You know who had been there a time or two and had experience. Here I was a first lieutenant. Probably was the only first lieutenant in the division (with a command at that time). That was something I had to overcome in that respect (displaying leadership and doing what you expect your people to do). It didn’t take long. It was like I mentioned earlier, nothing quite bonds a group of guys like a firefight. Once you work through one or two of those (fire fights) and the people see how things work, and the way you work, and that you’re not going to
do anything stupid or cost anyone life or limb needlessly you start to bond. That was the
biggest thing was just changing the mindset of the company, which was a little bit laid
back to make it disciplined and doing what they need to be doing. We were fortunate we
had few little firefights and were probed a few times and everything right off the bat.
That really helped get it all together. We basically continued on like that for a period of
time. It was about the end of October, which was about the same time I’d gotten there.
October, November of the previous year. The rains, monsoons were in there. They were
so much heavier in ’70 than they had been in ’69. I mean the valleys were all filled up
and even we found Highway QL1, which is sort of a north south artery through I corps
there. We had four to six inches of water on the road in some places. I mean the weather
conditions were very, very difficult. We kept on keeping on, no doubt about it.

SM: What would you say was the biggest difference besides the obvious? You
have more men, more responsibilities in that respect, but were there any different
challenges as opposed to say being platoon leader, being a company commander? Or
was it just the scale?

TM: The span of control is probably the main thing. The level that you interact
with. At company level then you become more of a processing center for intell and
everything. You know that’s where at platoon level, it’s tactical but it’s tactical from
your perspective. At company you have to start not only putting your platoons together,
but also those adjacent platoons and organization. You know whose around you. You
also then become the focal point. So the level of intensity picks up. Where before with
four platoons out there, one platoon maybe three babysitting on their thumbs and the
other one decisively engaged. Well at company level, something is always going on. It’s
an upscale tempo if you take that. But you have the additional people to do it with your
platoon headquarters or your company headquarters with additional RTOs and stuff like
that. But it was really, really interesting. (Then you work with the battalion who is
coordinating all of the rifle and support companies).

SM: Now the rule of thumb that you applied or tried to apply when you became a
platoon leader that is the advice your father gave you rely on your NCOs because they’re
the salt of the Earth, the life blood of the Army. Were you able to apply that lesson, that
advice as a company commander more so than as a platoon leader?
TM: No, it was the same cast of characters. The only guy with, when I say
longevity more than a year (or on his second tour). We had many seasoned people in
Vietnam and if you worked through all that after 10 months or so you were pretty
seasoned. When I say experience based, I’m talking about multiple tours or previous
wars. There was absolutely none of that level with the exception of my field first who
had volunteered to come back. My gosh, he was an old fellow then. He must have been
in his late 30s. I didn’t know people lived that long back then (laughs).

SM: In terms of the readiness of the men in your company, what were the biggest
concerns you had in terms for maintaining an appropriate level of physical readiness,
mental readiness and health, things like that?

TM: The health was probably the hardest part. The other part is when you’re in a
platoon you’re basically dealing with your squad leaders and you have a little bit of
flexibility in your squad leaders because you can move people around somewhat. But as
a company commander you’re platoon leaders are absolutely critical. If you’ve got a
weak link or two and there was one or two that we had to clean up there. But for the
most part they were all just really good soldiers and good to work with. But the health
part of it was a thing with the rain and everything. I know, I myself one time was dusted
off about the middle off of I think November. I didn’t have Malaria, it was fever of
unknown origin, which is sort of an offspring, same sort of thing. It was recurring for
multiple years after that, but finally got over that. But where we were working was out in
the mountain area near Fire Base Ripcord and that area. Were just doing mutual
supporting sort of operations. It was pretty good.

SM: When you say heath, were there other issues as well, besides just fevers?

TM: Well, Malaria was one and you had to make sure everyone was taking their
pills and everything. During the monsoons, just the paddy foot, immersion foot was
dominant. You really had to work at that. You had to take into consideration really I
mean there would be days on end when you never really were dry. It’s sort of like when
you’ve been in a bath how you sort of turn prunish and get wrinkly. I can remember just
in stripping your weapons to clean them you take off multiple layers of skin sometimes
just because it was so soft and pliable. About the only thing that was dry was the inside
of your ammo can. A lot of people carried an ammo can full of letters or whatever. It
was the only place you had that was dry. But at the same time you couldn’t let them carry too much weight because it just grinds you down. An issue that become very critical then, especially during the monsoons is your logistical tail sort of ebbs and flows. Remember when we were talking about as a platoon out there without food for a week or so when we all stand up and pass out. It’s ort of the same thing there. We went without food for good gosh, probably my second week there or third for probably five, six days at a time.

SM: What did the unit eat?

TM: You just ate what you had. When you realized it might be long term, you just cut back. One of the things, just like anything else, once you run out you’re not going to run out as quick but the trade off becomes what can you really carry? That’s one thing a lot of people don’t realize. At least this was my experience over there. With the heat and everything you actually really didn’t need a lot of food to keep going, in spite of the weight and the physical stress and everything going on. You know you’re diet is nothing like it would be today. So you sort of wean yourself to some degree. But when you’re out of food, you’re out. All you can do is see what’s around as far as indigenous stuff and use that.

SM: How did that affect the morale of the unit, if at all? That is the notion of almost running out of food?

TM: Well, it was a pisser (laughs). But it wasn’t the worst thing we had going on at the time.

SM: I guess being shot at was worse than running out of food?

TM: Well, nothing’s as bad as the constant booby traps. There was a lot of that too. So, it’s degrees of relativity.

SM: Would you say that was, what was the major threat, the biggest threat, the greatest fear? Was it booby traps?

TM: Well, in the mountain area it wasn’t. (If you found them in the mountains you were in a critical area they were defending or using as early warning devices). But in the flat land it most certainly was. That was sort of an overarching theme. Because as I mentioned before those booby traps for the most part weren’t just a hand grenade or something, they were recycled artillery rounds or mortar rounds. When you’d get it
you’d normally get two or three people and get them pretty bad. So, that was a real tough
time. In fact when we were out in the sand flats working and my platoon in fact became
the battalion’s motto. When you finish your conversation on the radio normally you say
“out”. To let the other guy know you’ve disconnected. We ended all of our radio
transmission at that time with “keep dispersed”. That was just so that’s the only way you
could deal with it was minimize what happened when it happened because if the
inevitability of it all. Does that make since?
SM: Yes, absolutely. Was that in terms of your work as a company commander,
this notion of staying dispersed, that’s not just applicable of course to a heavily booby
trapped area, but also in patrolling. Did you have to consistently train and reinforce basic
patrolling techniques, no clumping things like that?
TM: Yes, but the thing is when patrolling sometimes especially in the thick
canopy you really tighten up. You get a sense it’s a lost like reading road map and you
know which one’s a four-lane highway, you know which one’s a dirt road. You know
what I’m saying on a scale there. You get a sense for what’s booby trappable and what’s
not. It doesn’t make any sense in the world to put a booby trap out in the jungle when
you’re clearing your own trail through there. The probability of you getting someone
else with it is not very likely. The probability of one of your own coming across it is if
there’s no waiting. Remember we talked about flagging. So you need space and you
need a distance. So, when you’re in deep jungle, unless you’re in a base camp or
something chances are you’re not going to be booby-trapped. You may be caught in an
ambush that would start off sort of like a booby trap. You know what I mean with their
claymores and what not. The booby trap part goes away. Then when you’re moving at
night and everything that’s when you really have to get up close.
SM: As a company commander, did you go out on foot patrols with particular
platoons or as a whole company?
TM: No, basically we’re working in platoon size or less reinforcing one another
out there. I would rotate around and stay with different platoons and go out with them
when possible.
SM: What would be your role within the patrol?
Strictly an observer, an advisor. Because you don’t go take someone else’s job. That would be up to the platoon leader or the platoon sergeant I was with at the time. One thing that comes to mind and then that’s something that we haven’t talked about. There’s a significant amount of friendly fire and stuff that takes place in any combat environment. One evening in particular I had a lieutenant who was not particularly good. In fact, I got rid of him that evening, sent him back and the best thing I ever did for him. He went back and became the PX officer. You know life is just not fair. We were set up in an ambush position and I heard all this noise. It just was too much noise, it didn’t make sense. I quickly figured it was our own people. I called all my platoon leaders and asked them if they were in their night defensive positions. All of them acknowledged the fact that they were. This one platoon leader just flat lied to me. Said he was, but he wasn’t. He was the one that I heard. So, what I did was left my position with my RTO and kept talking to determine where they were. He assured me that he was not moving when I tapped him on the shoulder. (I linked up with his platoon when they were moving and worked my way up to him). He was gone the next day. But if I hadn’t had the finesse, hadn’t put the pieces together it would have been very tempting to go ahead and open up or initiate an ambush (in a free fire zone). That happened to me good gosh before Christmas, two days before Christmas who I was platoon leader. There was a lost platoon out there across the river and they’re making so much noise when they cut loose with the M-60 just inches over the head. Inches being like two.

That stuff happens but it can be minimized. But that’s sort of part of it. That’s why you’ve got to think what makes sense and what doesn’t.

When you were platoon leader were there any other close calls? Friendly fire incidents?

Yes, there was another one also. When it rains, it pours. Out there in the booby-trapped area. What happened initially when we got there, my platoon or my company commander at that time said that he would relieve me if I didn’t move any faster. Well he had a mission and the mission was to get from point A to point B. Remember I said we were supposed to do that three kilometers in a day or something. It
took us five weeks because of the booby traps. The initial concept of who was it Sommolty or someone said “no battle lasts through the first five minutes as far as the planning phase goes”. Things change, but he told me I wasn’t doing my job, I told him to come visit me. He came down and visited and as soon as everyone finally realized what happened. Several days later when we got the engineer support and everything. Once we got the engineers support there like I told you I had forgotten there were two incidences where I got knocked down working with the pick and shovel people were killed both times. That’s when they told us to sort of take a break in place. Like how do you take a break in place when you can’t walk around? At least we didn’t have to continue down the road. But that’s when they came up with the flame drop idea. They were using Napalm in 55 gallon drums and dropping those and then firing them up with M-60s to ignite them. Then we used the little daisy cutters, which had two different ones. One was a snake, which was a line that shot out like a rocket and then you blew that in place and the other was like (bangalore) torpedoes that you just cranked together one at a time or in series. One time and it was the battalion commander’s helicopter that dropped some Napalm on us, but we got them before they started engaging it. That was another time as a platoon leader. Then the airborne division on my next extension was the worst one. I was wrapped up, but we’ll cover that later.

SM: What about fragging? Was that ever an issue, ever a concern in your unit? Did it ever happen?

TM: It happened when I was company commander at this thing I had one soldier tell me that I needed to be careful that I might get fragged. He wasn’t saying it to warn me or help me. He was threatening. I said, “hey, I’ve got no problem with that. I’ve already been here a year”. But the thing about them frags they leave fingerprints of officers, or NCOs or privates. I just said, “yeah it goes both ways bubba”. We left it at that. Nothing again came of it. It just got his attention. That’s one of the things I think that was probably most helpful for me as a commander, being not necessarily young but being under rank (a 1st Lt.). When you normally figure you’ve got captain whose been around a little while even in Vietnam a little while it was the fact that I was there because I wanted to be. They knew who I was because I’d been in that unit the entire time. They
knew of my reputation as a platoon leader and staff guy and everything else. That was nothing but helpful.

SM: Were there any particular issues or problems that you faced in working with draftees versus volunteers in your unit?

TM: No, not at all. In fact like I mentioned the other day a lot of them had really volunteered to be there. It was surprising. Even the draftees some of them had volunteered. You know it’s the draft do you want two years or three yes, I’ve forgotten what it was at the time. But even some of those (draftees) didn’t really have that sort of problem.

SM: Did you encounter any problems with, you had mentioned the shake and bake NCOs as a platoon leader, was that obviously a continuing issue that you faced as accompany commander as well? Working with your lieutenants? With their shake and bake NCOs?

TM: The good ones were good and when I said there were some bad ones it was a very small percentage. I was going to use the current example today’s public schools or in any organization. You always hear about the one or two that aren’t doing the right thing when you’ve got 100 of them that are. In balance there was no problems at all. When you’ve got a dud, you’ve got a dud. You have to deal with it like that lieutenant. He could have had all his people wasted.

SM: How would you integrate new personnel? That is of course when you received some new especially privates, new soldiers that would be integrated into the line units?

TM: There’s a couple different ways that would work. It would be situational. (Based on where you were at what you were doing). All things being equal and all things aren’t equal all the time. We know that. But all things being equal you try and do an equitable distribution based on needs. Then at the same time you’ve also got to factor in the experience base of those people. If you’ve got four squads in a platoon of four platoons on a company either way you’ve got one that’s a little bit weaker. That’s where sometimes you would send someone more experienced there first to try and bring up their capabilities. In the respect with the young privates and everything you also would put them where you had good strong fire team leaders and squad leaders to try and develop
them and nurture them. It was almost like a mentorship program. (It was the job of the
squad to teach the “cherry” all he needed to stay alive and not have others killed
needlessly.) None of the training really prepares you for what you’re going through. It
wall helps, you know what I mean. There’s nothing like being there. That’s learned in
country at the time, sort of one step at a time and watching other people and asking why
they do things and having other people point out signs to them and stuff like that.

SM: Did you have any kind of special training for absolutely fresh troops that
came in from the U.S. that had just gone through basic AIT and were sent over as
replacements?

TM: Everyone did exactly the same thing I did in the 101st. We had the SERTS
(Screaming Eagle Replacement Training School) that I talked about for multiple days
there.

SM: Right. Did you then do anything additional to that after they got to your
company?

TM: No, because we were just engaged. When I said no and then I think of the
exception to it. When you’re not in a field environment you have that opportunity. Like
if you’re standing down or at a firebase or something then you can take them out and
show them how to do claymore traps and focus a little bit more (on tactics and
techniques) because you’re in a controlled environment. When you’re in a field
environment it becomes almost a one on one or mentoring. Or like we were doing with
the indiged Rough Puffs there with the paralleling people. You know put one with one
and sort of train as you go (explaining the need to do things certain ways).

SM: What units were in closest proximity to you out on your patrolling as a
company commander?

TM: It was the other companies in the battalion.

SM: You didn’t have any other country forces around you, ARVN, Rock, Thai?

TM: No, we did not. 101st was pretty pure at that time.

SM: How much time did you spend back in the firebase?

TM: That’s what you’ve got to keep in mind, this is December of’70.

SM: December if ’70.
TM: And January of’70 so everything I said would be flushed down the toilet come January and February. Remember I’d mentioned my battalion commander was killed supporting Lam Son 719. At that time they moved out and they were surrounded by all kinds of indig. It just depends on what cycle (you were in at the time). That’s what I meant about if nothing else the one common theme that every veteran would say is that Vietnam was such a personalized war because everyone’s experiences were so different. The type of unit, the type of mission you’re on. The geographic environment that you’re in. All that stuff it’s just so many variables.

SM: While you were a company commander when your unit was out in the field were you typically conducting a larger sweep operation battalion sized or even larger? Were they more focuses on company level or platoon level size patrols?

TM: They were battalion size operations, which were coordinated for the most part at brigade level. It was once again the same differences that you’ve got from platoon to company. You’ve got from company to battalion and then battalion to brigade. Brigade is pretty much where it stopped. You know we didn’t do many that I recall at all, multiple brigade. You would be crossed attached like I was that one time when I never did figure out where we were. But that was the exception rather than the rule. A lot of there when you look at where we were. We had the sand flats there with the coastal plains and the sand flats and Finger Lakes there (the street without joy area). And the little rolling hills where Camp Evans and Eagle were (south of Hue), which were the fire support bases (located on Highway 1). Then your first ridge line which we called Rocket Ridge and then your multiple valleys out that way going up (west) toward Laos and the A-Shaw valley in there. So, what you were doing for the most part a lot of it was firebase security. Working in and around at the area with patrols and saturation and stuff like that. Looking for infiltration routes or storage or training bases and stuff like that.

SM: On these patrols as a company as part of a larger battalion operation did you encounter many civilians, Vietnamese civilians in the areas?

TM: No. If you were past the first ridgeline it was all a free fire zone.

SM: So it was a free fire zone?

TM: Yes.

SM: Anything that moved you just engaged?
TM: Basically. Well, once you figured out what it was. If it was a random water buffalo or tiger or whatever. But for the most part there were no indig out there. That’s different in other parts because later I went to the II corps area and out there it was sort of the same thing but you really had to be careful there because of the montagnards and indigenous people. Where in our area of operation it had so much going on I think everyone pretty much left. I don’t ever recall coming across any ingdig natives during that time frame (with the 101st) or ever even hearing of any.

SM: What was the largest enemy unit you would estimate that your company went up against?

TM: They were probably company size, maybe battalion at the worst. But once again that ebbed and flowed. I remember one time they had gotten past us and we were all out in the highlands and the Vietnamese in the Phong Dien area had a real big fire fight and killed about 100 people. They were NVAs and we never did figure out where they came from. It’s either very peaceful and not a lot going on or violently active and then that doesn’t last for too long with a few exceptions.

SM: Was that the norm that your platoons and your company engaged NVA as opposed to Vietcong at this point?

TM: Yes, out in hinterland.

SM: What kind of intelligence as a company commander were you receiving about enemy units in the area and their movements?

TM: Pretty much the same because everything I got at platoon, anything a company commander would get he would share with his platoon and battalion. So, that flow was pretty good and the intelligence was pretty much consistent all the way through in the 101st. That’s one thing you shared and got out just as quick as you could.

SM: Did your unit recover many prisoners during these operations, company commander?

TM: No, we did not. No prisoners at all.

SM: At this pointing the war, how much of an emphasis was there on generating body counts for you as a company commander?

TM: It wasn’t a priority at all. Our priority was to do the best we could for our folks. It wasn’t as intense, but once again everything changes with time. When they
were supporting Lam Son (719 it was as deep as it gets as was Hamburger Hill), I don’t know because it was a target rich environments. You know what I mean.

SM: Did you ever feel pressured to provide better statistics or better numbers going up the chain of command while you were in Vietnam?

TM: No, never was. A time or two I was offered help I didn’t want.

SM: Could you elaborate on that?

TM: My last tour with the border Ranger camp there when I was with the montagnard battalion we were in a real big firefight at the time. I don’t know if you know about him, John Paul Vann. He was trying to get me to pinpoint my location and pop smoke and show him where I was so he could give me some advice. Keep in mind I’d had a few extensions (in country) by that time. I knew the last thing I needed was advice. Sometimes they’re quick to try and tell you what’s best and what you need the intel link, not the other part. For the most case.

SM: Intelligence as opposed to advice?

TM: Yes.

SM: In terms of your success as a company commander, how would yourself-evaluate your performance as your company commander? How did you know you were succeeding and when did you know that you were not necessarily successful, not necessarily failing either, but there were things that you needed to improve on?

TM: Real easy. When I got there and assumed command of D-Company the morale of the unit was exceptionally low. The field ability and capability was questionable. I took command from someone that was relieved. Then in just a matter of a couple of weeks the whole units operational level of efficiency changed. That’s just as a result of doing the right things and a little bit of leadership there. We proved at that in time we could hang with the best of them under the most adverive conditions. That’s pretty easy.

SM: How did you provide relief to your men? That is in the form of morale building activities or just minor things people in our civilian world take for granted. Just a good hot mea as opposed to a C-ration. How would you incorporate those types or morale building things?
TM: Hot meals you can roll that in, but I tell you don’t get me wrong, nothing wrong with a hot meal but I can remember one Christmas when we had to hump eight hours to get to an LZ so we could have a hot meal and then hump another eight hours, you know 16 hours of humping for a little piece of turkey. Many times people mean to be doing right but they don’t think through what the impact of the guy on the field is. That sort of thing happens on occasion. The thing you had power over then and power was the operative word was the scheduling of people for R&Rs (and time back at the fire base etc.) When you could get someone back to the rear to make a run to the PX for all the guys. Those were the sort of things along those lines (that made a difference, just showing that you cared about them). When a man a lieutenant or young NCO had done his stuff and you had heard about an opening that was coming up in the S-2 shop or the S-5 shop that would be professionally developing for them and give him a change of pace also and give him a chance to see a different part of the war, those are the ways that you could take care of your people (as well as appropriate awards and decoration). In the trying to get the promotions when they do things, the awards and decorations, you know as you can. Those are the sorts of things and just good judgment. I remember one time we were supposed to be an airborne assault into an old abandoned firebase. We started talking about this thing at o’dark thirty in the morning. Kept banging on and on and on. We finally got the airframe we were told they were coming and it was just about dusk. I said, “I’m sorry, I’m not going. I will not”. With what we’ve been through with booby traps, take a bunch of people and put them in that predicament when we can’t see squat, I just flat won’t do it. I’ll be glad to go at first light in the morning, but we ain’t doing it tonight. I stood up for them and the guys absolutely loved it. It just made sense. Once I said that they said well, duh. You’re right. You know what I mean. It’s things like that that just show that you genuinely care. That’s real easy because you rely on them (and they you). You’ve got to.

SM: How would you handle awards? In terms of heroic deeds of men in your unit, were properly recognized and ready to receive awards for them. Was that difficult?

TM: No, not at all. Normally they were very supportive of something like that. That’s the time where you didn’t give awards if you didn’t do things. If there was ever a
time where body count would factoring, the type of award would be based on what
happened there. The intensity of the conflict. You know what I mean?
SM: Yes.
TM: So that would be factored in at that point. It’s real easy. They were good
when you had. Everyone knew what was going on and listening to the radio traffic you
could tell who’s doing what (to some degree). Sometimes I guess one thing would be if
you had someone that’d been in country a long, long time and they were there and you
had to pick one or the other, you’d normally pick the guy who’d been there the longest I
some cases. You can’t everyone. (Being a hero is very circumstantial—it is not something
you plan on doing. You do your job and take care of those around you as they take care
of you).
SM: Did you have attached to your company any special personnel? Whether it
be like air?
TM: Yes. We had the artillery liaison with us. We had the Chieu Hoi that I
mentioned. Just depending on where we were and at what time I was really into dogs. I
loved dogs. They had a wide variety of different capabilities. They had those that were
anti-personnel for walking patrols and picking up ambushes. They had those that were
specifically tunnel dogs that worked off the scene of the person that was underground,
sort of musty. They had those that were booby trap and explosive dogs. They had a wide
variety of them. I would always try and have some kind of dogs with me, depending on
what we were doing. We had a lot of those. We didn’t have anything. We controlled all
of our own helicopter, air and gun ships and stuff like that. Didn’t have any Naval fire in
the 101st. If you do that then you have an ANGCO (Air Naval Gun Control Officer)
cross attached with you.
SM: Did you have dogs with you when you were working in the booby trap area
as a platoon leader?
TM: We tried that and it didn’t work. We lost the handler and they had a hard
time with the dog. There was too much there and so many of those were so old. They’d
work on a scent thing too. We tried that and it just wasn’t working for us.
SM: Would you send out dogs with almost all of your patrols, your platoons?
TM: No. At the platoon you might have one and you’d be sending out. A lot of that and it depends where you are again. If you’re deep in the mountains the rules are totally different. The low lands then you probably went out on a fire team to squad-sized elements. If you’ve got one dog with the platoon you can pick one of eight places to put them. You see what I mean?

SM: Right.

TM: So it wouldn’t be with everyone. You just do as best you can based on the environment and the capability.

SM: You mentioned of course you had artillery support and I would imagine air support as well.

TM: Oh, yes Aerial Rocket Artillery, ARA guns (as well as Air Force movers if you needed them).

SM: In an operation where you would be provided with a significant amount of either artillery or air support, and they would come through or they would fire a significant number of missions on an area where your men would hold back while they just basically bombarded, a suspected enemy position.

TM: I wouldn’t hold back, you just mark your locations and they work around you. That was if you think of stratification that’s where the battalion staff and everything is really good. All we’re doing (on the ground) is controlling what’s happening with that one Cobra (or support) that’s making its pass at that time. You’ve got to look at your gun target lines and factor all stuff that you worry about. You’re not aware of the other fast movers in the area and you’re not aware of the other ops going on. That’s where a battalion sitting above you, sort of orchestrating it all and that’s very, very helpful. Sure did a lot of good. (You could also recon by fire if that was needed).

SM: Was this literally a battalion commander, a battalion staff in helicopters above? Or was this just them back in the headquarters?

TM: It would be above during the execution and kickoff of an operation. So it would depend on what phase. There’s no real answer to any of that. It’s all so situational. Normally when you were going in, like I’d mentioned that other time when I couldn’t get much more fun than that to have your rolling artillery go in there and prep it and everything and your gun ships flying right next to you going in. That’s when
everyone is orchestrated and just stacked right up there doing it. (There is no better feeling than a hot LZ).

SM: Did you ever feel micromanaged by any of your battalion or higher commanders when you were accompany commander?

TM: No, did not.

SM: In a combat situation, in an operational situation and when you did receive a significant amount of fire support, whether it be artillery, air or whatever afterwards would it be a standard mission for the unit that was closest to that fire support to go through?

TM: Yes. You had the way it would work, you know who was in what they call direct support. That means they’re the first up line in your chain. They had direct support, which was sort of assigned to your unit with everything. Then general support and general support, reinforcing. You know they had different categories of that. You may have 105 and direct support 155 and general support, whatever you needed. I don't remember good gosh and I think it was about that time when logistically and that would be a morale thing, we were cutting back. You’d mentioned the casualties we were cutting back on those, but they were also cutting back on artillery rounds. One time when I got there you could use whatever your discretion called for, but after a while that sort of changed where you almost have to send them a check to get an artillery round. In fact I offered to pay for some once upon a time if I remember correctly (laughs). I didn’t have to but I offered, whatever works.

SM: After those heavy fire support missions were completed, do you have a ground unit, a platoon a closest to them go thorough that area that was bombarded and clear it?

TM: You always did BDAs is what they call it. Bomb damage assessment.

SM: Bomb damage assessment.

TM: It’s amazing you forget what all those stuff (initial) stands for after all this time.

SM: That would include.

TM: Same way, in fact that one time I mentioned we were in there doing partially (BDA) that with the B-52 strikes that had been put in there and everything.
SM: That battle damage assessment and patrol in the aftermath of a huge fire support mission, that would involve body count estimates of enemy killed?

TM: Oh, absolutely. At that point, when you went in you actually had to dig up the graves for trying to gather intelligence. What they looked like, were they fit? Were they old? Were they young? What their uniforms looked like. What kind of systems did them in. That sort of stuff. Sometimes they even wanted you to back haul some of that stuff. It’s non-sessical looking back on it.

SM: Why would they have you back haul it?

TM: I guess for identification.

SM: Wow. Again most of these were NVA that you would encounter? They would bury them there or these were people that were buried in the artillery or par barrages?

TM: The enemy would bury their people on site before they’d leave. Remember I mentioned earlier it didn’t matter where you dug (in a platoon or company) you almost (always) dug something up.

SM: While we’re on that subject how would you handle casualties when they occurred in your company? Especially the deaths of soldiers in your unit?

TM: Just standard procedures. You know medevac and just treat them as respectfully as possible. They wouldn’t mix medevacs with bodies. That was a no go when I was there. The same thing if you were at different sights and that’s some of the hardest stuff anyone has to do (go to the rear and identify the bodies). Even as a platoon leader if you were in one location and you’ve got an element out I remember Sergeant Larry T. Harrison got hit by a 105 one time at close range. It literally gutted him, killed him on the spot. He was far enough away and there were too many booby traps there. Once we worked through on the radio what had happened, we got a medevac in there and hauled him back. Then they had to send a little Loch out to pick me up and go back and identify his remains and everything and send all the stuff back to the family. That sort of thing. That’s something that’s very critical and it’s one of those things that effects morale also. I found several people who have hunted me down over the years just to thank me for once they were hit going back and making sure that all the personal effects and stuff were taken care of. Those are the little sorts of things that mean everything.
SM: You’ve talked about how you handle the body or how you handled the
wounded and how you handle the personal effects, but what about the unit itself? Was
there anything that you did as a company commander, a memorial service or anytime like
that?
TM: You didn’t do that in the field. You had memorial services back at the base
camp when you pulled back in there. They’d do the bayonet with the helmet and the
boots on top of it and all that sort of stuff.
SM: How effective did you find that?
TM: Well, I’m not sure what you men by effective. I was always very touched
by it. It was all very personal to all of us.
SM: I mean did you think it adequately addressed the issue of need for members
in your unit to mourn the death of their comrade, their buddy?
TM: It was one way. Everyone does that a little bit different. Mourning is not
and it can be a group process, but it’s much more individual. What you’re going to do in
an environment like that is you know everything about all your guys. Who they are, what
they are, what they meant to do. Who’s close to them, who had family. Who doesn’t.
Who might be really impacted by it. Those would be the ones as leaders that you’d be
watching and making sure that they were ready to cope with things before you put them
in situations.
SM: Did you have a chaplain that was typically close at hand?
TM: Battalion had a chaplain and chaplain’s assistant and then they would float
out. Some of the chaplains God bless them spent a lot of time in the field. Others didn’t.
SM: How frequently would you estimate you saw the Chaplin’s staff at you r
company level? How frequently when you were in the field?
TM: Well, sometimes more than I wanted to (laughs). Only because once again
it’s that logistics thing. The rule of thumb was that you couldn’t make them walk more
than a kilometer. I broke the rule one time and heard about it.
SM: How so?
TM: It was a kilometer, but one ridgeline away. It was a kilometer on the map,
not on the terrain. It goes back to the same thing as the turkey. (You need to thin how it
impacts the troops on the field). When you’re decisively engaged and you’re living
something a change isn’t necessarily good sometimes. It’s not like we just had been beat
up and needed someone to come out and hold our hand. You know what I mean?
SM: Yes.
TM: I got counseled about that. Looking back the colonel who counseled me
was probably right. It gives the men a lot of time for exposure and I was with them and
they looked at is as a task rather than a benefit that particular time.
SM: What about actual religious services for your men?
TM: Yes, in the rear they had them all the time. They were very good with the
packets and stuff. They always had Bibles and crosses for you, little sterling crosses they
give you. They have the bibles and services in the rear all the time. And any one that
wanted to get back you (would support that) some kids that were very devoted to that.
You try and get them back. That’s one of those things again if you knew that’s what
floated someone’s boat you try and get something Sunday to try and get them in for the
afternoon and get them back out. It’s all a balancing act. So, it if permits that’s another
way that’s a good plus for some. Because everyone looks for different types of things.
SM: You mentioned I think very appropriately that grieving is a very individual
thing. That we all grieve in our own way. Was there an opportunity or was there an
ability for you to provide those people who had a hard time coping with the death of a
friend. I don’t know was there any kind of counseling mechanism for them?
TM: You just sent them in the rear for a little bit, let them unwind. That’s sort of
like combat fatigue or anything else. When you just let them go back there, their duties
are cut down, they’ve got a much more secure environment. They’re able to go get a hot
meal and have a hamburger and a beer at the club. That’s part of what you do too when
the situation permits.
SM: Well, what about combat fatigue, was that very common? You mentioned
already that one mechanism was to send people back to the rear where they would feel
secure and kind of relax. How did you cope with that as a company commander where
you may not have an opportunity to provide?
TM: Then what you do is just try and rotate the best you can with whatever
missions come down to give everyone some relief. Remember what I said talking about
Ranger school (earlier in the interview) I was never as fatigued or as tired as I was in
Ranger school because it’d be non-sensical. (You have to pace yourself for the race you’re running). Because it’s all full of trade offs. The times you have to stretch, but as soon as you stretch you need to regroup. When you’re stretching you need to have some people resting. So you’ve got that continual coverage. Not just everyone going full out for 24, 48 hours and then withering on the vine to speak.

SM: Did you encounter very much combat fatigue?

TM: No, we were able to run a pretty good pace.

SM: That’s an interesting way to put it, make sure your units pace themselves so that they don’t become so fatigued that they’re combat defective.

TM: Absolutely right because if it’s balls to the wall all the time. What have you done? You’ve beat everyone up and chances are they’re not going to be alert. First time they’re not alert they’re going to sleep on duty. First time you sleep on duty or first time you don’t send your patrols out, they know what you do. It’s just amazing how quick the word would get out. But that’s just good field craft.

SM: Did you have much opportunity to talk with your contemporary company commander and fellow officers?

TM: We actually did have a pretty good bit of time because anytime you’d come up with operations orders or something and you need to be changing maps, the way they would often do that would be pull the company commanders in from the field. So that everyone sits down and goes over it (the plan) eye to eye and understands. You’re looking at the guy who’s on your left flank and your right flank and you understand what their missions are and how you’re part fits into that. So as a company commander that was very good. As a platoon leader we didn’t have that opportunity. Well, we pulled back to the company headquarters, which in some cases may have seemed like a really rear area for some folks. It’s all relative again. One of the best things that you had over there in my opinion was a visual reconnaissance. Because the map sheets we had for the I corps area were French that were printed last updated in 1940ish time frame. So you’d be looking at a map and there’d be big old villages there, but when you’re airborne you see there’s no such thing now. Then you’d be looking at a great big refugee camp or something else and there’s nothing there on your map. Your map man made features were totally unreliable. I mean your roads were good, but where villages were they sort
of ebbed and flowed. And in some cases like when we went back into that booby trapped area we couldn’t even find the main road we were looking for initially until we found the crick in the thing and went back (matching terrain features and then we found where it had been overgrown). They had it very well marked on the map, but it turned out it wasn’t. That sort of thing too. The visual reconnaissance (made all the difference). You’d often have you battalion commanders and staff come out to visit you. A lot of the battalion commanders had their staff visit on a daily basis just to get a feel for what the guys are going through. I thought that was a helpful thing really.

SM: How often would you be able to do that kind of a leaders recon?

TM: Normally with the change of missions it was almost automatic. Then you could also request it (as required). I used to request them all I could. I wouldn’t get everything I requested, but in the days that they weren’t committed for resupply, food, medevac or something else, they had the schedule too. Because just like you pace your people, they pace the pilots. So there would be times when they’ve got free time. One of the things I used to do because my commander went along with it. I would take my young squad leaders up with me. I’d never go anywhere by myself unless it was a Loch and there wasn’t any room. This gives them a feel for how it (the terrain) looks from above and how it looks on the ground. Because map reading is a totally different skill on the ground than when you’re in a helicopter. It’s totally different. I’ve known some who can do one or the other very good, not both. That’s all a function of tempo and being able to keep up and how you can maneuver your maps. Because when you’re in the air you can really burn up one over 50,000 (map sheet) real quick. That’s one of the techniques I always tried to do.

SM: How proficient did you find your NCOs and some of your other general enlisted men in terms of map reading? Was that something that was important for you as a company commander and platoon leader?

TM: It was absolutely critical. You know the degrees (of skill) varied and the good old boys who were raised on the farm and hunted a lot they had a much better level than a guy out of New York would learn it. Some of those could do well given the opportunity in training. But once again, it’s just when you’ve got your point guy and he’s up there watching the points. You’ve go the guy behind him covering him and then
you’ve got about three guys back you’ve got your guy with the map and the compass
that’s keeping you between the yellow line so to speak. That’s how you develop people
to do all of those positions. Remember when we talked about (training your men two or
three) position up?
SM: Right.
TM: That’s the same sort of thing. I thought map reading was a critical skill.
But there was always the artillery support for you, the Willie Pete, white phosphorous
that they put up if you were in question as to where you were. One time I never did
figure out where I was (it was an air assault near Laos). We started just from where we
were supposed to be. They fired Willie Petes and probably made 15 adjustments and
never did even hear one. So we were way out from wherever we thought we were going
to get dropped off.
SM: What would you do in that kind of circumstance?
TM: All we could do was just hang in there. It was during the monsoons time. I
don’t know how they figured out where we were, but they finally did. It was like two
valleys over or something. The pilot went back( and recovered the area and realized
there had been a mistake). I guess what they did was have the pilots had to sit there and
go back and figure out the way they had gone.
SM: Well, is there any other experience as a company commander that you
would like to discuss?
TM: No, I think that’s pretty much it.
SM: How long did you serve as accompany commander? When did you stop
that?
TM: I think it went from October to January.
SM: So, January of 1971?
TM: Yes.
SM: At that point you had just extended. You hadn’t really started a second tour
is that correct?
TM: No, that was just a couple of months extension there with the 101st. But at
that same time after I extended there in the 101st for the company I immediately put in for
a six months extension. Having been a platoon leader, com[any commander and
everything at battalion level I wanted to try the Vietnamese side (of the war). You know
I’d work with the Rough Puffs. So, I extended and went to the Vietnamese Airborne
Division, which was based out of Saigon. It was the Airborne Advisory Team, 162 or the
Red Hats as they were known there. If there was ever a group of elitists in country that
was it. Almost all the officers were West Pointers and had multiple combat tours. It was
just the absolute cream of the crop because the airborne division was the immediate
reaction force for the nation at the time. So, they went wherever things were really
tough. So, the Americans had a lot volunteered for that, but not everyone volunteered got
the job. So, it was a real honor to be picked up there. Then at that time, Colonel James B.
Vaught, years later was the general who did the Iranian raid. Really interesting fellow.
(He was an outstanding leader). We had a great team there.

SM: Did you have to go through any kind of special training to become an
advisor?

TM: Yes and no. The yes was if you were in the states and were coming out on
orders to go to Team 162, chances are you go to the MATA course (Military Advisor
Training and Assistance) down at Ft. Bragg. You know with Special Forces orientation
sort of thing with the language course. Some people even went to Monterrey (California)
for a year en route (in language school) just studying Vietnamese. But since I was
extending from in country based on my experiences in country and willingness to stay I
didn’t get any of that. I just went directly there. It depended on how you cycled into the
organization. We had some people that had come back multiple tours, same unit.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Lieutenant Colonel Ted
Mataxis on the 19 of September 2002 at approximately 10 o’clock Lubbock time.

TM: Okay.

SM: What were your primary responsibilities as a member of advisory team 162?

TM: Basically what we had at Egen was consistent through out all of the
battalions. The advisory team had the senior advisor which was Vaught was with a two
star (ARVN) general and his staff. Then each one of his functional staff members had a
counterpart. One, two, three, four, five, like that. Each brigade headquarters had a
lieutenant colonel American that was the senior advisor to the brigade. The each
battalion had a major positioned as the battalion senior advisor in a captain’s position as
the deputy advisor. Then one senior grade NCO at each one of the companies in the
battalion to help maneuver fire support training and stuff like that. This is where the
experience base (in the NCOs) that my dad had talked about was still alive and well.
Everyone at the airborne division had multiple tours and multiple wars and they were
very well picked. Does that make sense?
SM: Yes, sir.
TM: I was a deputy advisor to the 8th battalion there. That was about the same
time because I made captain in January of that same year. We’re talking ’71 now. My
dad was assistant division commander at Chu Lai for that (American Division). I went
up and had a ceremony up there where he pinned on the wings, not wings, captains bars
that he’d worn early on in World War II. Then I went back down and became an advisor
there in January. Basically what we did for the month of January was training. We were
training in close combat, fire support and everything like that (fire and maneuver). It was
sort of mundane. We went through the ritual because at the airborne division there they
had their own uniform. They had the jungle fatigues that were camouflaged, the
Americans. But then they took it off the pockets and modified it and everything. It was a
real image and morale sort of thing. So you really knew you were going through a
process as they changed over the uniforms and berets and that stuff, which was sort of
tradition there. So, we did that and stayed in Saigon for January not doing too much
other than training. Doing all but nothing combat related by any stretch. We did that
through about the first of February. Then on the first of February we were all given an
alert to stand by that we were going to go out and get into it. What had happened then on
the first this is when Lom Som 719. The Laos Incursion took place basically up in I
corps (into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail). This was the same area that I’d been
working in previously with the 101st. In fact my (battalion from the 101st) was one of the
supporting units there. This was a combined effort with Marines and everybody going
in. That’s probably as close to what I thought war was supposed to be about.
SM: Could you elaborate on that?
TM: When we got the operation order and moved from Saigon up to I corps to a
little place called Dong Ha, we were (air lifted) and shipped up with our vehicles and
everything. We had some people actually go out amphibious ways with the bigger trucks
and stuff. Then the chiefs and your staff and everybody, I mean we were loaded to the
teeth with everything locked and loaded. Loading on the airframes and being taken up to
Dong Ha where we kicked off of the operation. My battalion, the 8th battalion was the
lead element for that incursion. When we go to Dong Ha we received a briefing and
everything and talked about it. Old Vaught or Colonel Vaught at the time said, “well
here’s the highway, I think it was (HW9) that we were going down (it had been
abandoned). But boy I tell you if I were them I’d ambush us right here. And I’d ambush
us right here”. He was right. Everyplace he put his finger, we got ambushed at. We
made our way down to the border (Laos) there. This was as far as we were supposed to
go (as advisors). It was a combined effort. You know like you think of World War II
with the amphibious part of it. The Navy working with you, the Air Force working with
you. You’ve got the Marines on one side, this division on another side, the Americans
over here. All kinds of helicopters devoted to the mission, so it was up scaled is what I
meant by my comment. (Lom Som 719 was one of the largest combined operations of
the war). As I mentioned we had six of us in the battalion there. Jack Todd was the
major that I worked for. Then we had four NCOs. One was Sergeants White, Johnson,
Corella, and Logan. They were the group that was with the battalion I was with.
Unfortunately that evening and I think it was probably about the fifth or sixth or February
’71 being the lead element right there on the river (separating RVN from Laos). Airborne
battalion (8th) and directly behind us we had cross-attached an armor battalion with us. A
jet came out of Laos, it came out of Laos and came directly at us and dropped one bomb.
That bomb was a CBU, because you could just watch it go blip, blip, blip as it came
across and spread out. As a result of that they killed 14 of the airborne troopers I was
with and wounded 40. Then they killed three of the tankers that were with us and 15
wounded. This was just at sundown. So we spent all night medevacing people and
everything. There was also a reporter there and I’ve forgotten his name. But he was
from Life Magazine that was killed at that time. I think Life Magazine did a big write up
on that. But that was a friendly fire thing (by the Navy of the Aircraft Carrier Ranger).
Our battalion XO went and they bandaged up his broken right arm and he went off across
the river. As advisors we were prohibited from going with them into Laos (by an act of
Congress). So we sat at the river. And then at our division level we set up a tactical
operations center, I think at Khe Sanh there. That’s where all things were conducted through that (for the entire operation). So, once we set up at Khe Sanh based on the incoming (artillery and rocket fire) and the amount of facilities and it being a raw site they could not keep all the advisors at the field location there. What they did was they set up a rotation (of advisors to work at Khe Sanh). They kept people because we had no idea how long this was going to go on. We stayed there and I think about a week later, about the 9th or 10th we were back hauled aback to Saigon. So they kept some of the people (advisors) up at the TOC to run the war. Then the rest of us went back to Saigon and we were put on a rotation where everyone would be able to go up and serve time. Basically go up for a couple weeks at a time just based on the rotation. Once we got back down to Saigon about the 10th of February or so basically what we did was just worked with the indig there with supplies and logistics and trying to get things in forward locations. Because the normal battalion was gone and there wasn’t anyone left to train because pretty much everybody was deployed. The routine parts we got to jump a lot there with rigors and stuff that stayed behind there. We took advantage of that, got a lot of jumps and stuff in. Got to go on a quick R&R at the time and everything. Then rotated up to work out of the TOC for a couple weeks later. I’m trying to remember what time frame that was. I think it was probably about a month later, about the 10th of March. I was rotated up and I once again went through Dong Ha, but ended up at the firebase there and worked at the tactical operations center for the rest of the war. Or the rest of that particular campaign.

SM: You’re talking about Lam Son 719?

TM: Yes, 719. Our part finished up there good gosh probably about he 24th or 25th of March.

SM: What did you think about that operation?

TM: Well, it was really intense. It was absolutely amazing. Because when you just talk of number of bodies and wounded and people like that and the action it was full scale. The most I ever saw continually, no questions asked about that. While I was there I heard my previous battalion commander Colonel Sutton (Lt. Colonel B.J. Sutton from 3/187) on the radio and he happened to be shot down and killed during the time I was up there too on the 19th or so of March. He and his S-3. During the time I was up there in
the TOC running things or working with them, not me personally running. My, God I
was a captain just doing my part. But there were a couple other incidences with friendly
fire. I know the Navy hit one of our company’s in the airborne division on March 14th
and wounded 13 and killed 12 on the 14th of March. Then I think in the 20th again of
March we had four KIA, 14 WIA out of friendly fire again. But the intensity of combat
and everything going on there was absolutely incredible. I was there during the time, I
believe it was the 3rd brigade commander got overrun on one of the fire support bases
there, 34-54 (actually, 31) something like that I’ve forgotten the numbers but I’ve got
them written down somewhere. We as Americans pulled off all of our tactical air support
at that time when (FSB31) were 10 tanks on the perimeter taking it. (Hammer FAC was
off station at the critical time 25 1520 Feb. ‘71. He was off station for 40 minutes. As
FSB31 was being overrun with tanks and APCs). We had one down pilot. I had two low
parts with spots in Vietnam. One was saying good-bye to battalions as they walked
across the border. The other was sitting there trying to deal with my counterparts when
they pulled off all the air. In my battalion, I think one battalion came back with maybe
seven to nine people. I think my battalion probably came back with about 60 people off
that operation. You know what they did when it was over then they brought us together
and we all went to Eagle Beach with one of the in country R&R sites and we left the
troops there. We were probably there for eight to ten days at Eagle Beach while they had
a chance to try and reconstitute the battalions and everything. Then it was just dealing
with the people and working through those issues at the time.

SM: How would you rate the operation in terms of success and failure?

TM: It’s one that got mixed reviews. The intensity of it. First I think we did
them a disservice by not allowing the advisors to go across with them. Remember when I
said the organization of battalion we had a major, we had a captain, we had a senior grade
NCO in each one of those. These are the guys that could coordinate and orchestrate fast
movers, artillery all the support that we had. Our ability to do that would have been
better only because it was our host language than the indig in some cases. You see what I
mean? That would have impacted, you know if we’d provided air support. We lost a lot
of choppers, don’t get me wrong and everything during that time. But if we hadn’t pulled
off that firebase when all those tanks were overrun it would have been different. But
bottom line I think was that it was a bad tactical plan. They were sort of over committed from the get go but they sat in. I’m speaking just form the airborne division part because I wasn’t privy to the others. I mean I watched it and wasn’t really that interested at the time. Because you can only focus on so much on one thing at a time. I thought they did a magnificent job. I remember just with the (NVA) prisoners, you just had acres of prisoners up there. They’d all be wounded and stuff when they’d bring them in initially that they’d just look out and looking at all these people there all messed up and not a sound. Then after a couple hours they’d be moaning and groaning. Then after that the level of intensity would just pick up, but they’d all been drugged. There were reports of people, I’m talking the NVA had been drugged. There were reports of some of the people being chained to positions or tied to positions. It was a fight to the death on both sides.

SM: This is of course brings into stark relief some of the limitations, whether they be perceived as either self-imposed limitations or just the American unwillingness to break with certain treaties. Of course the inability of you as an American advisor to go across the border was in part a result of the Geneva accords for Laos in early 1960s that prevented U.S. military operations in Laos.

TM: Absolutely we could fly over and adjust air and everything like that and did that, but could not set down on the ground.

SM: What did you think about those restrictions? Again, whether they be self imposed or otherwise but these were the constraints that the United States could deal with.

TM: I was personally embarrassed with my counterparts. Here I signed on to do a job and I was willing to do whatever the job was as was every body else (all the other advisors). I mean that’s not a me thing. That’s the perception of all of us. We were all professional soldiers. Here we were and you worked with someone and you bond with them and then you say, “go get them buddy, I’ll sit here”. Sitting here can be in the TOC, it can be in the helicopter, but it’s just not the same. Especially when you look at the operation. I think that paper I gave at Texas Tech, I’d captured all the casualties and stuff like that. Just as a footnote I’d be glad to give you all the OERs and awards and stuff from this period. You know if you wanted to do that as an enclosure or something,
I’d be glad to. Anyway that’s why I said the two lowest pointing my career in Vietnam was sitting there saying good bye brother, you go get them. The second one was when we pulled the TAC air off the firebase (31) when they were being overrun (25 Feb. ’71). I mean unconscionable. Sure it was save two pilots, but that’s two people.

SM: At your level what kind of restrictions or what kind of limitations did you hear about that were being placed on the ARVN themselves? One of the things about Lam Son 719 that I read about is President Tieu issued an order that if ARVN casualties reached a certain level that they were supposed to stop and either regroup or pull back. Did you hear about that at the time?

TM: Well, I knew there was some dissention in the ranks among the Vietnamese side of that as fas as casualties. At the same time if you just look at the data the airborne division was really getting beat up. I mean they were hooking and jabbing and doing a lot of damage. But at the same time they were really getting beat up. I remember I think it was, good gosh what was his name? The old corps commander one time got all bent out of shape over sharing information with the news people or something. You know just at that time. They were trying to make it a Vietnam show. I don’t think we put them in the best possible position for that. It may haven been just a little bit too early. I say that’s just form my perspective at the time. Because I know what our mission was as an advisory team. I know our battalion at the time I just know they would have fared better with us. That was a very real thing there too. That’s when it really started to show itself probably in many different ways. That was a treaty that they’d agreed to there. But also that’s a time when the perception with the Americans because this is ‘71ish. You know February, March time frame there things were winding down, the Peace Talks were going on. We didn’t know how much longer it was going to be going on. At that time it was very much a concerted effort to cut back on casualties. To the point that some of the strategies they used were self-defeating. I’ll mention that when I get to the 123rd infantry division, which is my next assignment with the “G” Ranger Company there. About the time I got there General Baldwin was relieved. He was division commander I believe at the time or consistent firebase Mary Ann when they were overrun. Fredrick J. Krowsan came over and took charge at that time. That was one of those things at that firebase
where they cut back on patrols to try and cut back on casualties. There’s certain basic things you have to do. If you don’t pay me now, pay me later situation.

SM: The General’s relief was in part based on this idea, this desire to minimize casualties and therefore reduce patrolling?

TM: Right, that was my understanding at the time. That was firebase Mary Ann. I mean they went in and just slaughtered the Americans there.

SM: Wow. Because they weren’t actively patrolling?

TM: That’s right they were all hunkered up and comfortable as they could be on a firebase.

SM: In terms of your work as an advisor what did you think the overall effect of Lam Son 719, what were the most important things that resulted from that battle?

TM: That’s hard to say. I’ll have to ponder that one, but I’ll be glad to give it some thought if you want me to. We’ll come back to it.

SM: Yes please do. Of course one of the things that occurs after Lam Son 719 is the Nixon administration kind of used that as a launching vehicle to increase the tempo of Vietnamization. They say well see the Vietnamese they can be successful operationally. We can move forward and push further faster with the Vietnamization project, program so that we turn more of the fighting over to them and get more Americans out of country.

TM: That’s exactly the same mentality of cut down on casualties and all that that I made reference to earlier. That’s very true. But like I was saying I think it was a little bit too quick. They had their own problems that they had to sort through. (Intel for example initially only listed one division—it did not take long to learn there were elements of five divisions).

SM: Well what did you think about that evaluation at the top level, at the presidential level versus what you were seeing on the ground? Did you agree with that assessment that’s what Lam Son 719 proved?

TM: It proved that they were willing to fight and were real good soldiers and willing to hang in there. But it also killed a whole bunch of people who were the leadership structure. I want to say my battalion came back with maybe 50 people. There was another battalion that came back with six. It was in the single digit area there. So
when you reconstitute those you lose some capability and some of the infighting that had
taken place during that time I don’t think went away anytime soon at their level.

SM: Well, what about after Lam Son 719 as your battalion you were advising the
ARVN battalion, regrouped received replacements, what occurred during the remainder
of your time as an advisor with that unit?

TM: Well let’s see we went back and we were on what we call R&R, which was
really misrepresentation in my definition of R&R at Eagle Beach for about eight to ten
days. Then we went down (back to Saigon) and we had almost a brand new battalion.
You started with the training cycle there and really got into training at that time. Then we
were just running very small ops after that. We didn’t have a big one the rest of the time
I was there. I left let’s see about mid-June.

SM: What did you do when you left in mid-June?

TM: At that time I had volunteered to take over a “G” Ranger company, which
was up in Chu Lai (in the Americal division). I always thought a lot of the Rangers. I’d
heard that the company was coming open and I wrote a letter saying I’d be more than
glad to extend if I could command “G” Ranger Company. Went up for an interview and
got the job. Got up to that division, I’m trying to remember what time frame that was.
Give me a second I think May or June, I’m trying to look at the little book I kept but I
can’t even read my writing very well. I think about the July time frame is when I went up
there and checked in with Americal. That’s right after firebase Mary Ann. General
Crowson had just taken over and everything. Went through their sniper school there. All
divisions had a new in country course for soldiers. They also were very much into
snipers at that time. There was a Major Wiggins there who ran the sniper school. He was
a later gold medal winner for the Olympics for years and years. Real good guy. I’d been
through sniper training in ’65, so I’d gone by to visit him to make sure what we had at
division Recon level was the best capabilities and everything. Then the Ranger company
we also had our own Ranger school which was like a MAVC reconds. A spin off on
that where we trained all the guys coming in because the Ranger company basically
worked in six to eight man teams. You could put a couple six to eight man teams for
larger missions. That was the numbers, but not always deployed in that. Always
deployed a little less than that. You could put those together for larger ops. Basically
what they did was sort of a screen an economy of force along the outer division perimeter (acting as the eyes and ears of the division). Gathering intell, whatever the missions were based on the intelligence available. That was a really, really good assignment. In fact, I probably had about 250 people at that time in the Ranger company. (I had elements from my company at two different locations). It was an aberration what they had done because the Americal was the biggest division in Vietnam at the time. They really had a lot of good things that they did during their time frame there. They got a lot of bad press for Lt. William Calley and some of the other things (Fire Base Mary Ann). But they also had some good operations and campaigns. I had one Ranger company at Chu Lai and then I had another platoon at another location. That’s how we had so many people. It was really a great group of guys and everything. We ran combat ops for probably about four to six weeks after I got there. Then they went through a phase down, where they were closing down the company. I didn’t realize that part was going to happen. Wasn’t real enthused about that. Wasn’t what I thought I’d signed on for. So, when they closed down the company I tried to take care of the troops again. (I supported) the lieutenants and all that wanted to go to a MACV assignment to try and have a little bit different perspective on things. I try and worked orders and assignments for everybody. Got some war trophies for everybody at that time.

SM: Now, what was the morale like in the unit when you arrived with the Rangers?

TM: It was great. I mean Rangers are just good soldiers. Had a bunch of great guys there (officers, NCOs and soldiers). We were going through, we were still being employed because we were screening economy of force where the others had cut back. But at the same time, it’s funny how things sort of percolate. I remember one particular incident where a division directive came down as a result of press. I guess at that time, this is mid ’71 the M-16 was still getting a little grief on the parts of some folks. The division directive was that you would not use AK-47s in country. So, I wrote the general a memo and went up to brief him on that. What I did was request an exception to policy for my guys (in the Ranger company). Here was my following logic. I just laid it out for him. First, of all, if you’ve got a small team out there and you come around the corner the first thing you see on anybody, at least to me, don’t know if other people would be the
same were the eyes and the weapon. If it was M-16 it told you one thing, but keep in
mind they were everywhere too. If it was an AK it might just give you as a point guy a
split second in your timing there, felt we needed that. (Always have to look for
advantages in your favor). The next step of that is if you then have to engage and pop
that puppy, first if you just do it with a shot or two, you’ve got the sound of an AK which
is used in a shot or two series (by VC and NVA) for linking up the last people there also
(elements in the field). You wouldn’t necessarily compromise the fact that we had small
teams out in that location. That was the next thing I presented. Then I presented that if
you stay out there and get really bogged down, free ammo, availability of that everything.
We got an exception to policy for that. That’s what I meant. I found the chain of
command and everyone listened when you had something to say.

SM: You submitted that and they said, “ok, that’s fine. You can do that”?
TM: Yes. But if we ever get a picture of one of these guys (laughs). I said, “I
understand”. That was the thing about Rangers too, they’re all real good soldiers, but you
give them too much time off, no telling what they’ll get into.

SM: You mentioned the press now twice. Once with your time as an advisor and
now with the Rangers. How many times did you encounter the press previously in terms
of your time as a platoon leader and a company commander with the 101st?

TM: Well, with the 101st probably no more than three or four times throughout
that entire time. They just didn’t get down there too much. When I was in Saigon I knew
a bunch of the press guys through my dad. He’d known them from previous tours and
everything and had a pretty good relationship with them at that time. With Lam Son
there was all kinds of press there as opposed to just a routine operation. In Chu Lai they
were still doing a lot with the draw down and with the Pacification like I mentioned
earlier in the 101st. If there were press they were out in that aspect of it, not in the
mountain area. With the kickoff of Lam Son 719, that one reporter was killed when the
aircraft off the aircraft carrier ranger dropped a CBU on us. There was a reporter killed at
that time. All the reporters that were there could go right across the border with ARVN
troops from Lam Son 719). We could not, but they could. That was part of what I
received. Go figure.
SM: What did you think about the press coverage? I would imagine that on occasion you caught stories here and there from American newspapers of American magazines. U.S. News and World Report, Newsweek, Times, did you get that?

TM: Yes, those came out to the field but normally by the time we got them pretty outdated. The only current stuff we would get would be the Stars and Stripes. That would be on a current thing. By the time the magazine publications came down we got all that stuff but it was a long time in the draw.

SM: What did you think about the reporting as you saw it during your time in Vietnam?

TM: I don’t think they (the press) did us any favors. If you look at Vietnam in it’s entirety. Everyone had I at home on their TV screen about the time they’re trying to have supper. I don’t think it did us a lot of good. I really don’t. In fact I think that’s part of the reason that things possibly turned the way they did. Was the press coverage continually and the press is no difference today. If it bleeds, it leads. I think that’s why one thing the military has done id in the previous or campaigns after the fact like General Schwarzkopf (in Desert Storm knew)very much so knew what he was doing with the press. When I was in Grenada with the Admiral Medcalf and Schwarzkopf, the press was very much there too. I think in those respects in those campaigns they were much more of an asset that they were during the Vietnam time frame.

SM: When you were with the Rangers what was you specific area of operations and how frequently would you go out on patrols and conduct operations?

TM: We routinely kept probably about six to eight teams in the field at a time. The patrols were to the west of the division area of operation where all the brigades were out past their zone of influence (often out of artillery range). Basically looking at any build-ups and penetration or infiltration routes that may have been there. Snoop and poop for the most part. There were a couple of direct combat action things in there. I think one time they snatched a guy for intel.

SM: Brought back a prisoner?

TM: Yes.

SM: Ok, these were what squad level, platoon level?

TM: Team level.
SM: Team level, so five men?

TM: Yes, five to eight just depending.

SM: They were not going out to engage. They were going out to collect intelligence.

TM: Intelligence for the most part. If you’re engaged you’re wrong. Not wrong, there are times that’s what you have to do to get out of where you were. (A small team is at a very significant disadvantage when they are compromised).

SM: Right by the desire was to maintain.

TM: That’s right strictly intell and looking and collecting information and for planning (tactical operations at division level).

SM: How long would the teams stay out for stretches of time?

TM: Good, gosh I think the shortest time I was there was about 45 minutes. Probably about six, seven days, six days.

SM: Would they go out with enough to keep them sustained for that length of time?

TM: Yes.

SM: So they wouldn’t have to be resupplied?

TM: Right. That’s the diciest part of the whole thing is the insertion and exfiltration. Any time you’re talking about an area of operation there are a finite number of acceptable helicopter landing zones. That’s why you had routes where you had diversionary flying. You’d set down several different locations before and after so anyone watching, it’s like a shell game. Then you look for a stay behind other units had been pulled out or ever going by foot sometimes or rivers that’s available. Just depending on where you are and how things are working.

SM: What was your primary responsibility within the unit? Obviously you would no go out on those types of patrols?

TM: No, I did not. Because the timing like I said we only did that about six weeks. I was trying to orchestrate and manage everything. I did encourage all my lieutenants to do that and they did. Everyone wants to.

SM: You never got a chance to go out on patrol?

TM: No, not with them.
SM: Any serious hot extractions?
TM: There were a couple times when we had people committed and we had to beef up the unit and send other people out to get them.
SM: Were all those pretty successful?
TM: Yes. It’s amazing the hardest part there was picking your volunteers because everyone wants to go.
SM: What were the greatest challenges you faced with the border Rangers?
TM: This was the American Rangers.
SM: I’m sorry the regular Rangers.
TM: The regular Rangers. I think the biggest challenge that I had was when we were in the rear area and dealing with all the other support troops and stuff we were on a little Navy base at the end of a peninsula. For our guys to go anywhere they would have to go through a lot of the support troop areas. The supports troops at that time there was a lot of drugs and they didn’t like the Rangers. So, we constantly diffusing things like that. Keep in mind this is mid ’71 and the Army wasn’t the best shape it had been in at that time. There were a lot of tensions and stuff. That was part of it but the other part that was really secondary. The real part is in coming up with the tactical plans and operations and just flowing all the information. Doing the coordination and everything. We had a school that we ran there concurrent (at concurrent level) to train all of our people. Going through selecting people and building teams to deploy.
SM: When you were with the Rangers, what was the ethnic make up of the unit? Were there any ethnic problems?
TM: No, within the rangers themselves there were not. I would say that the ethnic skew was probably less than it was in the average combat unit. But I found that to be true in Special Forces and Special Ops also.
SM: Did you encounter any kind of racial stress or problems in any of the units you served with in Vietnam?
TM: The only racial problems I encountered was the units next to us and support people during that time frame. They had a lot of racial overtones there and a lot of drugs and stuff. It was a rotten organization.
SM: How much longer did you stay with Rangers?
TM: I was only with them I want to say two to three months.
SM: Then where did you go?
TM: I looked around and they offered me another company there in the Americal division. I’d already had one in the 101st and everything and had the Ranger company. Life was good. I just didn’t see going sideways or anything. I volunteered at that time to extend and go out to the border Ranger camps in II corps. They (the camps) had just converted them, not just but about a year earlier from the Special Forces camps with a 12 man “A detachments” down to a three man Ranger team. Part of that was to cut back on the number of casualties of Americans at the time. Rather than having 12 people exposed at one of the border camps or something like Polei Kleng, Ben Het, Plei Djereng were some of the places that I worked out of there. You only had a three-man team, which was basically a captain maybe a lieutenant, and then a senior grade NCO or maybe a captain, two NCOs. Just depending, it was situational as people came and left.
SM: Go ahead if you would describe the types of operations you conducted, the support you provided that kind of stuff.
TM: There was sort of like a mid evil thiefdom (laughs). As close as I got to that. Let’s say Polei Kleng was one of the places I was at. It was an old French fort that had been down in the draw first by the river and it had been overrun a few years earlier so they moved in back up to some high ground. It was triangular in shape and in that we had something like 50, .30 caliber machine guns in the perimeter. We probably had I would guess 1, 600 to 1, 800 montagnards both soldiers and families that were in the camp. Right outside of the camp collocated near where we were was a little leper colony there (and a montagnard village). Basically what we were doing was providing a buffer zone for infiltration routes and everything into Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia because it (II corps) was a tri border area right there. That was a mission. That went along with direct combat operations as well as smaller teams out there gathering intell and saturation patrols and ambushes. That position was a combination of everything. It wasn’t focused on one particular area. We worked through my counterpart was a Vietnamese major and we worked directly through them providing support and logistics and everything to the Vietnamese and the montagnards. The problem there was that with the Special Forces, American Special Forces in there earlier as you probably are well
aware of with the FURO uprising and some of the others (the montagnard soldiers) bonded very, very closely with the Americans (but they were always suspicious of ARVN). Often the Vietnamese did not have the same respect or anything for them as the Americans did. You know you had to really monitor that very closely. The guy I happened to be working with was very good. We got along well and didn’t have any problems. That’s something you continually had to be thinking about.

SM: What were the different challenges you faced working with this type of unit, that is montagnards as opposed to say the ARVN?

TM: The biggest challenge was having worked with the airborne division, they were the reaction force. They got everything they needed and wanted. It’s not that the border Ranger camps were disposable, like their weapon systems. We had the .30 machine guns. Not the .50 cal, not the .60s. You know all World War II vintage. So logistically they didn’t give them a lot. That was part of what I considered as frustrating as anything. Knowing what was out there, but also knowing at this time we were winding things down. So they weren’t putting in a lot of new supplies and everything. (It was very difficult) to get logistics and artillery and the support that you needed. It just wasn’t to the level that you would hope it would be as an advisor. Does that make sense?

SM: Yes, was this montagnard unit or the people that you worked with that were montagnards was this where they lived on a regular basis? Or where they brought in from some other location?

TM: At that time, that’s something that varied initially, when they came out with this concept they were doing it regionally based on their home turf. Which was very, very effective. Because they knew it just like the back of their hand. It’s like you take an old boy from Missouri or Mississippi out hunting, he knows the signs. He knows what’s where (and can tell if anything is different). They’ve got that intuitiveness with the land (they were raised in). They had such success with that. Then they, and they being the system somehow started to displace some of them and use them at different locations. As long as they were there protecting their valley, their families spirit and their family they were very, very effective. But they weren’t real enthused about just being used as canon faughter somewhere else. You can’t blame them a bit for that. You’ve got to keep in mind at this time because everything changes with time. At this time there were two
types of Rangers in II corps. One type was what I had, which is Dien Vien Quong, which
was the converted Special Forces Ranger camp, which was Plei Djereng, Polei Kleng,
Ben Het. Those camps along the border region. That was one set. We had our own
chain of command and everything for it. That the MACV Advisory Team 21 or the
Ranger Command. Now in addition to that there was also another Ranger group there
that was the task force for the corps regional reaction force. They would bounce out, I
guess and I never had any support from them but didn’t need any. They would support
whoever needed it at the time going on there. So there were two different elements there.
Both of us were Rangers but one worked with the montagnard itself and the other had the
indig that were the strike teams and strike forces carryover from that (Special Forces).

SM: How many people are you talking about total?
TM: On the sight. Probably about 1, 600, but that’s families too.
SM: How many active soldiers?
TM: I’m just guessing now because I really don’t remember. I would say
probably about 600 plus or minus. Maybe, well I’m not sure. I want to say 600 but it
may have been more because I’m trying to think of the you know as you ask the question
the ratio between the people there. Six hundred maybe plus.

SM: How many other Americans working with you?
TM: Myself, one lieutenant, one NCO. Just a three-man team. We lived rather
well all things considered. What had happened at one time there was an American
(Special Forces) 12 man team at each one of these sights. So the bunkers were really
hardened and built in. Each place had a team house that was normally designed for 12
people, you know what I mean.

SM: Yes, so you had lots of space.
TM: That part of it was good. We hired the indig to do our cooking and stuff for
us. We generated all our own electricity out of that thing off of generators. Had to pull
maintenance on stuff like that. We were multi tasked at that time. We were all
weathermen, where we had to go out multiple times a day and check the rain, the wind
and all those sorts of things forwarded on so they could do their weather forecasts out of
Saigon. We were all linked together at that time by short wave radios. At the time and
we checked in periodically. The chain of command would come out and check on you
every few days or so just to see how things were going and provide you updated
intelligence information so you could plan you operations. That was a place and time
where we really got a lot of intelligence. I think that’s probably the first time where I had
became obvious that a lot of the intell we were getting was indig intelligence, which is
normally a pretty good thing. When we would track and coordinate, but it’s just a full
time job and keeping up with where all the other units are deployed and notifying your
people about things like that.

SM: What kind of personal weapons were the soldiers carrying and the border
Rangers?

TM: The border Rangers there was sort of a mix. Some of the yards still had
carbines, Thompson machine guns. It was sort of a mix of weapons. There were M-16s
there. Vietnamese all had M-16s and most of the leadership in the yards had M-16s.
Some of the others were armed with older antiquated weapons.

SM: Anybody carry AKs?

TM: There were some AKs there. I’m a gun buff. It was just a target as well. I
closed down a Ranger company right. We had all kinds of exotic and neurotic weapons
there. In fact what I did was a I got a connex full of weapons because we were told to
drop them all in the ocean and get rid of them. I couldn’t see that so I put them in a
connex and sent them to Cambodia (my next assignment). I did that and got back I gave
all my officers and NCOs brand new Chicom fold action rifles to take home. So I had
my sniper systems and silence weapons and everything. In fact one of the things that was
a hoot there, we used to show the movies to the montagnards at night too. Our projector
screen was big old bed sheet. They’d get all fired up with cowboys and Indians. They’d
all be cheering for the Indians, because they could connect with that. Just a lot of fun.

SM: You mentioned sniper and silence weapons systems. How would you
employ snipers in your organization there?

TM: Basically in small teams. Put two man (sniper) teams out on likely avenues
of approach since it’s free fire (zone). Your teams had enough experience there they
knew who was friendly and who was not. I couldn’t sort through but I had to rely on
them for that. Snipers were very, very effective.
SM: What were the operational orders they had received? Just basically take someone out and get out? Harassment?

TM: Yes, (the mission was) they didn’t even have to come out when they would engage. Just to demoralize and harass the enemy. Just because you shoot someone doesn’t mean you have to leave there. You just move to a different sight and set up.

SM: Would the snipers typically have silencers?

TM: Some of them did, but not all of them. They were good systems, because that was the M-14. I forget what scope. M-81 used to be on the M-1. It was an upgraded commercial scope. It was a good weapon. We had that because as are or units closed down (things were made available). We had better weapons at that end of the scale than we did the other. One of the things we built there that the yards absolutely loved. It was not real effective. I could promise you it’d hit the ground everytime. But that was about the degree of accuracy but the yards loved it. We set a rocket pod off of a gun ship on a tripod. Then we put the rockets in that thing. Then we did an electrical circuit with it with a big old piece of wood there with the nail coming through. So as you took this spoon and hit each nail it would fire each rocket. The yards absolutely loved that. (To them) it was almost ghost like. They had a lot of superstitions and stuff and felt like that was the best weapon we ever had. Wouldn’t rely on it too much. It was a hoot.

SM: The silence systems that you’re talking about these subsonic M-14, that is did you use subsonic rounds?

TM: No, I don’t think we had the subsonic at that time. I remember national match, but I don’t remember subsonic.

SM: What kind of other operations did the border Rangers engage?

TM: We did anything from small teams (consisting of a) squad of fire teams on up to large battalion size operations coordinated on both sides. I’m trying to remember. The last operation I pulled there myself and one NCO went out with them and we did it at battalion-sized level. We just went way out and really got into it. That’s what I told the commander that I worked with. (My counterpart) asked me what I wanted to do for my last couple of weeks in country. I said, “well you know what I’d like to do really? I’d like to get in the biggest firefight in Vietnam for a couple of days. Then after that I’d like to go down to Saigon for a couple of days before I head back to the mainland”. So that’s
exactly what we did. Went out and got into a base area and really were not over
committed we did rather well at the time. But it was right out of Plei Djereng.

SM: Was this an NVA base camp?
TM: Yes.
SM: What size unit?
TM: It was battalion plus. In fact I think they may have even had multiple
battalions there because they really put the pressure on us once we hit them. We had to
pull back because we were battalion sized. I would say probably a couple of them. In
that particular operation it was in January. We had gone out.

SM: This is January ’72?
TM: Yes. That’s the one I mentioned earlier with Paul coming over and wanting
to give me some advice and everything. That’s one where at that time the rules where
when you were engaged you physically had to go out and see the bodies before you could
report them. That’s the only time I came across that was at that particular location. I
guess that was because of the winding down in American troops. I think in that particular
firefight killed something like 25 of them. Got some mortars and AKs and captured a
bunch of RPGs and stuff like that. In fact, General, not General, my gosh what was the
secretary of the Army at that time. Came in the next day after we got back and just
wanted to see. It was the best thing going on at the time there (in country). Froehlke
(Bob) was the guys name, Secretary of the Army, really interesting fellow. He’d been a
machine gunner in the Second World War. He (his chopper) got fired up when he came
in, just thought that was really neat. A VC with a bar, we had to dispatch some patrols,
go out there and get him. We went out got the guy when he was still there and came in
with a bar. He was really impressed. So was I actually. That was a lucky op. Things
normally aren’t that easy.

SM: You say you confirmed about 25 enemy killed. How many casualties did
your unit suffer in return? Do you recall?
TM: No I don’t, not right off hand. There weren’t many at all. We had some
wounded but I don’t remember anyone getting popped on that thing.
SM: I guess you were either border Rangers about six months?
TM: A little less that six.
SM: Over the span of that time that you were with them, did you witness or notice any changes? In particular I guess what I’m looking for is after January of course, in March of ’72 in the Easter Offensive. Of course in order to prepare for that offensive, the NVA had to build up their forces along the border area. So it seems to me you would have been in a unique position to witness perhaps some of that build up, the NVA build up just prior to the major offensive, the Easter Offensive of ’72? Did you see that?

TM: Yes, in fact that group we went out and banged on that time was more than I thought would be there.

SM: So you were surprised by the build up there?

TM: Yes. I wanted to get in a shit kicker and we got in one (laughs). The magnitude of it. My counterpart and I had good relationship he did exactly what I said. In an Advisors role that’s exactly what you are (an advisor and a commander). Your leverage there becomes your tactical air that you have or your artillery. We didn’t have that (tactical air) in this particular op. It was all triple canopy. The one time that we disagreed after we got into it was going on the second day. We were pulling back and we came to a really significant river and my counterpart said well we can stop here for the night because it’s starting to get dark. I said “no, sir”. He said, “yes, sir”. I put my arm around his shoulder and said, “well, let me tell you something. So far we’ve done good but this gringo is not staying here tonight”. I said, ”I’m going across the river. See that finger there, see that high ground? See where you could put machine guns there, there, and there? So when they come across the river at night you can just shoot them like ducks”. If you have to cross that river, you sit there and look at someone trying to go that way. I said, “now you do whatever you want, I’m just giving you my best advice, form my time here”. I picked up my stuff and my NCO and I walked across the river, started up the finger and they all came across. That night we got hit on all sides of the river there where they thought we’d set up. Had we stayed there it would have been exactly like I told them. That’s the way you do thing as an advisor. That was a great experience. He came back over that evening and told me when he got up there he said you know you’re absolutely right. I was sort of taking a short cut. I said, “well that’s what we’re here for. Now what are we going to do next”? We built on that. Didn’t use it as a block.
SM: Is that a technique that you found, I guess you had developed it earlier in
your experiences in terms of trying to build a rapport?

TM: Yes, it’s absolutely critical. They don’t give a hoot what you know until
they realize that you really care about them and are sincere. (No different with American
soldiers). Because so many people rotated through so many things. The bottom line is
that if you were out for yourself you could have made a tour that way. It’s just not what
you do. At least in my opinion.

SM: You bring up an interesting point, the rotation system. What did you think
about the 365-day rotation system in general for personnel, the six-month combat rotation
for officers? Six months in combat, six months out? What did you think about that as a
mechanism for fighting this war? Did you think it was effective?

TM: I can understand the need for it. At the same time one cannot, and I’m sort
of stammering and stuttering here, but you can clean all that up. One cannot reasonably
expect people to go in that environment and everything like they did in World War II.
Even there (in WWII) you had x number of missions or this that or the other. You were
rotated out something like that may have been a better policy. (You also deployed as a
unit, not on individual orders). The problem was that it did cause a lot of turn over in the
units. Which caused a learning curve that was always higher than it probably should
have been or could have been. Does that make sense? (I did not think it was a good
system).

SM: Yes, sir.

TM: That’s the reason I extended. Even in my extensions I wanted to personally
experience the different aspects of the war because they were all so different. I could
have just as easily spent two years straight in the 101st? You see what I’m saying?

SM: Yes.

TM: The only place I found where a lot of people, because most people like
myself would extend for a particular job or a new experience. If it was just the same old
thing it was just the short time calendar. You were counting the days because each day
you didn’t know if you’d have another one. It’s sort of a trade off there.
SM: You had mentioned earlier and we were talking about some of the friendly fire incidents, that there was one that you wanted to talk about later in the interview. I wasn’t sure if that was the cluster bomb unit?

TM: Yes, that was the CBU and the other two that followed up there in the time that I was in the TOC there where the Navy got those people that I’d mentioned. Just to show you that stuff does happen. And in an operation of that scale and magnitude you can just imagine the command and control of everything. It’s part of war regrettably and it always has been.

SM: Always will be. What about with the border rangers, any friendly fire incidents with them?

TM: No. My biggest fear with them was that we would have had something like that. Because at that time there were some clandestine elements that would be working to the fireside (west) of our AO. They were so spooky they wouldn’t even work with you. We’d launch support missions for them out of our camp and if they got hit we’d have people medevaced back through us. That’s the only time they’d let us know they were around was when they needed to use us. That was not real good.

SM: Who were they working for?

TM: I would only speculate.

SM: Were these like PRUS?

TM: No they were Americans.

SM: American military units or civilian?

TM: Who knows?

SM: You don’t know.

TM: I could only guess.

SM: Did you ever work along side or know of operations that involved the provincial reconnaissance units that went out to neutralize the Vietcong infrastructure, the Phoenix Program, that kind of stuff?

TM: I had a little bit of dealing with them, but not a lot. In fact, I had extended to try and stay another extension in Vietnam. I had gone back and the branch chief, infantry branch at that time since there was no Special Operations was General Schwarzkopf, who was then a lieutenant colonel. I was trying to go to Command and Control North at that
time, which was the max SOG (Special Operations Group), cross border ops sort of stuff. CCN (MACV) was command and control north up in I corps. I wanted to go there and he would not approve my extension. Because he said and he was absolutely right that they were going to all take a big hit. One guy got the Medal of Honor out of that company. But they did get beat up at that time and place. He wouldn’t approve my extension for that. Looking back I guess that’s good thing. But I got to work with him during Grenada. We’ve always gotten along. He’s a real fine gentleman. Did a bang up job doing Desert Storm.

SM: In your work with the border rangers, did you notice any kind of difficulties in terms of the interaction, the personal interaction between the ARVN and the border rangers? I assume that you had a Vietnamese counterpart that was really ARVN that was also working with montagnards.

TM: He was major in (ARVN) Special Forces form them and had his whole team there with him, where we (the U.S. advisors) just had the three-man cell. Remember I’d made the comment earlier, I spoke to that by saying that the relationships that were built up at those camps during the time that (U.S.) Special Forces were there, they were very close and very bonding. They would do anything an American asked. Some of them because of different histories over time and different places had been abused and misused by some bad elements of the Vietnamese Army. There were elements there, not where I was but in that area in general that at one time or another really had some bad history. There was that reservation (with montagnards and ARVN). But the guys I worked with were just as god as they were anyplace else. Like the airborne division level quality (simply outstanding soldiers).

SM: So, you didn’t necessarily witness any kind of animosity between the Vietnamese and the montagnards, yourself?

TM: Not animosity. It wasn’t like it was with us.

SM: Different dynamic.

TM: The bonding wasn’t there. They were respectful and dutiful, but there just wasn’t the connection. The connections what makes things work.

SM: Were there any other challenges that you want to discuss with regard to working with the Border Rangers, the montagnards?
TM: Not really. I thought life was good.

SM: This will end the interview with Lieutenant Colonel Mataxis on September 19th.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Ted Mataxis on the 22nd of October 2002 at approximately 9:20 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Ted Mataxis is in North Carolina. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with a discussion of your third tour with the border rangers in 1972. If you would describe how you became assigned to that particular tour and what it involved.

TM: What I’d mentioned earlier was I had extended and was commanding a “G” Ranger Company out of Chu Lai, which had not only a company at Chu Lai, but I had another platoon of that located up in the Da Nang area. So from there when we closed down the Ranger company I sort of had my choices to where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do at that time was go to the Vietnamese border Ranger camp that they (II corps) had. What had happened was the Special Forces had been phased out of Vietnam at that time. They had converted the old Special Forces Camps along the tri border area (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) into what they called Dien Binh Quang, which was Vietnamese for Rangers. Basically what you did instead of a Special Forces operation of attachment A-team with 12 people in there you had three to four persons per camp, doing basically the same sort of functions that an A-team did. But at that time this was late ’71 and early ’72. At that time it was a high threat area and with the (peace) talks and things going on. One of the primary concerns was cutting down on (American) casualties. They decided with small teams like that even if they got over run, you’re numbers statistically would be some what less than it had before. When you volunteered for that you basically were going out there to the tri-border area with about three Americans. What you would do you would be paired with an ARVN battalion commander who was generally a major at that time. The positions in the border camps them selves the captain was the highest rank an American would be out there. You often had a master sergeant or E-7 there with you, sergeant first class. Then you may also have a lieutenant would be the team composition. That would normally be the NCOs would be communications and operations. Then the officers positions were branch immaterial at that time. You worked with your Vietnamese counterparts as well as the indigenous (montagnards) on
site. That was the Ranger Command was the name of the (MACV) organization. I believe it was Advisor team number 21. Team 12 was the one that was stagnant (mobile ranger team). It (team 21) was at each one of the old Special Forces camps where they also had a II corps at that time. This was II corps. They had the Vietnamese Rangers that were immediate reaction force (team 12). They went around and went to specific things that were mobile. Team 21 was the one that was actually at the sights themselves (with their headquarters at Plei Ku). I think the team commander at that time was a lieutenant colonel by the name of Burnette and Major (Wade) Lovings and (John) Theologos were his assistants. Basically my first assignment there was to Ben Het and some of the other camps that we had there were: Dak Seang, Ben het, Polei Kleng, Plei Djereng, Duc Co, Plei Me were some of the other camps. Basically we just went out there and worked with the indig. Conducting tactical operations, planning intelligence collections and other things. We did other exotic jobs like the weather forecasts. We had to take weather several times a day just to help the projections in Saigon as to what the weather might be and things of that nature. We all each one of the camps pretty much had a small airfield there and was supported by that as well as the helicopter links there. (We basically were sitting on the likely avenues of approach and providing early warning for the rest of Vietnam).

SM: The total number of Americans working in this area, how many would you estimate?

TM: At the camp our team (team 21) probably had I would guess at the most maybe 45 people assigned to it. The highest would have been a Lieutenant Colonel who was a team commander. Then we had some all the way down to PFCs that were radio operators for the most part. They were at the headquarters. Basically what we had was just three people per camp depending on the time and depending on people coming and going, they’d bounce you from one camp to another (as required). It’s not like you went to one camp and stayed there forever. I think in my time there I hit about three different camps (Plei Djereng, Poloi Kleng and Ben Het).

SM: How was your language proficiency and the proficiency of other team members as far as Vietnamese?
TM: Our language proficiency at that time was lacking compared to the Special Forces. If you’d look at earlier in the war, when Special Forces sent all their people to Bragg, through the MATA course, which is military advisor training program, language was a significant component of that. So, I never had any formal Vietnamese training. I had worked with the people when I first got there in ’69, like I’d mentioned at platoon level even (in the 101st). Then had an extension with the airborne division, so I’d picked up some on my own. But I am certainly not a linguist by any stretch. I’ve been forced over the years to pick up several different languages. You know you use them or lose them.

SM: What about the other team members, was that pretty standard, most people didn’t have very much training?

TM: I was typical. I don’t know of anyone at that time and place that late in the war that was going to language school in route. Because what was happening to people (was anyone captain or higher) had been there multiple tours. I just don’t think they were putting the thought into it that they did initially.

SM: You were with the border Rangers, were there many Chieu Hois, surrenders, NVA?

TM: No, there really weren’t. Where I came across that was back in the 101st back in I corps, that was an active program and we had the people even working with us at platoon level. In the border region you’ve got to stop and close your eyes there for a second with the tri border right there. Which you’ve got basically the tribal groups with the different montagnards component and then the Vietnamese over it. I don’t think I would want a Chieu Hoi to them. You know what I mean?

SM: The ARVN when they made contact with many NVA in the area, did many NVA surrender?

TM: No, there wasn’t a lot of that. That came with the propaganda and the programs we offered them different incentives and dollars and jobs and stuff. Out there is sort of a third world. You know it’s totally different than the rest of it, at least in my experience. You were just like small islands into yourself.

SM: Was there a lot of fighting?
TM: Yes, there was. The boundaries were pretty much defined. When I say boundaries as to where they were. The hard part was planning the tactical operations and getting intelligence form the adjacent camps and trying to coordinate the infiltration routes. Yes, there was a lot of fighting. In fact, that’s one of the things I’d requested from my counterparts before we left. I wanted to go out and get in a really good one and we went out and did that.

TM: So, you didn’t have any problems finding NVA out there?

TM: No, not at all. (It was a target rich environment)!

SM: [The ARVN] were they willing to engage? Were they ready to go out and fight? What was the attitude among the soldiers and commanders, the ARVN soldiers?

TM: The ARVN had no problem with that at all. Just like with the Vietnamese airborne divisions. They were very good soldiers in my experience. Like I said I worked with the indig. People down with the 101st. They were just defending their land. When I worked with both the airborne division and the Rangers, they were very professional. Their Rangers were their Special Forces at that time. They weren’t really what we called Rangers. But Dien Bien Phong was the (ARVN) name of it.

SM: These ARVN in this area, they were also working with as you mentioned the tribe people, the montagnards?

TM: Right, each camp had a tribe. Like we had probably 1,700 montagnards at each camp location, you know families and everything that lived wither right there on the camp or right outside the camp. They were right there with you. That was men, women, and children. What was the real success initially of that program was that’s the way the montagnards did it because they were for all intensive purposes protecting their individual homeland. When they tried to make them mobile, like the Strike Force Rangers that I talked about earlier, they didn’t like that because the montagnards didn’t feel that they were having the same level of fighting for their own.

SM: That makes sense.

TM: It sure does.

SM: People are going to fight a lot more strongly to defend their own territory, their own homes.

TM: And their families that go off.
SM: Families, yes. Now the ARVN, the Rangers themselves, how many ARVN were within that large compound? You said 1,700 montagnard compared to how many ARVN?

TM: Probably about 10-12 about like an old Special Forces A detachment. There weren’t large numbers.

SM: What was the interaction like between the montagnard commanders and their ARVN counterparts that you witnessed? Were there good relationships?

TM: I was with an exceptionally good man at one of the camps and there sure were. But that was one of the things that sort of depended on who was there at the time and what the culture and experiences had been I the past. Historically, I think it’s a very well known fact that the Vietnamese looked down on the montagnards as a primitive mountain people. Thought they were well below the Vietnamese culture and everything else. They were oppressive to them in some cases. In some cases there could have been resentment. At that time and place we’re following and doing whatever needed to be done. I didn’t notice any real bonding as such. Where the reverse was true with Americans. Everyone wanted the Americans there. That was sort of the dilemma that Special Forces found itself in as a result of their approach and philosophy in dealing with indig. There were very good bonds that were built up. If you look at the montagnard populations and programs in America today, so much of that stuff was sponsored by people who’d worked with them years ago with Special Forces or the agency. There were good connections in that respect.

SM: Speaking of the agencies were there many civilians, American civilians working in the area?

TM: No, John Paul Vanhn was the guy at the time that was overall, he was retired military but in a civilian position. I think he was II corps whatever. I don’t even know what his title was. I remember him there and there weren’t many others at all. I think corps and some of the other things were working in the area, but no one ever came out our way. We were way out there on the perimeter.

SM: As one of the American advisors, how much of the support that you helped provide, how much of that was basic things like food, ammunition and that kind of stuff
as opposed to actual combat support? Whether it be air power, naval gunfire, that kind of
stuff? You were probably too far in land for naval gunfire.

TM: Yes, we were too far in land for that. We could get air, but basically we
were sort of self-dependent to a great degree. We had no artillery at all on my firebase.
I think they had a couple of old small French cannons and such (we also had a couple of
4.2 mortars). We had a rocket pod off of a gunship that we fixed up there. Basically the
defense I think I had something like 52, (WWII) .30 caliber machine guns around the
perimeter. (Helicopters, the caribou air craft and the porter air craft were our lifeline for
supplies).

SM: How many?

TM: Fifty-two.

SM: Fifty-two, ok.

TM: .30 cal the old ones. It was overwhelming. I guess they just had a lot of
them and no one else was using that. My God, the old .30 cal goes back how far? It’s
an old one.

SM: Yes, sir. It wasn’t hard getting ammunition for it?

TM: No.

SM: What about the supplies that you brought in. Did you bring in a lot of food
and things like that or was that all internal?

TM: No we brought it in only for the teams. The others were all done through
the Vietnamese channels.

SM: Did they grow a lot of their own on site?

TM: They had some out in the areas around there. In fact we had a little leper
colony at Plei Djereng that was right next to us. There was another village there and they
did their own slash and burn sort of farming.

SM: During this time, you mentioned this was January, February of ’72 in that
correct?

TM: Yes, January.

SM: Of course that year, 1972, is the year of the Easter Offensive, Easter Thai
Offensive kicked off in March. Did you get a sense while you were there in that are that
the North Vietnamese were building up to something as massive as the Easter Offensive turned out?

TM: Yes we knew that they were really ramping up across the board. You could feel that because they were infiltrating in and using the routes through there for follow operations down in to the Southern part of Vietnam.

SM: Were you privy to very much intelligence coming from the patrolling and other activities in the area that was coming from the montagnards and the ARAVN team going back?

TM: Yes, in fact that was one of our overarching missions there was to collect all the intelligence and data that we were from all the different camps and tie it together and see patterns between camps. Because if one camp did aggressive patrolling all they would do would be shift to the next area. So, all that was sort of orchestrated at team level trying to make sure we shutoff all the ways, rather than just push them somewhere else. (Tactical operations were very much like playing chess, one moves and the other does something to counter it).

SM: Well, that’s interesting.

TM: We did a lot of things I set up a sniper program at that time there as well. We taught mechanical ambushes and air ground support, artillery adjustments, stuff like that.

SM: What was the principle sniper weapon you used?

TM: It was the M-1 with the M-84 scope, 7.62 a real good.

SM: Yes, a good solid round.

TM: Actually if you fiber glass it out and do a little tweaking with it, but iron sight’s a good (accurate) weapon.

SM: You mentioned that one of the concerns was that if certain areas engaged in aggressive patrolling that the enemy of course would shift to those areas that did not engage in it. Do you know if there was ever any consideration to do that intentionally? That is engaging in aggressive patrolling in specific areas to force the enemy into areas so that you’d know approximately where they were and where their avenues of approach might be for an assault?
TM: No, I wouldn’t say that was a strategy or a tactic used because what was happening at that time, keep in mind this was indig. and just a small Vietnamese element and three Americans at a sight. We were trying to just hold off and not get overrun at that time. Because it would have been very easy for them to put pressure. As you go back and look over time, every camp I named had been banged on real heavy a time or two (many of them when the French had been operating in the area).

SM: In other words, the enemy had numerical superiority?

TM: Yes, oh sure.

SM: You couldn’t do that, couldn’t manipulate them?

TM: Yes, overwhelming. Like when we went out on that last operation we did bite off more than we could chew, but we sure had a mouth full.

SM: What was the mechanism in place for medevac casualty evacuation, that kind of stuff? Was it decent?

TM: Yes, it was pretty much time real. There was helicopter support and that support throughout the area, but that was prioritized. They had medevacs on standby so whoever need it the most had it. During the time I was there, there was never a time when we were really stretched beyond the resources available. That could have happened with a coordinated attack on multiple sites. Say if they picked on three sites at a time or maybe even two. It just didn’t happen during that time (I was there).

SM: Was this run by Americans, the medevac system or was it the Vietnamese?

TM: No it was Vietnamese at that time, but we had parallel chains. That was one of the jobs, just make sure that the information was flowing. (We had our own dedicated U.S. choppers that were on call based on the priority at the time).

SM: Would you say that most of the contact that was made by the montagnards and the ARVN Rangers that you worked with, was the contact initiated by the montagnards and ARVN or was it initiated by NVA? Who controlled the tempo of conflict?

TM: It was a combination of both. They would come bang on us and we’d go bang on them. So it sort of ebbed and flowed just depending on the time. Because you know they could always come up and RPG. That was nothing to get RPG’d or machine-gunned or something like that’s sniper stuff. That’s pretty much just business as usual.
So, if you’re then realizing you’re going against a threat you build up a thing to go
against that specific threat. You can go out and nail them pretty good or they move on.

SM: Was there much harassment activity on your part? That is sending out small
teams? You mentioned snipers.

TM: Yes, saturation patrols, mechanical ambushes was the strategy we used the
most. Just saturated the area, because the more you patrol, the more you disrupt it. The
chance of good luck coming across it (was increased the more patrols). That sure was a
key strategy that we used at that time.

SM: It sounds like one of the problems you faced though and one of the problems
faced by the ARVN and the montagnards, it doesn’t sound like there was that much
capability to concentrate all that much fire power in a rapid way. Whether it be through
artillery or through air support. In the even you found a really good target of opportunity.

TM: That’s right that was limited. It was pretty much with you on the ground,
what you were carrying in and maybe some random air support. But you’re right, that
was pretty much it. That’s what prevented at the same time like you were saying the
strategic part of it. You know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

TM: You were holding on to what you had.

SM: Right, that’s about all you could do.

TM: Yes, sir. Given that time and place and the resources.

SM: When did you leave that area?

TM: January or the first part of February of ’72.

SM: Where did you go from there?

TM: From there I came back to Ft. Bragg and chose at that time against the
advice of infantry branch, who at that time was Lieutenant Colonel Schwarzkopf. I
wanted to stay in Special Forces. If you keep in mind, 1972 the Army was probably as
low as it has ever been. And was in total disrepair in Europe with beer in the barracks
and racial issues and everything else. I just did not care to be part of any of that. I
wanted to go Special Forces at that time, since I’d been enlisted Special Forces. He was
supportive of that. I went back to fifth Special Forces group there at Ft. Bragg.
SM: What was it like coming back from that last tour? Coming back to the United States?

TM: Well, I’d been back several times over the years. I really didn’t want to come back. I still wanted to be there. I had requested another extensions. I was trying to get to the command and control north (CCN) and was turned down by (infantry) branch and Schwarzkopf was the gentleman who did that. He really impressed me. He knew everything I’d done, my extensions and what awards I had and all that sort of stuff. His best advice was that I’d been there (RVN) too long and I needed to come back and get into the “real Army”.

SM: That the Stateside garrison Army was the real Army as opposed to the Army of war?


SM: Wow! That’s an interesting statement though. What did you think at the time?

TM: I begged to differ. I thought it was the only war we had and wanted to be part of it. I’ve always been hard headed like that.

SM: Well, that’s one way of describing it. I don’t know hardheaded.

TM: Right before I left the Secretary of the Army, Mr. (Bob) Froehlke came out and visited the camp, because we’d just been in a real big, probably the biggest one in the country at that time and place. The last operation we went on Mr. Folkrey came out at that time and he got shot up coming in. They sniped at him a little bit and everything. He spent a day with us. He’s a very interesting gentleman. In fact, I saw him a couple weeks later when I came back to the States he was speaking in California and I bumped into him there.

SM: What was that like that last major engagement? I guess we should talk about that, because that’s the on you went on.

TM: Yes, it was sort of a going away gift, one last crack at it (laughs). Basically we had a battalion sized with what was at the firebase. (Plei Djereng with the 80th Vietnamese border ranger battalion). We took pretty much a good portion of the battalion with us and penetrated way beyond our normal zone. It took us probably a day and a half to get into the middle of it. We went right into their training areas and
everything where they had real good training facilities. There was a hospital complex in there and everything. Just got into it. (It was Operation Le Minh 801).

SM: What sized unit was there?

TM: I would say it was probably at least battalion or regiment size. We were over committed, but we managed to work through it.

SM: How many loses?

TM: I’m trying to remember. I think we killed 19 on that one I think (captured a 60mm mortar, (1) light machine gun, (3)B-40 rocket launcher, (10) AK-47 and an M2 carbine).

SM: How about on your side?

TM: We only had a couple killed. We moved back. In fact, moving back they wanted to stop one on the enemy side of the river and I said they shouldn’t and went to the other side and they eventually followed me. But that night we got probed and they were trying to overrun us. It was good thing that we were where we were. Had we been on the other side we would have had a lot of casualties.

SM: So when you left that last time and you came back, of course a month and a half later, or almost two moths later the Easter Offensive kicked off. Was that a surprise to you?

TM: Not really a surprise. We knew things had been building up. That whole area when you look at the Easter Offensive and when you look at what happened up in Dong Ha and everything, that’s the place that I spent all my time with the 101st was exactly. Then in Lam Son 719 that was my old playground, that whole area up there. You know from the low lands all the way out to the mountain in the A-Shaw valley and that area. So, you knew the capability was there. It always had a tendency to percolate up from time to time. I wouldn’t say it was that surprising. The fact that the armor and to the extent that they came is, yes. But the threat was always very real.

SM: As that battle of course, ended and the RVN had help on to d on they eventually took much of the territory that had initially been gained by the NVA. Although the NVA did stay in South Vietnam after that.

TM: That’s right, but they also had a lot of good logistical support for that too because we had the Cobra gunships (with the ton anti-attack missiles) and stuff like that
up there. They really rallied and did a great job. (Just wish I could have been there for
that one).

SM: I guess you could say that was used by President Nixon that ARVN could
stand on their own and finally the U.S. could really push hard for complete withdraw and
an end of American involvement, which led to the pushes in Paris for peace. The
Christmas bombing they tried to compel North Vietnam to agree to a peace settlement.
Then the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, January of ’73. What did you think of all that
rapid, complete removal of the United States from the picture in Southeast Asia?

TM: I really knew because I tried to stay there. At the time we were really
dropping down in numbers and you could see that just like with the border camps, where
you once had 12, now you had three and they were phasing those out. Having shut down
the Ranger Company, they were phasing that out. So, you could see a lot of the draw
down and (attempt to) disconnect from the American involvement there. At the same
time the ARVN were picking up that responsibility. I just thought it went quicker than I
personally expected at that time.

SM: What did you think about the Paris Peace settlement itself? That is what
each side got from that Paris Peace Accords?

TM: Not a lot really.

SM: Did you see it as the peace with honor that Nixon was seeking?

TM: No, I didn’t see it. I thought that was lights and mirrors.

SM: Of course that ended really American military involvement in Southeast
Asia, then of course a year and a half later, Saigon fell, April of 1975. Where were you
at that point and what did you think when you heard that North Vietnam had taken over
South Vietnam?

TM: Let’s see ’75 I was an instructor at the Ranger department at Ft. Benning.
At that time it was even interesting because at the ranger department the young captains
there, a lot of them weren't Vietnam vets like you would suspect. You really look at that
thing and ’69 was sort of a pivotal point, that’s the year group I was. I went over in ’69
as a second Lieutenant and stayed through ’72. After ’72 not many people had the
opportunity to go in. So, those in your group (my year), ’69 in my opinion if you wanted
to be there, you would in spite of what some people will tell you. You know ’70 you
could get there still relatively easy, but you really had to want it by ’71, ’72 was the
exception to get there rather than the rule. So with a system like that lot of the West
Pointers who got in the three years rotation to Germany were pretty much fenced out of it
(some by choice, others not). We had a lot of those (captains) in the Ranger department.
I was just sort of surprised, hat quick afterwards that there were in fact, a lot more non-
combat vets there. Because you know Rangers you think they’d have almost all of it,
given there was a lot of that experience in the military. But at the same time when I went
through the advanced course prior to that, it was just a real joke when you look at the
down sizing of the military and what they were going through at the time with the
reductions in forces RIFs). They just did a lot of people really wrong there. I thought the
worst thing the military ever did at that time and place was they took a lot of really good
professional, hard charging NCOs who had displayed many, many times coolness under
fire and were well decorated and everything else and they commissioned them for a five
year period of time. Then at the end of that time they reverted them back to their rank in
the peacetime Army, the early ’70s. Here’s the guy that you needed and wanted to lead
men in combat and come back to peace time, they haven’t go time for them in spite of
what he did. I thought that was unconscionable. I really did. Then they just riffed. My
year group probably had, I’m just guessing on the numbers, maybe 60% to 70% of the
young captains that came back (were involved in) reduction in force. I went to the
advanced course and my gosh, our honor graduate was riffed and a significant percent of
our class was. It came down that quick.

SM: The honor graduate was riffed?

TM: Yes, I think he had a Distinguished Service Cross.

SM: Oh my goodness. For crying out loud.

TM: There was no rhyme or reason to it from a combat veteran’s perspective.

You know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir. Staying in the Army at that point must have been rather interesting
but also troubling?

TM: I made that decisions and if there was such a thing as a perk from having
been in Vietnam all that time. I had the luxury because if I said, I’d do something they’d
realize I meant it, I wasn’t just talking. You know what I mean?
SM: Yes, sir.

TM: So I could sort of pick my assignment. That’s exactly why when Schwarzkopf told me I needed to go to Germany and command a mechanized company now in the real Army, I felt like I’d rather go to Special Forces. I’m sure the advice he gave me was absolutely the best advice going. But you do what you feel is right. I was always an adrenaline junkie).

SM: When did you leave the force? When did you leave the Army?


SM: ’93.

TM: I was a slow learner.

SM: From the time you left training Ranger companies, going from there forward did you stay in Special forces your entire career?

TM: Well, pretty close to entire. What I did out of the Ranger thing at that time from the Ranger department I had volunteered to be a foreign area officer specialist, which is the FAO program that they had. In fact the group (Special Forces) I had worked with when I came back from Vietnam was (focused on) Iran and I worked out of Iran several times and was picking up a little Farsee, had contacts in the Special Forces over there because I had be through there as a dependent in ’65 when my dad was there as a senior Army advisor. Or the deputy there, I’m sorry not senior. Had good contacts there (from one summer in college and my 5th FG time) so I was going the Iranian FAO route. Went through the FAO training with a lot of Special Forces guys and was out in Monterey California for language school (taking Farsie). It was a year assignment, but after six months our embassy was taken over. When that happened it was the first time that I did not have the chance to pick an assignment. I was assigned to the first infantry division at Ft. Riley, Kansas and went there and had a combat service support company and was the S-3 there and then the division current operations guy there. Went from there to the Armed Forces Staff College, which was a joint assignment because I was going from there out of the staff college to the new command that had just stood up at FT. Bragg called JSOC, Joint Special Operations Command. So, I went from JSCO from about ’82 to about ’87 maybe. I had five years there where I was director of the exercise and training evaluation part of that thing. Which was really outstanding and very
interesting times between ’82 and ’87. So then I went from there was a deputy commanding officer for as 7th Special Forces Group there at Ft. Bragg, which had a mission on central and South America. One day I was escorting some young El Salvadorian Colonels around the place and they were talking about the war. We were supporting that actively at the time. But most of our support was out of third battalion, down in Panama. I was talking to the colonels and really just hit up with them. So, I decided I would volunteer. I volunteered to be the senior OPAT, which was Operation Plan and Training Team. Went down and headed up the project there with the Special Forces in El Salvador, ’89-’90 time frame. Then came back and we were just in the process then of standing up 3rd Special Forces Group. So, I became the XO for a period of time and then deputy commanding officer for the 3rd Special Forces. That’s the position I retired out of. For the most part, yes, my career was Special Operations Rangers, you know Special Forces sort of stuff with that one mal assignment, or not mal, mis-assingment to First Infantry Division.

SM: Your assignment to JSOC in the early ‘80s, I was wondering what your thoughts were? Of course you were training to become a foreign specialist in Iran, then of course one of the big debacles of the ‘70s was the attempted rescue of the hostages in Iran. I was wondering what you thought about that failed operation, Desert 1? The whole notion that jointness, some critics have said that was part of the problem.

TM: That’s exactly why they came up with JSOC after that to look at and try and overcome the bureaucracies and understand the capabilities of the sister services and work on interoperability of communications, aviation systems and everything like that.

SM: Did you find that JSOC was adequately addressing those issues?

TM: Very much so, it’s absolutely amazed with the progress made during that time frame. Sometimes you flash back to your parochials. An example of that would be during Grenada. I think they made real good strides. If you look at the force structure that’s there today in the Special Ops area and you look at the operations that are currently on-going in Afghanistan which have just transitioned sort of from Special Forces over to the conventional Army with (Maj. Gen.) John Vine there. But the 82nd contingency and stuff I can’t feel anything but pride for the guys and the good job they’re doing. Just glad to have been part of it.
SM: Yes, sir. Is there anything you can talk about with regard to your time in El Salvador?

TM: I’m not sure.

SM: Just some of the general experiences that you had working there?

TM: Yes, well sure.

SM: I guess the most important thing I’m trying to see are the parallels or the lessons that you might have learned in your previous combat experiences and how they may have affected how you advised and worked in another combat environment?

TM: In fact, I made the comment (that El Salvador) was sort of what I pictured Vietnam being in the early ‘60s. Because if you remember what we were talking about was the border Ranger camps as my last assignment in Vietnam. Well, that’s not far off from the way the program was run in El Salvador. Because if you stop and think about it, the (U.S.) national policy at that time was to cap the military people (in El Salvador) to 55. That was a self-induced limit by the American government. But basically as a senior OPAT what I was in charge of were all of the Special Forces operations that were going on in country. Working through the Military Advisory Group and the Ambassador there. But at each one of the brigades that we had representative (Special Forces personnel) for all intensive purposes, very much like one the montagnards had. It was sort of the same thing each brigade was a stand-alone entity scattered throughout the entire country. At each location I had a major. For the most part, sometimes it would be a captain if it was a really good young captain and then two NCOs out at each one of the brigade headquarters. Their job was to do exactly what I did in Vietnam. Advise them on intelligence, update the training and monitor tactical operations and everything. For that part of it, it was exactly the same. In fact, I got a lot of my lesson plans that I used for the Sniper school in Vietnam and shared that with the brigades. A lot of the lesson plans for the MACV training for the long-range patrols, so much of it was exactly the same thing, just a different culture and different environment to some degree. There was a lot of parallels in that respect certainly. The difference became I think and this was the overarching difference, because in the II corps area, tri-border area in Vietnam there was nothing there. There were good guys and bad guys and random mountain people on their own. It sort of ebbed and flowed which ever was the best for them at the time. And
rightfully so. I’m not badmouthing them, would have done the same probably. That was it, where in El Salvador (RVN) and that’s why mechanical ambushes were very effective there. Because there was no population, but in El Salvador, it’s the most densely populated country in Central, South America. Mechanical ambushes couldn’t even be considered because of the randomness of them. You know in a population there were some things that you couldn’t do as a result of that. But there were many things that were parallel. In my opinion the rules of engagement weren’t too terribly different. In Vietnam we (advisors) were told not to go out on our own, with a three-man cell, you certainly could, but the problem was you would have absolutely no back up. Nothing against three man teams, in fact I believe in that stuff. To be isolated in the field without the support of connecting uplink is not real smart. That’s what we were told. But in El Salvador during the time I was there our rules of engagement were that my soldiers, the majors (and NCOs) could go anywhere in the world they wanted on one stipulation, that their counterpart was with them. Their counterpart was an El Salvadorian O-5 or O-6. Wherever their counterpart needed to be is where they needed to be. You see what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

TM: The rules I thought were more than fair. At the same time they knew that we weren’t supposed to go out in tactical operations to any large extent. I forgot which firebase it was, we had one El Parieco was penetrated one night and they turned .50 cals around and everything and fired at my young major (Jim Parker’s) hooch there! They were doing pretty good, old Jim he’s a two star now down at Tampa and was doing really good stuff there. So when the press came out, his counterpart was the colonel there. The colonel was taking good care of Jim. The reporter said, “well, what about the Americans? Did they engage in combat”? He made the comment to him, “oh no, not our American brothers. You know they can’t do any of this stuff”.

SM: That’s funny.

TM: Here this poor advisor is the best thing he ever did and I did put him in for a Bronze Star for valor for that evening as his NCO. They were both directed to be not put in. I said no, I put them in. They just were denied, but years later he got it. They all did. In fact, they had the ceremony a few years back when they got all the El Salvadorian
guys in there and gave them little expedition medals and stuff like that. But that was
something that took time, but those were the rules of the time and you play by the rules.
SM: Absolutely. In terms of other aspects, the rules of engagement of course
from the Vietnam perspective, they’ve been heavily criticized as being too restrictive,
whether it be not firing until fired upon. Having to be of course, very wary when you
were in populated areas, not to engage in just rampant firefights for fear of civilian
casualties.
        TM: I never was in many populated areas.
SM: And not in Vietnam?
        TM: Yes.
SM: Right, but now to go back to El Salvador and comparing and contrasting the
rules of engagement in either country, did you find that there were similar problems and
issues that had to be considered whenever you went out with an EL Salvadorian unit?
    You got always this possibility of collateral damage and civilian casualties that could turn
people against the El Salvadorian government and the cause.
    TM: That’s why the rules of engagement are there. Sometimes they seem overly
tight, but it’s for the good of the order so to speak long term.
SM: Yes, sir.
    TM: No one needs a rogue. Look what Lt. Caley did with My Lai. You do no
good by doing stuff like that. If you’re not on the high moral ground, what’s the point in
fighting if you become what they are?
SM: Yes, sir.
    TM: That’s something that as a professional soldier you realize early on.
SM: Did you find that the El Salvadorian units that you were working with that
they were open to that attitude?
    TM: Very much so.
SM: What were the other important lessons?
    TM: In fact that was part of their strength I think. I think the program we had in
place there was an excellent program. In fact a commentary on the El Salvadorian war
that a lot of people don’t realize is that when a war ended the terrorists or the bad boys
there requested that the OPATs, which were the group that I was heading up there as a
senior OPAT, remain in country and work with both side because they thought that much of them being the balance and reasonableness in there. That’s not widely known, but that’s a good commentary on something. Considering their primary target was us and our rental cars.

SM: Also how much do you think that wanted to keep Americans there like yourself, how much do you think that was also to provide a degree of balance and security because if there are American observers there, then there can’t be government access against the former enemy.

TM: No, absolutely. They thought that we would be objective enough to be honest brokers in that process. Just like I think with the Russia in Afghanistan. One of the things that they (the terrorists in El Salvador) did to their demise was the mining and everything. You know because there were a lot of mines and stuff there. I just think that one little girl, when I was there they made a psyops poster of a young lady (about six-years-old) who had lost her leg and had been blown up pretty bad. They put her in a really pristine white dress. The psy-ops said, “You support people who do things like this”. It was one of the most successful psy-ops programs I’ve ever seen. They had a lot of commonality in the psy-ops perspective as well as the tactical.

SM: Did they adopt civil affairs programs similar to what we tried to do in Vietnam and try to apply the to El Salvador as well?

TM: Yes, sure did. They had a whole group that did that.

SM: Did that involve medcaps, that kind of stuff?

TM: It was the same sort of thing. It had medcaps where you go out and distribute food and shots and stuff of that nature (medical, dental). In fact, it was almost a clone of the old madcap period, you know when you do a cordon (and circled a village). The difference became in El Salvador normally they didn’t have tactical involvement as a precursor. In Vietnam we often went in and cordoned everything up the evening before and then went in the next day to see who was leaving. El Salvador was pretty much going to the town, or the village. A lot of that was done by air, because it’s really rugged terrain.

SM: Were there a lot of firefights that you witnessed and were involved in El Salvador?
TM: Not a lot. I mean on a national basis there was always something going on. But it was sporadic, but at the same time the capabilities were there where they did overrun several positions over that period of time.

SM: Would you say it was less intense that your experience in Vietnam?

TM: Yes.

SM: Were there any other lessons that you took away from Vietnam that you were able to apply either in El Salvador or anywhere else in your military career?

TM: I think the overarching lesson is just in working with the people. You take care of them and they take care of you and you’re all in it together. You do the job to the best of your ability, but you also would make it all happen. And you’ve go to take care of troops because there’s no bond like combat. It’s a real quick bond. Even with the rotation systems that we had there (RVN). I think the friendships and connections made there were lifetime experiences. It’s something you don’t forget if you see a guy 40 years later.

SM: Yes, sir. What did you think about the parallel between as you mention, what you were doing in El Salvador seemed to be like what was happening in Vietnam in the early ‘60s before the major build up. What do you think about that as an approach of American foreign policy? That is keeping the American involvement minimized, training and providing support and letting the people inside their own country, defend their own country?

TM: I would have really loved to have seen U.S. Special Forces stay and continue with their camps, and everything and taking a different approach. I think part of what got us where we got there (in Vietnam) was the macho image of “step aside, let me show you how this is done”. Not keeping in mind that it (their war) had been going on there forever and is still going on varying degrees. I think there’s a lot of wisdom to that. I think EL Salvador was and excellent model. I think what they’re doing now in Afghanistan is very much a reflection of that. But the problem is that you can’t ever fight tomorrow’s war, with yesterday’s stuff. Because it’s just all changing. Does that make sense?

SM: Yes, sir. I think it does. But at the same time.
TM: I think buying in and ownership on the part of the nation you’re in, is absolutely critical. It’s just like with the medcap if you don’t in that process teach them to plant or raise fish or whatever they’re doing, you’re just filling a short-term need. You’re really wasting you time other than the real time intelligence you may have picked up there.

SM: What do you think about the U.S. deployment of large forces to fight other people’s wars for them? Like what we tried to do in Vietnam? We in essences deployed our military in an attempt to fight South Vietnam’s war for them. Do you think that we can succeed in those types of wars?

TM: I would think it would be very difficult to. You could make a scenario, sure you could in Grenada, El Salvador. I don’t know what that would have done there. I really don’t think it would have helped. We did it the best way with minimum resources. I think that was a pretty good model. In Panama you could deploy larger numbers. You could take that and try it in a European environment or a Southeast Asian environment I just don’t think it’d be doing much good there. The other part of it is, who are you helping? Is it an internal issue, civil war, you know what I mean? There’s so many variables there it’s real hard to say no. You could make a case for anything if you define the scenario well enough and pinning it down.

SM: Just out of curiosity, given you interest in this type of activity and your observations as a military officer, looking at what’s going on today for instance between the United States and Iraq and the current administration obvious desire to try to push us closer and closer to a potential war with Iraq. What do you think about that as a prospect?

TM: I dread it. Most especially if it becomes a gringo (an American) thing and we do it by ourself. You know the important thing to any thing (conflict) is to be on the high moral ground. There’s a significant portion of the world that doesn’t like us. The reasons they don’t like us from their perspective are very real in my mind. We have unconditionally supported, (Israel) without asking questions for some time. Both sides are right from their own perspective. The worst thing in the world would be perceived if we were acting as the agent of another country or just unilaterally doing it by ourself because that’s what we feel we need to do. I think we need to frame that whole thing that
we are a nation of 285,000,000 people. Today there are 1,666,000,000 Muslims. A lot of them don’t like us now because of our past policies. I’d certainly hate to see all of them hate us because of future policies. But then it could go just as squeaky-smooth as other thing have. Who knows?

SM: You’re right (laughs).

TM: Like we used to say in Vietnam, “the difference between a hero and a zero is just a typo”.

SM: I hadn’t heard that one, that’s good (laughs).

TM: Think about it. (laughs).

SM: Absolutely. That’s very interesting. What do you think should be the major lesson we take away from the Vietnam War as a nation?

TM: I would think the ones to address that it’s probably been addressed, by a lot of the current leadership in the military over the last few years. When you look at guy’s like Schwarzkopf and some of those that came out of the Vietnam experience, it was very much indelibly inscribed. I was there at the end of it. The generals and stuff above me, some of them really outstanding people had been there through multiple phases. They realized, well look at what Schwarzkopf did with the last Desert Storm? He had definitive goals, objectives, had a specific mission, overwhelming force, don’t waste people. Those sorts of lessons may not have been there had it not been for Vietnam. They saw the other side of the coin so to speak. I think from that perspective it took a while to build the Army back up. Because all these people chose to stay and work through it during it’s down times. I think that’s a real credit to them and the nation. I think right now we have a really great Army, real good capabilities. I’m very proud of all the people in uniform. I think we’re doing them a disservice right now by downsizing like we have and increasing the ops tempo. You’re just wearing them out. That is only so much people can do. Then it’s a concern of mine. Maybe overly, but that’s juts me on my perspective.

SM: Of course increasing not just on the active services but also demands on the reserve components.

TM: I think it’s partly unfair to what we’ve done to the Reserves. I was in Reserves from ’62 to ’67 when I went on contract with ROTC and had to get out. My
son’s in Reserves now (and in ROTC at Duke). But they (the reserves) signed on for the
big one, not to be substituting for every little thing that comes up. I don’t mean that in
the wrong sense, some of these things are little things that come up. You can’t expect
someone who’s got a life and a family at home, who’s working towards a career and
trying to provide a livelihood to go off for six months here and then come back and
resettle and then go off for three months here and then come back and then go off for
three months here and then come back and go off. My dad often spoke of a guy (reserve
officer) he knew who gave up after the Korean War. He was a reservists called up for
World War II, had a little camera shop on New York and was able to reconstitute that.
Was called up for the Korean War, went back and then he couldn’t get it going again the
second time. I think in that respect we’re abusing the Reserves to some degree. We
almost have to because of the force structure. They’re now the combat service support.
You can’t leave home without them. I think there has to be some way of looking at it and
seeing how you could do better in the future in my opinion.

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss today?
TM: No, I think that’s pretty much it unless you had any specific questions.
SM: Nothing comes to mind right this minute. So, why don’t we go ahead and
put an end on the interview? Thank you very much sir. This will end the interview with
Ted Mataxis.