Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Marvin P. Mathiak. It is the 8th of August, year 2000, at approximately 10:15 Lubbock time. I am in the Special Collections Library in Lubbock, and Mr. Mathiak is in Katy, Texas. Okay, Mr. Mathiak, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Marvin Mathiak: Okay, I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin, a town called Horicon. I went to school at the University of Wisconsin where I got a bachelor's in chemistry and then went on to the University of Chicago where I intended to get my doctorate in physical chemistry but as chance would have it, Uncle Sam decided there were more important things I should do with my life, and he drafted me and I managed to get a masters in physical chemistry prior to being drafted and managed to get work at a company before I was drafted, knowing that they would be required to take me back when I came back from service. I was drafted and went into basic training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I went to AIT at Fort Polk and then went on to Vietnam into Cambodia and so forth and then back.

SM: Now how much was going on at the university as far as anti-war activity, protesting, and things of that nature?

MM: At Wisconsin there were a lot of demonstrations that were going on. Wisconsin was an extremely liberal campus and there were a lot of characters who
thought it was a lot of fun to demonstrate. I think probably 1% or 5% of the people who
were demonstrating had serious convictions and the remainder were just out for fun.
There were a lot of sit-ins, particularly in the chemistry building where I spent a lot of
time because at that time there was a lot of antagonism against Dow Chemical for
producing napalm and there were a number of sit-ins. I remember I had to step over and
around and on people to get to my classes. There was a very stressful, very nasty time as
the years went on. I graduated from Wisconsin in the summer or spring of 1967 and then
went on to Chicago right away in the fall of ’67 and I don’t remember that much anti-war
activity at Chicago. It may be because Chicago was much more heavily into trying to
survive its students than they were at Wisconsin, I don't know.

SM: What about teach ins? Were there many teach ins at Wisconsin?

MM: You’re using a term I’d forgotten about. Yes, there were. I really don’t
know anything about them, though. I never was involved with one, but yeah, there was
every conceivable type of activity going on at Wisconsin. Wisconsin was one of the most
active schools. I think Wisconsin and Berkeley were probably the two most active
schools in terms of anti-war protesting at the time.

SM: And you did not ever attend a teach in? Never went on a sit in?

MM: No, no I never did.

SM: Never went to an anti-war rally?

MM: No, to me they were a nuisance and a distraction and I was there trying to
get an education. I was very serious about that, and intended to come away with a good
education. As far as I was concerned, they were just interfering with my rights to try to
get an education by interfering with my mobility and generally being obnoxious.

SM: Well, what did you think about the American policy when you were a
college student? What did you think about what we were doing in Vietnam?

MM: Well, when I first entered college it was in 1963, fall of ’63, and of course
at that point Vietnam was not an issue. It was something that evolved slowly. Steve, can
I put you on hold? Oh, never mind. That’s okay, it went away. The Vietnam issue
evolved by the time I left Wisconsin. It was ’67 which is getting more into the peak anti-
war years, of course. Initially I really didn’t pay that much attention to it. Finally,
obviously it was impossible to catch you attention but what was affecting me most were
basically the demonstrators who were being obnoxious. The war itself really wasn’t that much of a factor on my mind. I had it in my mind I was going to get education and at that time there were draft deferments and I really wasn’t anticipating getting involved so I was very, very highly focused just on an education at that point and really didn’t pay that much attention to what was going on with the war. Now as things evolved, I became more and more unhappy with the war and became quite strongly anti-war, and in fact to this day I think it was a big mistake, but in any event, as time progressed, I guess like a lot of the population in this country I gradually became more and more against the war.

SM: And what in particular, when you were in college and based on what you heard in terms of news reporting and I guess maybe just information available through the college student grape vine, what was it about the Vietnam War that you grew to dislike and became critical of?

MM: As far as I was concerned it was basically a pointless exercise. The Vietnamese were not a threat to this country, they weren't a threat to anybody else, we were not in the threat of being invaded by a fleet of sampans and I really didn’t think there was any point to going over there. I viewed it more as mass homicide than anything else at the time.

SM: So you viewed what the United States was doing kind of along the lines of I guess what college students were accusing them of, war crimes and murder?

MM: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

SM: What were your parent’s perspectives on the war? Did you talk much about it with them prior to going to Vietnam?

MM: No, I didn’t. I really don’t know exactly what it was. I don’t remember any discussions with them. Its interesting you should ask it. I cannot remember any discussions with my parents about the war. Now when I was drafted and getting sent over there, of course they were not real happy about that, and they were pretty concerned while I was over there, but beyond that I really don’t know what their thinking was, and again, I don’t remember ever talking about it with them.

SM: How about your sisters?

MM: Basically the same thing, I just don’t remember any conversations. That was really not an issue. Now by the time I was getting ready to be drafted I had been
away from home for quite a while. I basically had left home in 1963 and I was drafted in 1969, so as the war built up I was getting more and more removed from my parents. It wasn't as though I was living with them or like I was a 17 year old kid or something of the sort. So, I was a little more remote from my family at that time.

SM: What about friends you had in college, maybe some of your classmates that you were closer with, was the war much of a discussion with them?

MM: You know, I really don’t recall a lot of discussions with classmates or anybody else. In fact, the only comments I can recall being made about…well, I know my classmates were also against the war. My roommates were against the war by the time I was a senior in college, but the only real comments I can remember is being in a group someplace and hearing one person say to another that, “You really need to get out and demonstrate. You haven't lived until you’ve demonstrated,” as though it was just a big lark which I really do believe was pretty typical of most of the demonstrators that they really didn’t have much personal convictions, but it was something to do.

SM: Now did your father or any of your uncles serve in World War II or Korea?

MM: Yes, my father was unable to because he had had an accident and lost an arm prior to World War II. I had one uncle that was in the Marines in the south Pacific and another uncle that was in the Army in Europe. I had another uncle who was in Korea.

SM: Now growing up and interacting with your uncles, did you have much opportunity to talk with them about their experiences in the war?

MM: No, I never did. I was a kid, it was never an issue, and…excuse me, can I put you on hold just a second, Steve? Be right back.

SM: Sure.

MM: Yeah, I never discussed it with them at all. We didn’t see them that much because they all lived some distance away, and when we did I was busy playing with my cousins and the children didn’t talk with the adults really. The adults went and played cards and did whatever they were doing and the kids went out and played.

SM: How about after the war, did you ever have an opportunity to go talk with them about you war experiences?

MM: No, I’ve never really talked with anybody about my war experiences.
SM: And you said the University of Chicago was pretty much the same thing as far as not a whole lot of interaction or talk about the Vietnam War and what was going on?

MM: No, I don’t remember that much. I was in the Ph.D. program there in a highly theoretical area and I am here to tell you we were all studying very, very seriously. Chicago’s a very tough school, very highly acclaimed school, and our intentions were 100% focused on our education at that point so I really don’t even remember any comments about the war. Our discussions were always about the exam or prelims or something or another that was going to come up.

SM: And you were working on your Ph.D. in physical chemistry?

MM: Yes.

SM: Well, what went through your mind when you received your draft notice?

MM: Well, it wasn’t much of a surprise. The draft laws, I believe, were changed or must have been changed in 1967 sometime so it was the graduate students were no longer automatically granted deferments and of course the draft boards had tremendous latitude in what they did. So I got my first draft notice I want to say in early fall of 1967 just after I went there…or maybe it was ’68, I don’t remember. My notice that my classification had been changed to 1A came pretty quickly and then not too long after that came the first draft notice, and there was an appeal system set up which I went through. The first step of appeals as I recall was sending in a written appeal and it seemed to me that you had 30 days to do that and of course I took the full 30 days before sending it in and that was turned down and the next step was a personal appeal which I did. I went up and spoke to the draft board and of course got no sympathy from them, and after that I was just drafted. So when the draft notice came, it was no surprise at all. I was expecting it and I knew it was coming.

SM: What draft board was it? Was it in Chicago?

MM: No, it was in Wisconsin, Dodge County, Wisconsin. I think it was a county draft board, I can't recall. I think it was a county level, though.

SM: Was there an exchange there, or did you just go in, make your appeal, leave the room, they made their decision, and you heard about it? Was there a question-answer type session where they…
MM: I remember speaking to them, but I can't remember anything else about it. I know I drove up from Chicago where I was living at the time up to wherever this draft board was meeting and I remember speaking to them but I really cannot remember anything else that happened there.

SM: Well, so what went through your mind when you received that rejection? That was your final appeal, correct?

MM: Yes, I was not surprised. I was expecting it. It was one of these things that you have a feeling of impending doom and when it actually comes it’s almost a relief just to get it over with.

SM: What did you dread most about this?

MM: Interruption of my education more than anything else. I had no interest in going into the military. When I knew I was going to be drafted I decided that if I had to go into service, which obviously was going to happen, that I would go into the Air Force and learn to fly because at least that would be something I could use afterwards rather than just going and being drafted like everybody else. So, I went and took the written examinations to get into the Air Force; I don’t know if it was for officer school or flight school or whatever it was, and passed that. Then, about a month or sometime later I had to go down to a base in southern Illinois someplace, I think it might have been around Ratool. Excuse me, let me put you on hold again. Just a minute, Steve. [interruption here]. When I went down for my physical I found out that I didn’t quite have perfect 20/20 vision which was surprising because my vision had always been exceptional, so I didn’t get to go into the Air Force. So, I was just drafted into the Army and of course by that time I had managed to get my masters and I was thinking, “This is really ridiculous that they’re going to take me with a Masters in physical chemistry and make a common grunt out of me.” I could certainly do a lot more for my country than carry a rifle. So, I looked into getting into the chemical corps and what came down unofficially was that they would grant me a commission as a captain in the chemical corps, but there’d be a four year obligation attached to it, and that occurred, I would say, in the middle of basic training or towards the end of basic training at which point I had had more than my fill of the military. I didn’t want any more and I couldn't see any way I would want to spend two extra years in it. I decided to just roll the dice because at that point it was still not
100% certain what was going to happen to me. So, I didn’t proceed any farther in that
direction.

SM: So you finally entered basic training, entered active duty, let’s see here, that
was in…

MM: I was drafted on June 19th, 1969, and then went immediately down to Fort
Campbell, Kentucky.

SM: For basic training?

MM: For basic, yeah.

SM: What was that training like?

MM: Well, in some respects it was very good. The physical conditioning was
excellent, they did a good job of that, but of course the training was primarily just
harassment; sleep deprivation, and the Army was trying to go through their usual
program to take a bunch of 17 year old kids and turn them into soldiers, but what works
well for a 17 year old kid does not work well for somebody who was 23 years old, which
is what I was, and there were a number of other people that age, too. There were a lot of
graduate students in the basic training at that point, and so it was a major turn off to me.
It taught me a level of contempt for the military that I know the military didn’t want, and
the same with essentially other people. In fact, my observation was that the older you
were, the less effective the military training was and the more you came to despise the
military as you went through the basic training as opposed to the 17-18 year old kids that
were in there thought it was pretty cool and didn’t mind the way we were treated but the
way you motivate somebody who’s in their early 20s is quite a bit different from the way
you motivate a teenager.

SM: Absolutely. What turned you off the most?

MM: Probably the stupid brutality. Beatings were common by the cadre.

Sometimes they would do it publicly like one time when a young 2nd lieutenant came into
the mess hall with two drill sergeants and some trainee hadn't eaten some gristle on his
plate, so the two drill sergeants grabbed the poor kid and held him up while the lieutenant
beat the kid heavily with his fists. Other times if they wanted to beat somebody for
whatever reason they would take them into the day room. They’d even pull people out of
formation in front the day room, take them in there, and everybody could hear what was
going on. I didn’t think there was any point in that. Some of the cadre were very sick, I
think. We had one drill sergeant who bragged about taking a Vietnamese woman and
stripping her, tying her upside down, and shoving an iguana in her vagina. He also had a
picture; he was real proud of holding two severed heads of Vietnamese. These are the
kind of people doing the training; not exactly the kind of people that I wanted to emulate.

SM: Why didn’t somebody report them for the physical beating?

MM: Oh, they were, but the Army doesn’t care. The procedure is that you report
to the IG, the Inspector General, and some paperwork is initiated, the kid tells what
happened to him, and then the cadre just comes back and says, “He’s lying. He fell down
a flight of stairs. He’s just a whiny trainee,” and that’s the end of it. I know it was
reported in a number of occasions but the same thing happened each time. It was
amazing how many trainees had fallen down steps.

SM: Anybody ever write their congressman about it?

MM: I think I did, as a matter of fact. I remember having written to a
congressman. I don't remember if it was about that or if it was trying to get a
commission. I really cannot remember. But again, it was always the Army’s word
against some poor trainee and nobody cared. I mean, we were disposable at that point.
There was no consideration or respect for us as human beings at all. We were simply
trainees.

SM: About how many times do you recall someone being physically accosted?

MM: I never was.

SM: No, how many times do you recall somebody in your platoon actually being
physically accosted?

MM: Gosh, I can't really remember; I’d say a good half dozen times.

SM: And this was in the course of eight weeks?

MM: Yes.

SM: eight weeks of training?

MM: Yes.

SM: Okay, any other methods of disciplining and enforcing discipline?

MM: There was always a threat. The most common discipline was the threat of
an article 15, which is a minor fine or something like that. I understand it goes on your
record. There was also more minor threats of being put on KP or getting extra duty of some sort or another.

SM: What about push ups and that kind of stuff?

MM: Oh yes, yes, I hadn't even thought about that. Yes, you had to drop and give them 10 or 20 if you looked at them cross ways. That was very common. We also had a horizontal ladder out in front of the mess hall that we all had to go through before every meal, but that was also a form of punishment as I recall. The punishment was generally in terms of some sort of physical activity, well, I guess most often as you mention in terms of push ups or something of the sort.

SM: And what do you think was the most difficult thing for you to deal with in terms of basic training? What was a good challenge for you?

MM: The biggest challenge was keeping my mouth shut and putting up with the cadre. There was really no option that I had, of course, and I wasn’t going to get out of line and let them do to me what they were doing to some of the other kids, so I guess in that respect what they were doing was effective; but then again, I’m not a major trouble maker anyway.

SM: Alright, well from there you went on to Fort Polk, Louisiana for your advanced training?

MM: Right.

SM: This was advanced infantry training, correct?

MM: Yes, at that point we were assigned our MOS, military occupational specialty, at the end of basic training and mine, the one I was assigned was 11 Charlie which is mortars and I don’t remember but I think that the AIT company I was in was all people who were assigned for mortars. I may be wrong on that. AIT was a much more serious type of training in that it was not as much mindless harassment. They actually were interested in training and took a much more serious approach to try to teach you how to use your weapons, how to read maps, how to do compass courses, and that sort of thing. So, in that respect, it was a whole lot better than basic training had been. There really seemed to be a purpose to what they were doing.

SM: What kind of weapons training had you received prior to advanced training? What did you get in basic?
MM: In basic we used an M-14 rifle. I don’t know, I think we may have used an M-16 too. I'm quite sure we did, as a matter of fact.

SM: What did you qualify with, both?

MM: I believe I qualified with both.

SM: What did you think about the differences between the two? Which weapon did you prefer?

MM: I preferred the M-16. The reason I preferred it was in that it was lighter and it didn’t seem to accumulate as much gravel inside of it that had to be cleaned out as the M-14 did. Obviously it is a smaller and lighter rifle as well, so I guess as a matter of convenience I preferred that. Of course the only time we used it was on the rifle range as opposed to under any sort of combat conditions, so at that point I had no basis for preferring one over the other for anything other than rifle range activity.

SM: What kind of weapons training did you receive in advanced training?

MM: In AIT we did…I know we got going on mortars and I'm sure we did some more M-16 training, but to tell the truth AIT is kind of a blur with me. I really don’t remember a whole lot about what we did in AIT other than that it was certainly much more geared to actually training you to do something that was going to help you survive than basic had been.

SM: What about machine gun training, M-60 or greater? Anything like that during AIT?

MM: We may have fired an M-60. I’m not sure that we did or did not. We fired a 50 caliber once. We fired one LAW, light anti tank weapon, each. I don’t remember any, but I’m sure we tossed a grenade or two. We got a pretty basic round of training because presumably right after AIT you were going to be sent over to Vietnam. I know we did not train with an M-79 grenade launcher, at least I don’t remember that we did; I don't think we did, which was kind of surprising because that was one of the standard weapons over in Vietnam.

SM: Did you find that the AIT training was better, made you better prepared for what you eventually encountered in Vietnam?

MM: Well, it certainly helped. I don’t think it was really adequate. For one thing, I ended up in the infantry when I ended up over there as a grunt out beating the
bush as opposed to running mortars. So, a lot of the training I got in AIT and in the States was not all that relevant. I’d say in general it was pretty helpful. One thing I really think they should have emphasized a whole lot more was low crawling because when you got in combat that’s one thing you did a lot and they taught us how to low crawl and I remember going over or through some sort of obstacle course. We had to crawl under barbed wire and so forth, but I think that’s something that they really should have worn us out on in AIT.

SM: Low crawl, not high crawl?

MM: Right.

SM: And let’s see…how about enforcing discipline at AIT?

MM: I don’t remember any real problems. At that point, we all knew where we were going. There was no doubt about it. Nobody had any illusions. I really don’t remember too many discipline problems; in fact, the only one that comes to mind was once when we were out on bivouac some little punk took the flash suppressor off of his M-16 and I was bending over to do something and he pushed it up in my butt and pulled the trigger and blew a little hold in my rear end, but other than that…

SM: What happened to him?

MM: I don’t know that anything happened to him. I really don't know that anything happened to him. Something may have, I suppose, but I don't know that I ever knew that he ever got any sort of punishment for it.

SM: What happened to you? Did you have to go back and get stitches or anything?

MM: They took me to…there was a field hospital or something like that set up for the operations so they took me over there and cleaned it up and patched it up a little bit. I mean, it wasn’t any real serious damage, it was just the blast from the powder, but of course that’s a pretty good sized blast, too, even without the slug.

SM: And it burns.

MM: Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely.

SM: Did they ask you how it happened?

MM: Oh yeah, they knew how it happened. In fact, they had pulled me off of the punk that did it right away before I killed him.
SM: And yet you don’t recall them giving him an Article 15?

MM: I do not recall any punishment for him. It was the Army; what can you say?

SM: And what about other differences between AIT and basic as far as physical training and things like that?

MM: There wasn’t as much physical training in AIT as there was in basic. Basic was very heavy on physical training. The AIT was much more involved in skills of one sort or another; teaching you how to use your weapons. In terms of physical training, the only kind of stuff that I can remember was getting out and double timing extensively in the morning before chow. AIT was not so much PT as it was presumably teaching you how to get by in Vietnam.

SM: You left from Fort Polk to go to Fort Benning?

MM: Right, right.

SM: To the NCO academy? Is that correct?

MM: Yes. The Army, instead of sending me to Vietnam directly, sent me instead to Fort Benning to NCO school there to learn to run a mortar squad and that was a promotion to E4 when I went over and then at the completion of school we were promoted to E5s and that was very, very specifically oriented toward teaching you how to become extremely proficient with the mortar, teaching you how to run groups of people, and basically teaching you how to become a leader in the military sense.

SM: Did you get fire direction training there, as far as for running the mortar team and actually doing the fire direction center responsibilities?

MM: Yes, we did everything. Yeah, absolutely everything. We learned every position with the mortar, we learned how to call in mortars, we did the calculations telling them how to set the mortars, to adjust it, and so forth. So yeah, it was absolutely comprehensive. There is nothing left out, and it was pretty effective. We got to be pretty good by the end of the times. We could take a mortar and its base and some ammunition and run out and set it up and start nailing a target down range pretty quickly. So, that was some pretty effective training there and that was, again, a little bit looser in military hassles than it had been. When I went to Fort Benning, my wife came down and was living in Columbus while I was there so presumably, occasionally, there was an
opportunity to get off the base at night. A lot of wives of people in NCO school were
down in Columbus as well, of course, so we got acquainted with the wives and men in
my unit quite a bit.

SM: And the NCOs that were training you, again, as far as disciplining, how did
ey they enforce discipline at that level?

MM: At that level there really wasn’t any discipline problem that I can remember.
They'd weeded out the troublemakers real well up to that point. They didn’t have any
trouble makers left in the crowd. We were all pretty much discipline free at that point,
although obviously we tried to get away with as much as we could.

SM: So what rank did you attain after completing the NCO school?

MM: After completion of NCO school I was a sergeant E5, and when I
completed the NCO school which I think was in January or February of 1970, they kept
me on there as a trainer for OCS and NCO school to train people on mortars for another
couple of months until I think it was early May, and during that point I was living off
base almost like a normal soldier, I guess, you know, I’d say. I was just working on base
during the day. That continued until the end of May…not the end of May, I believe
around the beginning of May or late April or something of that sort when I had received
my orders for Vietnam and it seems to me that I had several weeks leave from the time I
received my orders and until I actually had to report to go over to Vietnam.

SM: Now just out of curiosity, what would you train the OCS candidates and
NCO school candidates in terms of mortars, what did you focus on, everything?

MM: Everything, everything, yeah. We’d train them how to do the calculations
of adjusting the mortars, setting them up, running them. We did demonstrations for them.
In fact, one demonstration got kind of interesting; I was down in the…I don’t remember
where I was, it wasn’t as an FO, some place away from the OCS crowd they were trying
to make the demonstration to. They were sitting up in the bleachers watching this range
or something and calling in rounds for us to shoot at the range. I was down by the guns
which were quite a way away, and they gave us – after we’d been hitting the targets real
well – whoever it was up at the OCS group told us to drop one in as close to the stands as
we could and of course on the charts we had there was a fan mark that you had to stay in
and you couldn't get any closer to the bleachers than that so we put one on the edge of the
fan and apparently the fan was a little bit off because it landed apparently way too close
to the stands and got everybody kind of shook up. I think they made some corrections
after that. [laughs.]

SM: Any serious accidents in any of the training you received prior to Vietnam?
MM: No, no. At no time were there any kind of serious accidents that I recall.
Amazingly enough, there were no snake bites; nothing more serious than blisters, as I
recall.

SM: Alright, and then you...let’s see, you went from Fort Benning straight over
to Vietnam?
MM: Yes, yeah, I left for Vietnam. I think I left out of Fort Lewis, Washington
and I think the date was May 31st of 1970 and flew via Anchorage and then you go to
Japan down to Cam Ranh Bay and got there and I was thinking at that time, because of
having read all the press about how great we were doing in Cambodia, that the threat
coming from the west was going to be pretty much eliminated and they’d probably send
me up to the DMZ because that was the only place that there would be a problem
anymore, but of course the reports from the press were not based on accuracy and
Cambodia was a very serious military disaster as far as manpower was concerned and got
shipped over to Cambodia immediately. I was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division
Airmobile to Alpha Company, 1st of the 7th, which is Custer’s old unit and sent over to
Quan Loi...well, the company headquarters at the time was in Quan Loi which is very
near the Cambodian border. My unit was in Cambodia.

SM: Do you remember where?
MM: Just out in the jungle someplace. At no time when I was in the bush was I
ever near a place. I only remember seeing a road once. We were never near a named
place. Well, we may have been near something but if we were, I didn’t know about it.

SM: What did you think about the process that was being developed by Nixon
and Kissinger, the Vietnamization program, to try to hand the war over to the
Vietnamese? How did that affect you in terms of what you were expecting when you got
there, or did it?

MM: It didn’t really affect me at all. The politics that went on really didn’t have
anything to do with the conduct of the war from my standpoint, anyway. I’m sure if you
were interviewing a general, he’d be able to tell you all about that, how important the
politics were, but when you’re just told you’re going to get in this helicopter and go to
wherever it lands, there’s not much else that’s important and you in fact do not hear
anything else. You have no idea what’s happening around you, absolutely none. You’re
completely in the dark.

SM: By the time you arrived in 1970, let’s see, Nixon had been in office for over
a year, and he’d been implementing this program. What about when you were still in
training? Was there much talk about, “Well, it looks like we’re going to be pulling out
soon, the war should be over pretty soon?” Was there much talk like that in training?

MM: No, I don’t remember any talk like that. I don't think anybody expected
that to happen. There was certainly a lot of hope that something would happen, but the
time interval between training and the full-blown war that was going on with half a
million people in country, a few weeks isn't going to make any difference. The
momentum of the situation is going to carry you into it no matter what happens when
you’re in training and we all expected to be over there, particularly once we got our
MOS’s in basic training. Then we knew for sure where we were going.

SM: What were your first impressions upon arriving at Cam Ranh Bay? What
did you think when you got off the plane?

MM: The first one’s probably the same impression everybody has had of the
intense heat and humidity and the smell in the air, and the smell of course was from the
burning the waste from the outhouses. It seemed to permeate the air almost all the time
in the rear. But, the first impressions were basically just heat. I remember we were put
on I believe we had to walk down a ramp off of the plane onto the tarmac and were
loaded onto a bus to take us to whatever processing in barracks they had there and I
remember as we were going by in the bus seeing a lot of soldiers in sandbag positions
that we were driving past. Of course some of them were pretty short and they knew we
were all brand new and so they were teasing us and yelling, “Short!” and having a good
time watching us come in.

SM: What about the Vietnamese people? Did you have much interaction with
them early on?
MM: No, I never had any interaction with any Vietnamese people with the exception of when I was in the bush we had some Kit Carson scouts we worked with from time to time and I had very minor interactions with them, but it was unusual for me to be around any Vietnamese people at any time during my tour over there. I was never off of a base ever. I was never in a Vietnamese restaurant; I was never in a village. Well, I take it back, I was in a village once after I’d gotten out of the bush, but that was just in and out on a quick helicopter hop.

SM: And what about the 1st Cav when you arrived there? What were your first impressions of that unit? How were you welcomed into the unit? What kind of briefing did you receive?

MM: Well, after I was assigned to the Cav they transported me and I think a couple of other people with me to my company headquarters which was in Quan Loi and that’s the first contact I actually had with the Cav. But, it didn’t make any difference what unit it was. I knew nothing about the Cav at that point although I’m sure I knew the name and their patch, but when I arrived in Quan Loi all that happened was that they pointed me to a great big stack of rucksacks and other equipment that had come in from people that had been killed or wounded and showed me what I needed to pull and helped me get the gear I needed off of that big stack of stuff, gave me a rifle, and sent me out to the heli-pad which is, as I recall, right near by. I remember the company camp was in the rubber there and it seems to me just on the edge of the rubber there was a little area that was used for helicopters and they just dressed me up, took the civilian clothes I had, gave me everything I needed, and told me – and it seems to me there was another person or two there with me – where to go out in this heli-pad and wait for the chopper to come in. So we were in and out of Quan Loi in I would guess a matter of some hours, and after a while a helicopter came in and sat down I’d guess probably 70 yards away or so, something like that, and a couple of guys got out and they had body bags that they were bringing back so they unloaded the body bags and then came over to pick us up and we almost immediately got going into Cambodia to my unit.

SM: How did that affect you?
MM: Well, we knew what was going on, obviously. We knew there was a war and we knew of people being killed, but when the helicopter came in and unloaded those body bags, that was tough.

SM: Want to take a break?

MM: No, that’s okay.

SM: What did you…what happened when you first arrived in Cambodia?

MM: Well, we got off the helicopter on the edge of…they took us to an LZ. I don’t remember what the name of it was; it might have been Ranch or Bronco or Corral, and we got off and went in into the LZ and were met by somebody immediately who said, “This is your squad. This is…” and they introduced us to the people. I was taken over to the ammo dump and got all my ammo. I don't remember how much we carried. It seems to me we carried like 10 bandoleers of M-16 ammunition. I was carrying an M-16 at the time, and a couple of belts, I believe 100 rounds each, of M-60 ammo. I don’t remember if we picked up canteens there. I think I had canteens already. Anyway, it seems to me I was carrying about eight or nine liters of water with me, but they showed me what LRPs were, how to eat LRPs, how to make a GI stove which is how we heated C-rations. What we’d do would be to take an empty C-ration can from a dry product like a biscuit or something and take a church key and punch holes around the sides of it, not in the top, or not in the bottom – the top would have been removed. We’d punch holes around the sides and the top and bottom and we would drop a heat tab, we could sit a canteen cup on top of it and use that as a little stove. They showed me the various tricks to eating and gave me samples of some of the different foods so when we got logged I’d know which ones I liked and which ones I didn’t like. That was about it.

SM: And from the time you arrived in country at Cam Ranh Bay to the time where you actually were in Cambodia and assigned to your new platoon or squad, whatever, what kind of briefings did you receive about expected behavior, things to look out for, rules of engagement, that kind of stuff?

MM: We had one…I only remember one briefing of any sort and I really don’t remember what was said. Thinking about it, I remember being up in a shaded set of bleachers and somebody giving us a briefing, but that’s it. I don’t recall any discussions at any point about rules of engagement and where we were operating was always in a free
fire zone. There was never any restrictions. Where I was personally, when I was in the
bush, was strictly out in the jungle. We were never around a village. There was never
any friendly activity, or at least not that we knew of.

SM: And what did you, when you arrived to the Cav, what did you understand
would be your mission as a member of that unit? What were you all trying to
accomplish?

MM: The big picture didn’t exist. It was a matter of just knowing you had to go
to such-and-such a place, get on a helicopter, they’d say, “Here’s your weapon, go do
your thing.” In terms of political briefings or missions or grand scopes or anything like
that, that was non-existent.

SM: What about when you got out there into Cambodia? What did you
understand was the mission of your unit there in Cambodia?

MM: Well, typically we’d have short term missions. We had one situation where
we had to protect…we were pulled in to defend an LZ that was under heavy attack.
Other times we’d have to go out and we’d be going from point A to point B through the
jungle looking for trouble. Those were our missions; it was as simple as that. You go out
or make patrol out 50 yards and look for any trails. There were momentary missions.
I’m sure that the CO of the unit had some broader plan knowing we were operating with
somebody or we were going to meet somebody up or whatever but we never knew that.
All we knew was that we had to follow the guy in front of us, really, and that’s about it;
we just followed the guys in front of us through the jungle.

SM: What about…what was your position in your unit as an NCO, E5?

MM: I was just a common gun squad member. I was in a machine gun squad,
and the way it was organized was that there were rifle squads and gun squads. I don’t
know what the normal strength would be. We were way understrengthed. I know they
collapsed us from, I think there was normally four or five platoons in the company to by
the time I left I think we had two platoons left and we had four or five people in a squad
and I think four squads in a platoon. But anyway, the rifle squads were the guys who
took turns walking point. They all had M-16s or shot guns or occasional M-79 grenade
launcher, and in the gun squad we carried M-16s and the gunner of course had the
machine gun, the M-60 machine gun.
SM: What do you think were the most effective weapons you had when you went out on these operations?

MM: The M-60 was by far the most effective weapon. That was the one that had the capability of penetrating brush. The M-16, unfortunately, the M-16 was…I mean, the M-16 rifle which was so popular was a rather ineffective weapon in the jungle and we were at a rather big disadvantage against the NVA who we were always bumping heads against because the NVA used the AK-47s which fired a much heavier slug and their slugs could penetrate brush whereas the slugs from the M-16 are very light weight and they apparently start tumbling as soon as they hit anything and smack sideways into the next thing they hit and get stopped fairly quickly by brush so they didn’t have much penetrating power which meant that once you got into trouble the M-60 machine gun is the one that could put out the heaviest and of course the most continuous fire and it would penetrate brush better than the M-16s would. So, that was by far the most effective weapon.

SM: Did you get to use the M-60 much in combat?

MM: A little bit. After a while we needed a new machine gunner and I was kind of bored carrying an M-16 so I decided I would carry the M-60. So, I held the M-60 for a while.

SM: Alright, why don’t you describe for me quickly your first contact with the enemy, the first operation where you went out and actually made contact with an NVA force?

MM: That’s kind of hard to do. I was having big problems when I came back, and I spent about a year and a half tricking myself, forcing myself, to forget and at this point it’s basically just an exotic camping expedition for me. I really don’t have any combat stories to tell about.

SM: How long were you in Cambodia?

MM: The month of June. From early June, not June 1 but very early June through June 30th. In fact, on June 29th we crossed the border that afternoon late and set up and it was dusk by the time we set up in Vietnam to spend the night when our whoever it was in charge of us got instructions that we had to cross the river back into Cambodia and spend the night there because we were not going to leave Cambodia until
the 30th, so we had to make an extra river crossing - which is highly hazardous to say the least – back into Cambodia to spend the night on June 29th and then left again on the 30th.

SM: What else do you remember about being in Cambodia?

MM: It was a major military disaster as far as I could tell. We lost tremendous numbers of people there. There were very few people that had walked into Cambodia that walked out and in fact of the people I can remember from being out of Cambodia, I don’t know that any of them had joined the unit prior to May. There were very, very heavy casualties. It was a very bad place. I know that there were some arms caches found and some medicine caches found. We never did, but the toll in terms of what it cost us was atrocious and we were severely understrengthed, but when we came out, although they had been pouring in people like me heavily the whole time we’d been in there to try to keep it up to strength, it was, from my opinion, a terrible military disaster.

SM: What kind of weapons systems did you run into as far as the North Vietnamese? Did they have artillery and air power at their disposal, or was it just primarily small arms fire and heavy weapons?

MM: It was only small arms fire, only small arms fire. Well, they had mortars and rockets, of course. They mortared us heavily and rocketed us heavily from time to time with 82 millimeter mortars and 122 millimeter rockets. They had Chicom mines, they had B-40s, these are rocket propelled grenade launchers. Their primary weapon, of course, was the AK-47. They had, on very rare occasions, extremely rare, we would capture an SKS rifle which is a rifle with a beautiful wooden stock and it was very highly prized as a trophy, but the problem with capturing one of those was you couldn't keep it with you in the bush, of course. You had to send it back to the rear for storage and those things had a habit of being given as gifts to VIPs so you didn’t always get back your trophies to take home with you.

SM: Were there a lot of weapons captured while you were there?

MM: Not…well, I was…my unit, while I was in the bush, never did. Now just after I got out of the bush they captured a very large arms cache, but while I was in the bush we never…we captured some bunker complexes, we captured a training camp once, an NVA training camp in Cambodia, but that was about it.

SM: You captured a training camp?
MM: Yeah.
SM: How many people were there?
MM: When we got in, nobody. We didn’t...there was nobody there when we got into it, but it wasn’t a huge...it was a very primitive jungle facility. They had a crude model of a Huey helicopter up in a tree at about 20 feet high. I’d say it was probably about two or three feet long. There really wasn’t much there by the time we got in. The NVA didn’t tend to stick around and fight. When they got into contact they’d more often than not break the contact.
SM: Do you recall if there was anybody, any NVA, that were killed or captured in that particular operation?
MM: I can't remember any, but I’ve very successfully forgotten most of what happened in the bush except for things like living conditions and so forth.
SM: What about any incidents involving wildlife while you were there in Cambodia; snakes, spiders?
MM: I really can't separate Cambodia from Vietnam, but they’re both the same as far as the wildlife is concerned.
SM: Okay, well in general, then.
MM: Yeah, there was an abundance of all types of wildlife. There are all kinds of snakes. We would every once in a while see one of these little green bamboo vipers which are about two feet long tree snakes, very deadly, poisonous. One night when I was clearing the brush to make a place to sleep for the night I found a Banded Krait which is an extremely dangerous, extremely lethal snake, and I had to kill it to find a place to sleep. We saw our fair share of snakes. To my amazement, I don't recall that anybody was ever killed or even bitten by a snake. I’m sure it must have happened, but I don’t remember anybody ever actually getting bitten by a snake which is unbelievable, particularly because when you’re moving around through the bush you really don’t see everything that’s around you and if you’re moving at night, like when your turn for watch comes and you’ve got to go over to the gun and stand watch for an hour or whatever it is, and if you’re in triple canopy jungle it is absolutely dark; you can't see anything. You literally cannot see your hand in front of your face, and you move by feeling, and we still didn’t get into problems with snakes. The insect life was phenomenal. I remember it
seemed like every day I’d see another really fascinating insect that I’d never seen before, and they ranged from very colorful and being noteworthy for very colorful to very huge. For instance, in the area there was a giant black scorpion that I guess if you uncurled it would be about a foot from the tip of its tail to its claws. It’s an enormous thing. I killed one of them once. They have giant millipedes that are probably eight or nine inches long and all types of spiders and butterflies and you name it.

SM: Now were the millipedes or the...well, the scorpions were poisonous, but how about the other insects?

MM: The only...well, you would assume that some of the spiders are going to be poisonous. I don’t know that anybody was ever bitten by one. Well, somebody probably was I'm sure. In terms of poisonous insects, the scorpions were the major ones. We didn’t really see that many of them, but they were there. Once in a while you’d see one. The biggest things were mosquitoes, of course. They were extremely thick and of course we had no protection other than what we called bug spray which was an aerosol can with some sort of insect repellant and what we called bug piss which was a little plastic bottle with a liquid repellant, I presume the same thing you sprayed, and I think the way that I used it and I think the way that most of the other people did, too, was you spray the bug spray on your skin and also spray the area where you were going to sleep to try to discourage creepy-crawlies from chewing on you, and the bug piss was used primarily to take leeches off because leeches were extremely abundant and particularly during the monsoon season. They lived in the trees; they lived everywhere. They’re not river animals. They lived everywhere just like spiders or you name it, and every time we stopped for a break we had to pick leeches off of ourselves and a drop of that bug piss was a little faster and safer than burning them with a cigarette usually, so that’s the way most of us handled it. In fact, once when we...in fact it was when we crossed the river from Cambodia to Vietnam, I don’t remember which time it was, it wasn’t terribly wide river at that point, probably 30-40 feet across maximum. But, when we got on the other side we started picking leeches off and I had 47 on me and another guy had 120 something on him. So, they were omnipresent and a real nuisance. Most of the leeches we saw were probably about I’d say an inch and a half to two inches long, someplace in
that range. I’d heard but never seen that down in the Delta there were cigar size leeches, but I never ran into or ever personally saw anything like that.

SM: And let’s see, when you were in Cambodia, you only ran into NVA units? You never ran into any other kind of soldiers?

MM: Yeah, that’s correct. The NVA’s the only people we ever bumped heads with. We never ran into any VC at all and as I mentioned earlier in the interview we were never around any villages so there was never any question about, “Are they friendly?” or “What are they?” When we saw them, they were unfriendly.

SM: And do you recall was there any time that an NVA soldier was captured by your unit while you were there?

MM: No, I don’t ever remember anybody being taken alive. The only time I saw somebody alive was a Chieu Hoi came in once to a LZ just before we arrived. We were being extracted from the bush to some LZ and there was a Chieu Hoi that had just come in, but that was the only one that I’ve ever seen.

SM: Could you describe – I know you don’t have, perhaps, some of the specifics – but when you were in Cambodia you operated out of a base camp and conducted patrols in the area? How did that generally work in terms of your daily operations?

MM: Well, we were – with the exception of one point when we were pulling security for a fire base which was for Bronco which was under attack; we were driven off of the thing actually. Basically – with that exception, we were just out in the jungle all the time. We weren’t back and forth from bases. We were in the jungle period, and not just in Cambodia but in Vietnam as well I know at one point - and it was pretty hostile in a lot of those areas - and I remember at one point in Vietnam I’d gone for a little over three weeks, I wasn’t sure exactly what, without even taking my pants off, without even unlacing my boots, because it was just too dangerous to do so, day or night. We finally got to a river where we were feeling pretty secure and we all were able to take baths and that was the first time in three weeks plus that I’d washed or had any sort of sanitation at all. We were pretty primitive. We were living just like wild animals running through the jungle. They’d drop in supplies to us. If they couldn't set down so that they could bring you clean clothing and take old clothing back, you didn’t get clean clothing. You just kept wearing the same thing for weeks at a time. They just would drop in food and
hopefully they’d drop in enough water. They didn’t always drop in enough water, and then we ended up drinking whatever water was available including water from bomb craters which is probably about the worst stuff in the world you can drink.

SM: How would you purify that?

MM: Well, this little white pill of some sort that we had that we could put into a canteen of water and that was the only way we could purify it, and generally it seemed to work pretty well. I don’t remember any real problem while I was in the bush. I was in the bush for only about three months or so, but I don’t remember any problem with diarrhea or dysentery as a major problem, although I do remember at one time some whole platoon came down with dysentery. I don’t know what they got into. But, the water we would drink would either be dropped in elephant rubbers which were long, plastic, soft plastic, double tubed about three feet long and six inches in diameter they’d drop out of the helicopter. Most of them would survive the fall and then we could get clean water from them. Or, we also would drink out of rivers and streams, and the worst of course was bomb craters because the water in a bomb crater had who knows what in it. I know once I was drinking…we’d been out of water for over a day and a half and we’d been in contact. In the meantime we captured a bunker complex without water and we were moving on and finally, to make a long story short, we came to a big bomb crater and went down and the water was so filthy that with half of a canteen cup you couldn’t even see the bottom of the canteen cup, and it didn’t smell very good and it tasted even worse, but that’s some of the best water I’ve ever had.

SM: After a day and a half?

MM: Oh yeah, yeah, and of course when you’re in contact you get extremely thirsty. I guess it’s the nervousness or something, but thirst is a major problem and of course we were not sitting in air conditioned comfort. We’re exerting heavy physical effort, moving through the jungle. So thirst can be a big problem, but bomb craters were always a last resort. I mean, you didn’t drink out of them unless you really had to but you did have to from time to time.

SM: The bunker system that you captured in operation, were there a lot of weapons or was there anybody there? Do you remember?
MM: Not when we went in. On this particular one we ran into trouble when we bumped into it unknowingly and then we called in air strikes and they worked out quite heavily for some time. We backed off just a little bit and then it was getting late so we spent the night and went in the next morning and when we went in it had been abandoned. There was nothing left in it except I remember there was a great big old lumberjack-type two man cross-cut saw and a huge pot of some rice that just looked absolutely filthy, but they didn’t leave things behind. They didn’t have a good supply line, they didn’t have a reliable supply line, and they didn’t leave people behind any more than we did. They didn’t leave materials behind or anything, and when they had time to get out of Dodge they took everything with them.

SM: And was that typical when you were out on your operations whenever you came upon anything you immediately just brought in as much air power or artillery or whatever and laid low?

MM: Well, yeah, if it was something that was getting pretty heavy you’d bring something in but normally a lot of contacts are pretty fleeting. It’s just a matter of a few moments here and there and that’s the end of it. But, when you got into something heavy, of course, then you’d call in the…I can't say the cavalry because we were in the cavalry, but you’d call in artillery. We were supported by 105s and 155s and the artillery is extremely accurate. We only had one friendly fire accident that I can recall. Some guy got a bad, bad wound to his thigh, but they were always impressive when they came in because they sounded to me like little jet planes coming in as the rounds approached and some of them, particularly the 155s, could turn trees into toothpicks if they made a good, solid hit. Of course being in the jungle, we had trouble being supported by people like that or by air power because the rounds are traveling horizontally and so are rounds from the fast moving aircraft and from jets and so forth, so a lot of what those guys did really didn’t get through to the bush but it was often I think effective in just scaring Charlie out of the area. In fact, I remember one time when we took a small bunker, there weren't that many, I guess three or four of them. We had had jets working out for some time and they were firing I presume 20 millimeter cannons and I don’t remember what else. I think there was some rockets, too. But, when we went in I was looking for damage from what they’d done because they had expended a tremendous amount of ordinance working that
thing over and the only damage I could see was a gouge up about 40 feet high in a tree
and I don’t think the rest of what they did penetrated it just because of the angle they
were coming at.
SM: Do you recall receiving any kind of Cobra gunship support?
MM: Yes, yeah. We usually called them Puff. We knew that there were
variations of that, you know, Puffs, Snoopy, Specter, what have you. Normally we
wouldn’t know what they were. I’m sure that whoever called…I suspect whoever called
them in personally knew; the radio guy knew what they were, but we didn’t. We’d
probably be 50 feet away and have no communication. But yes, we did keep getting
support from them but primarily on thin stuff or once on the LZ that was under attack
they came in and worked out extensively, and they were always extremely impressive.
We always welcomed all the air support we got. We’d have anything from the gunships
that I was mentioning, and they all had their mini guns of course and 20 millimeter
cannons, and some had 40 millimeter cannons, and they’d drop flares and light up the
area at night. They were nighttime specialists, primarily. I don’t recall ever a gunship
being out in the daytime. But, they’d drop flares and illuminate the area with a real harsh
bright white light and when they’d start working out it was always very impressive to see
the stream of red fire coming out of those mini guns. They always sounded to me like
drag boats or outboard motors going way too fast. Of course Cobras supported this as
well. They were more effective in a lot of situations because they weren't moving as fast
and they could get a little better angle if they were shooting at a particular…if they dove
at what they were shooting. So, we called them Max or Blue Max. I think that was the
name of the unit that supported us the Cobra was Max or Blue Max. We had all types of
support and we were always extremely grateful. It was always a very good feeling when
a FAC showed up because you knew his buddies were going to be right behind him and
the big show was going to start. You could kind of relax a little bit so to speak.
SM: Now you said there was only one friendly fire incident involving artillery;
how about involving air power or small arms weapons, indigenous weapons to your unit?
MM: Not as far as I know. We had one incident once. We had been basically
driven off of an LZ into…well, we were in Cambodia and spent the night back at LZ and
just across the border into Vietnam and at that point everybody was really badly shaken.
We’d had a hell of a time, and one of my friends apparently was sleeping with his M-16 between his legs because he was so scared and when they woke him up it discharged and he shot himself in the foot somehow which is an awful thing to do with an M-16 because that thing shatters bone and shatters tendon and it shatters flesh. It’s a terrible wound. But, that’s the only other friendly fire sort of thing I ever saw and that was his own stupid fault.

SM: And given the ability of you to bring in air power, were there ever any incidents where with the introduction of air power into an area the NVA opened up with larger crew serve weapons; a quad 50, any kind of anti aircraft weapons systems, anything like that?

MM: No, we were never around anything like that. We were basically in unpopulated areas and we ran into the NVA that was moving around through the jungle just like we were and they didn’t have the capability to move in any sort of heavy weapons like that. They were carrying in what they could carry on their backs, just like we were. So, we would always have an advantage when air would come in. I mean, that was a fantastic advantage to have and I’m sure it saved a lot of hides.

SM: And did you primarily walk to most of these areas or did you find yourself airlifted a lot? How did that work?

MM: We were air mobile, so it depended on what was happening. At times we would go for weeks just humping through the jungle day by day. I really can't remember how long we’d go for at a time without getting picked up by a helicopter. I remember at one point, I mentioned earlier to you, that I at one point had gone for over three weeks without taking my pants off and I know we hadn't been picked up by any helicopter in that period. But, I know another time I…well, usually we’d just be humping along and for whatever interval it would take and then if they wanted to move us some place we’d find an LZ or make an LZ and I don’t mean a fire base at this point. I guess I’ve used the term loosely in our conversation here, but we’d make a little LZ and they’d come in and pick us up and move us to the next place. We weren't moved around on a daily basis or anything like that, and we were not moved around on an every other day basis; we were down on the ground for longer periods than that but we did get moved around. We were considered air mobile and we did get moved around quite a bit by helicopter from place
to place, either from a firebase into the bush or from one place in the bush to the next
place in the bush. But to us we never knew where we were going. Of course they were
just the next place in the bush; none of them had names or distinguishing features.

SM: How would you describe morale in your unit when you were in combat in
Cambodia and in areas of Vietnam?

MM: I don’t think there’s anybody that wanted to be there. Everybody was most
interested in surviving. I guess you could say morale was about as good as could be
expected under the conditions. Most of the people in the bush were draftees, at least in
my experience, and an awful lot of them, like myself, were older draftees. I think the
educational level in the bush was enormously higher than it was anyplace else in the
military. They seem to concentrate people’s educations in the bush in my experience
because I know in…I don't remember that many people anymore, but of the probably
dozen or so, three or four dozen I can…well, not three or four dozen but dozen or so
maximum, eight, nine, 10 I can remember, there were about three or four of us at least
that had our masters degree at least by the time we were in the bush and a lot of other
people had their bachelor’s degrees. I don’t know how we got talking about that.

SM: No, that’s an interesting point; a lot of educated people. How about the
racial make up?

MM: There was some Blacks, mostly Whites as I recall. The racial thing was
really not a big deal; it really was not an issue for most of us in the bush, anyway.

SM: There weren't any racial incidents or racial tension?

MM: No, no, not that I ever saw.

SM: What about drug use, alcohol use, things like that?

MM: Out in the bush, absolutely zero. I know that’s one of the things that the
press has done a tremendous disservice to this country and Hollywood is portraying
grunts as being out there doing drugs and so forth, but as far as I know and as far as
everybody else I ever talk to about it, there was essentially no drug use whatsoever in the
bush. I mean, everybody else in the bush knew what the dangers were. Nobody was
stupid enough to try to incapacitate themselves while they were out in the bush. Now
back in the rear, of course, that’s another thing. The people in the far rear had access to
all the drugs they wanted and everything else and there was some use back there just like
there’s use here today in the States. There’s some use, but it was not general by any means, and I wouldn’t say it was common, and as a matter of fact, I did not ever know anybody to use drugs at all in Vietnam with the exception of when we got pulled back from the bush one time a guy came into the barracks we were staying in with a great big grab bag of grass and said, “Hey, look what I got!” But that’s the only time I ever saw anybody doing any sort of drugs and that was just back in the rear. You weren't dumb enough to try to smoke in the bush. Now everybody drank, or almost everybody drank beer, of course, and coming out of the bush a lot of times people would drink until they got blown away just to get blown away.

SM: Did you ever do that?

MM: I don’t remember. I probably did. I can't remember that I did. I wouldn’t be surprised if I did; I certainly drank beer.

SM: But only in the rear?

MM: Well, out in the bush when they logged us sometimes they would drop in beer and soda; sometimes they would even be cold. Not very often, but sometimes they’d even drop in cold beer and soda. So, there was consumption of beer in the bush but not to excess.

SM: How many beers would be allotted each individual, do you remember?

MM: Oh gosh, I’d say that probably each individual could probably get one or two or three beers maximum, and you didn’t drink those all at once. There was not time when you got logged to sit and drink a bunch of cold beers and bullshit. That’s not the way it worked. When you were logged you received your stuff, you packaged it up as quickly as you could and got out of Dodge because that helicopter was going to attract any NVA that were in the area so being logged was a real, real quick operation, or as quick as possible. But, as far as consumption of alcohol in the bush, yeah, technically there was some. They dropped it in. They dropped everything we needed; they dropped cigarettes, they dropped gourmet delights in terms of C-rations and LRPs, but consumption to the point of incapacitating ones self, that never happened.

SM: Can you give an estimation of how long was a resupply mission usually? How long would it last from the time you made contact with the aircraft dropping your resupply load to the time you got out of that logistical resupply area?
MM: We could be in an area for weeks at a time. We were not coming back to bases or having regular contact. We could be out – we were out, in fact – in the jungle for weeks at a time without coming back in at all.

SM: Right, but I mean when you were resupplied, when aircraft came in to resupply you?

MM: We’d be logged every three days normally, unless there was something going on that prevented them from getting into us, we’d be logged every three days.

SM: But that wouldn't be in an area where you would stay for very long?

MM: Yeah.

SM: Oh, it was?

MM: Yeah, yeah we got every three days, hopefully, the log bird would find us and if he could set down then we could get out any mail that we’d written.

SM: Would they bring mail to you?

MM: Yes, yeah. When they brought food and water they’d bring mail; they’d drop mail as well. So, we’d get mail every three days when they logged us but we could only get mail out on those occasions when a log bird could sit down and that was much more irregular. That could go for weeks at a time. So, our communication to the outside world was pretty limited, it was pretty much one way communication.

SM: Okay, I think I misunderstood you. When you mentioned before that you couldn't just – after you were resupplied – you couldn't just sit there and drink cold beer because of course the aircraft attracted NVA in the area. You wouldn’t necessarily leave, but you would be prepared for that eventuality in case they came in?

MM: We would leave. We’d pack our bags and head out immediately.

SM: Oh, okay.

MM: Oh yeah, the way it worked when we were logged is that the aircraft obviously had a fairly good idea of where we were before the chopper headed out and it was always a Slick that would log us, and when they got close enough that we could hear them we’d pop smoke and they’d tell us what color smoke they saw and if it was the right color we’d tell them to come on in and if we had a little LZ for them to sit down in they could sit down. If not, they’d just hover overhead and kick out whatever supplies they had for us and then they’d leave, and as soon as the stuff would hit the ground and they
left, importantly after they left, we’d be in there scurrying around picking up whatever
had been dropped and breaking open the cases, redistributing everything as equitably as
possible among everybody. People would trade for whatever they liked best with
whoever got their favorite stuff and we’d pack it up. We’d pile any wrappings, and there
were cardboard wrappings, cardboard packages, that the C-rations came in for instance.
We’d make a big trash pile and with anything that we had, any food we weren’t going to
eat like a canned ham and lima beans and something like that, hopefully whoever was
throwing it away into this trash pile would punch a hole in it so it wouldn’t explode
because when we left we would light the pile to deny Charlie use of anything in it, and so
when the log bird came in, that was kind of the signal of get out of Dodge as fast as you
can, to start because we didn’t want to hang around. Now on occasions where we were in
a pretty secure area and the log bird could sit down, that was a little different. That didn’t
seem to happen terribly often.

SM: Now you mentioned sometimes you’d make an LZ for a bird to come into.
How would you do that?

MM: Well, we’d chop down or blow down trees. We were primarily in real
heavy triple canopy jungle, but even there, there are light areas all over. It’s not a
uniform area like a park or like the concept of a rainforest that the environmentally
correct like to talk about, that is not the way it is at all. It’s a variation of very dense and
lighter stuff and park-like areas and brambles. Its just all mixed all over and we’d find a
place that would have an absence of really large trees. We’d cut down with machetes
smaller trees. We once cut down I’m pretty sure it was a mahogany tree about eight
inches diameter with a machete. Other times, if we had plenty of claymore mines we
could break them open and use the C-4 in them to blow trees down, and I know we
dropped some pretty good sized trees by blowing them down to make room for a chopper
to come in. But, we would do whatever we needed to to open up enough space so that
the pilot could get in and I’ve got to say some of those pilots were enormously skilled
because I can vividly remember a couple of little LZs we made like that in which there
really was not much clearance at all for the main rotor and tail rotor to get in, and the
pilot took quite a long time trying to get down and quite a long time trying to get back up
safely and made it. But, a lot of those pilots were extremely highly skilled.
SM: And also, your operations, they were primarily during the day?

MM: Yeah. You can't move at night in the jungle, its too dangerous, so what we would do…the procedure was, say, to start out the morning we’d wake up, we’d pick up our alpha-alphas which are automatic ambushes. They’re made by stringing together…well, you don’t necessarily string them, you use one or more claymore mines set in a daisy chain connected with det cord and they’re detonating electronically with a six volt battery and a trip wire. You set up the ambush on any trails in the area you’re in and on your back trail in particular so if somebody comes down the trail, these claymores are going to blow them away and of course they’re extremely lethal weapons. They have…they’re loaded with I guess like steel ball bearings as I recall maybe a quarter inch diameter or something propelled by C-4 explosive, presumably directionally. Anyway, the thing would be set off by trip wires and we’d have to go out in the morning and pick them back up, disassemble them, and we’d get something to eat of course. We’d tell the people on both sides of us “Friendly shitter out front,” and take a little entrenching tool and go three or four feet out in the jungle and dig a little cat hole and do our thing and come back and load up our pack and start humping out for the day and we’d typically hump for about an hour and then stop and take a break, smoke a cigarette, and continue on for another hour. We’d do that and in the middle of the day we’d eat a little C-ration or whatever we had handy and continue doing that the rest of the afternoon until dusk. Typically the maximum distance we were capable of covering because of the density of the jungle, was maybe a kilometer and a half and then we’d set up for the night again, set up our alpha-alphas as I just described and clear a space to sleep which meant clearing the brush out of the way because we were sleeping right on the ground. Actually, the Army furnished us with air mattresses but I don’t think any of us had functioning air mattresses because shrapnel had a way of puncturing them. I don’t think any of us had an air mattress that worked. But, most of us – I think all of us – carried them anyway flat just to have something under you so you weren't sleeping directly on the jungle floor. But anyway, after we got set up and had the alpha-alphas set and the machine gun was in place or however many we had were in place pointing outwards we determined the order of watch and then if we had time to get something to eat we’d get something to eat and sleep until our watch, and we’d be awake for typically our watch would be for I suppose
an hour and a half, two hours every night. We’d get up the next morning and do the same
thing; seven days a week, no different, really.

SM: Now how many men typically were on these types operations with you?

MM: It varied. The largest one I was ever involved with was when we were
leaving Cambodia at the end of June. As I recall, we were doing a battalion sized sweep
to the Vietnamese border. Obviously from an individual standpoint you see maybe three
or four people around you maximum because the density of the jungle, but anyway most
of the time we’d be out in maybe a platoon or two and sometimes full company strength.
When we were out, of course, we’d always have to hump through the jungle single file
because you couldn't take the chance of humping in parallel files or columns through the
jungle because if you lost sight of the other column and heard something you could fire
on them or if you got an NVA or a bunker or something like that between you you’d have
to fire towards each other, so we were always humping in a single file like a long snake
going through the jungle 100% of the time, except one time we had a new CO come in
who thought he was going to show us how to do it and required us to hump in two
parallel columns and scared us all to death. By the end of the morning I think he realized
that was a big mistake and let us do it the right way.

SM: How about using the wedge formation or anything like that?

MM: Never.

SM: Never?  

MM: Never, never. It was too dangerous. Under the conditions in which we
operated, any noise could be lethal, any movement could be lethal – a puff of smoke was
definitely lethal – and you fired first and that’s how you stayed alive. That was very well
understood which is why the single column was the only way to do it.

SM: Because that way anything at all perceived in the flanks would be enemy?

MM: Absolutely, absolutely; there was no question, and you didn't risk shooting
each other. The last thing you wanted to do was to get into a fire fight with your own
fellows.

SM: And when you were out in the platoon, two platoon sized operations, how
much information were you given, or even with the larger formations, how much
information did you receive as to expected enemy contacts, expected enemy sizes, anything about that?

MM: It seems to me once in a while we would know that there was supposed to be a bunker complex coming up or something of the sort, but usually not. Usually we were just humping, we didn’t know where, and it really didn’t make any difference. I mean, you’re going from one point in the jungle to the other with different coordinates. We didn’t see the maps normally. Whoever was leading the expedition, of course, would have the maps and knew where we were going, but for us it was a very isolated little world. We probably see no more than four or five people most of the time because of the density of the vegetation. I mean, if you’re operating platoon sized you couldn't see the platoon until you kind of circled the wagons in the evening, and even then with the density of the jungle vegetation and the fact that you didn’t set up until dusk and you were busy, you didn’t see people; no matter where we were going, it didn’t make any difference to us, we were just going.

SM: Now when you set up for the night, did you actually have to dig standard sized foxholes, or what did you do for cover?

MM: No, we never dug foxholes at anytime, ever. In the terrain we were operating in, it was jungle and there were a lot of roots around. It wasn’t like being in a farmer’s field or something. There were also plenty of big trees around and there wasn’t time to dig a foxhole. You'd have needed a backhoe to dig a foxhole in a lot of those places, so they just never were. I never saw a foxhole the whole time I was over there. I know in some parts of the country they did, of course, but I’m sure as you’re talking to everybody you’re hearing quite different stories from everybody because everybody’s conditions were very different.

SM: What did you think of the leadership that was in your unit in terms of those that were directly over you; the NCOs for instance, and then the junior officers, your platoon leader, company commanders, battalion commander? Did you have much interaction with them?

MM: Yeah, from time to time we would, usually not with the CO. We were just a bunch of equals out there. It wasn’t a matter of somebody being the big boss. It wasn’t the sort of thing like on this Forrest Gump movie where they show this big dominating
lieutenant. It wasn’t like that at all, ever. We were all pretty much equals. We knew what to do. When we got a new lieutenant in we had to break him in and train him how to do things. He learned to respect what we were doing pretty quickly. Some were better than others like everything else, but they were okay. They were out there doing their thing just like we were, and we were kind of like a loose team.

SM: Now for the time period when you were with the Cav actually out in the bush, before going…I guess it was in early September that you went to Phuc Vinh?

MM: Yes.

SM: So before you went to Phuc Vinh, how many lieutenants, how many platoon leaders did you have? Do you recall?

MM: No, I don’t. I remember we got a new one in so I know there were at least two, and it seems to me that he was only out in the bush for a couple of weeks. I don’t know why. He was not a particularly impressive individual, so we might have had three in that period of time. I really don’t remember. But, as I understood it…well, you probably know better than I do, but I understood it though that their routine was that they’d be out in the bush for six months and get their ticket punched and then get out of the bush, but I don’t know if that’s accurate or not.

SM: Yeah, that was the standard; six months in combat, and six months in the rear. What about the NCO leadership?

MM: Oh, it was fine. I mean, there was…I was an E5 myself and so was…whoever was doing the leading or whatever was just doing his thing. There wasn’t, in terms of leadership, it wasn’t necessary to have much. We’d be told we’re going to head out tomorrow morning and we’d head out that morning. We’d stop in the night and we’d head out the next morning and stop the next morning and stop that night and it just happened over and over. It operated pretty smoothly, really.

SM: There weren't any incidents in your unit of…any kind of resistance to orders, fragging incidents, or anything like that?

MM: There was one incident in which as a unit we refused an order and that was in Cambodia. We were way out…the boundary…we were supposed to be out no further than 26 miles or 26 kilometers - whatever it was, I can't remember - from the border but we were out way beyond that and we got an order that was going to send us way out far
beyond that, way outside of artillery range and we had had such severe losses at that time
that we all just refused to do it because if we went out there they wouldn’t even be able to
recover our bodies. But, that was the end of that. That was about it, really. Most of the
stuff we did was pretty routine. It became routine. You came in as an FNG, you got used
to it, and that’s the way it was, and that’s the way it seemed to stay; just keep doing the
same thing over and over.

SM: Now were there many sniper incidents?
MM: No, there were none.
SM: So you never got sniped at?
MM: No, never.

SM: How about booby traps?
MM: Never. Actually, I think at one time I may have stepped in an old – I mean
a real old – bear trap. I’m not sure, and I didn’t probe to find out. They were
never…well, there were mines of course. They set up mines. Their Chicom mines were
used like claymores just like we would, but in terms of the Viet Cong type booby traps,
no; that’s something that we never ran into. The NVA as you know is just a standing
Army of North Vietnam. It was a regular army just like we were and they operated just
like we did. We bumped heads, basically, like two armies bumping heads against each
other.

SM: Do you recall the largest sized unit that you ran into in terms of contact?
MM: No, no. I didn’t have any idea. We were never involved in the sort of
situation like Hamburger Hill deal where you’re fighting for some piece of real estate
against a well-defined unit. Most of the time when we ran into somebody, they'd
eventually disappear. We wouldn’t even see what we’d run into.

SM: Your unit never recovered any dead Vietnamese remains while you were in
Cambodia?
MM: Any what?
SM: Any dead Vietnamese remains? You know, after an engagement you walk
in and you find dead bodies that were left behind because they didn’t have time to collect
them?
MM: We never did anything. We saw some, yeah, but in terms of doing
anything with them, no.
SM: You didn’t search them for documents?
MM: Oh yes, yeah.
SM: Would you find anything, or did you find anything? Do you recall?
MM: Yeah, we’d find stuff occasionally.
SM: Letters and orders and anything like that, maps?
MM: Oh, I’ve got an award like an NVA bronze star equivalent and that sort of
thing. We’d find personal stuff.
SM: Typically would that be sent back and processed for military intelligence
purposes, or just kept?
MM: Well, the personal stuff…anything of any military value would be, but I
don’t recall that we found that much that had military value.
SM: Anything else you want to discuss about your time with the 1st Cav in
Cambodia?
MM: I’ll tell you, I think we’ve covered the water front pretty well. Well, to that
extent not just Cambodia, but Vietnam as well.
SM: Yeah, I was just going to say…
MM: I can’t separate the two, really.
SM: If you were going to give percentages to the number of operations you
conducted in Cambodia versus the number of operations you conducted in Vietnam
proper, could you do that? Could you say, well, 50% of the time you operated in
Cambodia, 50% Vietnam?
MM: The Cambodian invasion started May 1st and it ended June 30th, and I
personally arrived there in very early June and I was there throughout the entire month of
June until we crossed out the last time June 30th, and after that I was someplace, I think
primarily in Tay Ninh Province, I think, in western Vietnam. In terms of defining
operations, I cannot. As I said before, we just go out and hump through the bush and that
was it. We had no idea what the big picture was, absolutely none.
SM: The operations that you did conduct in Vietnam, did you have more contact
with civilians in that regard?
MM: No, not either.
SM: Not in either case?
MM: No, never at any time in my experience.
SM: Alright, well what led to going to Phuc Binh in early September of 1970?
MM: Well, a couple of things happened; one, my hearing had deteriorated to the point I could hardly hear anything anymore and also they needed the new company clerk who was DROS-ing and I could type, so they sent me back to become a company clerk and that was just a stroke of major luck. Then I was there as company clerk until November at which time a fellow named Major Schneider who I had never heard of before over at Bien Hoa 1st Cav headquarters there invited me to come over to come over to see if I wanted to work the S-3 air desk over there, so I ended up over there. So I had kind of a checkered career in Southeast Asia.
SM: So your primary duties as company clerk was just processing paperwork?
MM: Yeah, it was strictly processing paperwork. I know I went out on helicopters occasionally for one thing or another, I don’t remember what. We had a mail clerk as well who handled taking the mail out so I know I didn’t do that. I really have very little recollection of my duties as a clerk other than I know I typed up orders. When somebody was killed I had to type up a letter of condolence and it had to be absolutely perfect with no typos or anything on it. But, it was just processing paperwork. It was nice to be back in the rear and I would have done almost anything to stay in the rear at that point. I’d really had my fill of being out in the bush. A lot of the people were very jealous that I got out of the bush as early as I did, but c’est la vie; we all have to play by the hand we’re dealt.
SM: Now you mentioned that you had to write letters of condolence for men who were killed. Was that the first line of notification, when someone was killed in the bush, of course their body would be brought back to the company area and start the processing through graves registration?
MM: Well, the body didn’t get brought back to the company area.
SM: Oh, it didn’t?
MM: It was taken directly to the graves registration.
SM: In Tan Son Nhut?
MM: It didn’t come back to the company area. But, I’d write the letter immediately but then it was written for the CO’s signature and if he was out in the bush it might take three or four days or longer to get it signed by him. So, I would imagine that it arrived sometime after the relatives had been notified.

SM: What was the process of notification at the company level? Okay, you’d receive a report that someone in the company was killed. What would you do as company clerk? Anything besides the letter of condolence?

MM: I really don’t remember. That’s such a blur. I really don’t remember what we did. The only thing I remember is the letter of condolence. I don’t remember the letter itself, I remember having to write the thing.

SM: Were there a lot while you were company clerk?

MM: Not a huge number, no. By that time, or at that time, we were operating in Vietnam and it was a lot quieter. The Cambodian invasion was unbelievable, but Vietnam had slowed down quite a bit. In fact, one thing that might be worth mentioning is during the time we were in Cambodia, or for the time we were in Cambodia, to my knowledge there were no medals whatsoever issued or given, awarded, to anybody for anything; not one medal, and they should have been passing out bronze stars and silver stars by the basket. I mean, the fighting there was unbelievable and it wasn’t just one little fire fight. But, there was not one award other than I presume…I know people got their purple hearts. That was given at that time. In early July, just after…I think it was early July, yeah, it was…not too long after we’d been pulled out of Cambodia they pulled us back to…I think the company base had been moved to Phuc Binh at that time. I think that’s where it was. Anyway, they pulled us back to the rear and the whole battalion was there, the battalion base was there, and we all got a chance to shower and get cleaned up and about the time we were finishing getting cleaned up - and we were a mess; I mean, most of us were wearing bandages and just looked like hell warmed over – they called a formation, a big formation of the whole battalion or what was left of it, anyway, and we all stood there and listened to a medal being presented to the executive officer of the 1st battalion [of the 7th] there, and his award that we had to stand there and listen to was for putting out a fire in a file cabinet, and I am not making this up.

SM: What did he get for that?
MM: The soldier’s medal, the highest non combat medal there is.

SM: Because he put out a fire in a filing cabinet?

MM: Yes, and I swear to God I am not making this up. They didn’t say one word of “Thank you,” or “Congratulations,” or, “You guys went through hell and look how many of you are left,” or anything like that.

SM: If you put a percentage on it, about how many of the battalion were left?

MM: A percentage of…

SM: Of how many people had survived that were in that formation from the original battalion.

MM: You mean when they went into Cambodia?

SM: Yeah, compared…you said that the loss was relatively heavy.

MM: I do not know. I was not there at the beginning; however, almost everybody that I knew had been brought in during May or June. I know I heard from somebody who had been in another unit in Cambodia, I can't remember what it was offhand, but he was telling me that of his whole company, of his entire company, I think it was nine people who walked in at May 1 walked out at the end of June. Only nine people walked out of the originals, and in his platoon he said only two, of which he was one, walked out at the end of June, and that was typical. That was very definitely typical.

SM: Speaking of awards, what would you describe as one of the most award-worthy actions that you witnessed that should have been…that the person or people should have received something and didn’t receive anything? Do you remember anything?

MM: No, no I really don’t. There was a lot that went on.

SM: I didn’t know if perhaps one of the incidents at one of the hot LZs or something like that where a pilot…you mentioned some of the skills of the pilots in particular.

MM: Well, there were a lot of air support missions that were flown, but in terms of awarding medals for what I saw from the air, other than air medals obviously, it was all pretty routine.

SM: You don’t remember anything from the ground?

MM: No, not really. There was…I think everybody just behaved very, very well.
SM: You had medics attached or assigned to you, didn’t you?

MM: Yes, we did.

SM: Do you remember any particular events involving them?

MM: No, I don’t. In fact, I remember the name of our medic, a guy named Doc Parish, but I really don’t other than I think, it seems to me, the medics would give us our big, orange malaria pill on Mondays, but other than that…and take care of the things that came up, but other than that I really don’t remember much about them.

SM: Do you recall any incidents involving Medevac helicopters?

MM: No, I really don’t. I know they had to have come in, but I really don’t have any recollection of them.

SM: And what about your duties at the S3 air desk at Bien Hoa?

MM: I was coordinating air support for troops that got into trouble. When somebody needed air support, as I recall anyway…I was thinking about that the other day, and I remember an awful lot about living conditions in the bush but that’s about all that’s left in my mind anymore. But anyway, at Bien Hoa I know I would call in or arrange for air support for troops that got into trouble. I don’t remember exactly how it was done, but it was done, and one kind of unusual job I had was placing Commando Vaults when we got them in III Corps. I was handling the whole III Corps region as far as that goes and the Commando Vault is a 15,000 pound bomb of which 12,500 pounds is high explosive. It’s got a rod, if you will, out of its nose and it’s dropped and radar controlled by a parachute so it lands nose down and explodes about a yard above the ground. It’s dropped in areas where there is light brush or bamboo to blow LZs, and by light brush I’m talking maybe trees up to six inches in diameter or something, not the big ones. But, I would choose the site to put those in and it seems to me we got one about every month or so, I may be wrong on that. Other than that…

SM: Was that also called a daisy cutter?

MM: A daisy cutter…there is a…I’m not sure if a daisy cutter necessarily meant the same thing or not. I think some people did. I’ve heard that term used. We knew it only as Commando Vault. I think that daisy cutters, though, were 10,000 pound bombs.

SM: Oh, okay, this is 12,000?

MM: No, this is a 15,000 pound bomb.
SM: Oh, 15,000, okay.

MM: I may be wrong on that, I’m certainly no authority. The correct designation, if I recall correctly, was BLU-82 for the Commando Vault that I knew.

SM: How large of an air field would it generally create? Do you remember?

MM: I never saw one. I’ve seen a photograph of one and I’ve talked – when I was over there I talked to somebody who went into one – and apparently it was extremely impressive. One thing it would do, I understand, is it would blow the brush away and it would kind of pile up the brush around the edge so you could land on the LZ alright but then you had to clamber over a very difficult pile of broken logs and branches and so forth to get out of that thing. But, they were effective, very used, and blew some very useable LZs from what I know.

SM: And what about the morale and other issues, both at the headquarters company and when you were the company clerk and when you were at the S3 air desk?

MM: Morale in the rear was never very bad. When you’re back in the rear, you don’t have to worry about anything. You’ve got all the water you want, its clean, you can take a shower, you can brush your teeth, you don’t get shot at. People in the rear think it’s a big deal when a bullet comes over the perim once every three months. Back in the rear its more like…I suppose it would be like just being in the States; I’m guessing, never having been in a normal slot in the military in the States. Living conditions were a little different, but I don’t recall any morale issues one way or the other.

SM: What about drug use, alcohol use?

MM: In my personal experience, I never knew of anybody using drugs at any time while I was in the rear. I know it happened because I remember seeing little plastic vials or heroin, empty ones, in a ditch one time, and no doubt it did happen but I personally never knew of anybody who used drugs at all. Now essentially everybody would drink some beers from time to time. In the sense of being falling-down drunk, no; that’s something that I don’t recall seeing.

SM: Now when did you leave? When did you leave Vietnam?


SM: What way did you come back to the United States and where did you enter the United States? How were you received?
MM: I flew back from Bien Hoa airport, or Bien Hoa military strip, to...I don’t remember. It was Oakland...I think it might have been Oakland. It was in California I remember. It might have been San Francisco, I just don’t remember. Anyway, we were processed, and I was getting out of service at the time. At that point I’d had something like 19 months and my unit was being disbanded. We were being disbanded because I think my unit had been in Vietnam longer than any of the others at that point and we’d never been brought up to strength after Cambodia so we were way understrengthed so they just disbanded us and I got out of service right away. They processed us out fairly quickly. I’d say within a day or so I was gone and caught a flight back home. I didn’t run into any real openly hostile people attacking me; I sure got a lot of dirty looks traveling home in uniform, though, a lot of dirty looks.

SM: But no one said anything to you?

MM: No, no one said anything to me. But, there was certainly some obvious disapproval, especially from younger people who I presume could not be drafted and were very self-righteous and indignant about somebody who’d been in the Army.

SM: And I guess I should ask you before we continue with the discussion of post Vietnam activities, was there anything else you wanted to talk about with regard to your service in Vietnam and Cambodia?

MM: No, not really. I think this covers it awfully extensively.

SM: Okay. How did you respond to such a quick transition, going from being in Vietnam, working at the S3 desk in Bien Hoa, to basically being back home?

MM: It was no problem at all. It was wonderful. It was wonderful being out of the Army; absolutely wonderful. I was having some other problems. I was a little bit messed up at the time.

SM: Could you be a little more specific, or would you rather not talk about it?

MM: Well, at that time they weren't diagnosing it but looking back now and looking back, and now I’ve been diagnosed, I was suffering from PTSD pretty well. Of course there was no recognition of it or treatment at that time so I had to just deal with it as best I could.

SM: Did it have an effect on your relationship with your wife?
MM: Yeah, we got divorced after a while. It had our relationship, and again, looking back at the symptoms on it now...I didn’t even hear about it, I had never heard about it until a year and a half ago when they finally diagnosed me with it; that was the first I even heard of the thing. But, looking back at the symptoms now, I can see it. It really wrecked my chances of having any kind of a career, which I’ve not really had. I’ve been able to hold onto jobs by the skin of my teeth. It’s been a very negative factor.

SM: Did you go back to school?

MM: Yeah. I went back to school and managed to get an MBA in finance and international studies, and changed jobs as soon as I did that and tried to get on with my life.

SM: Okay, so you did go back to work for the company where you got that job just before being drafted?

MM: Yes, yes. That was fortunately a very good strategy that paid off because when I came back in early ’71 the US was in a recession and it was not easy to get jobs and I needed some way to support myself, so I had a ready made job ready to go back to. I worked full time. I was working as a research chemist and went back to school in the evenings at the University of Chicago.

SM: Now, just out of curiosity, you seemed to have a passion for chemistry and I guess with your first degree being physical chemistry. You mentioned that it was theoretical, a lot of theoretical aspects to that?

MM: Yes.

SM: A lot of intellectual work, and so you were very much into that educational process and also the thinking aspect of chemistry. Did you find that that passion was gone after coming back from Vietnam?

MM: Yes. I’d lost essentially everything after spending almost 20 months in that intellectual vacuum which is one reason I changed fields. I thought it would be just too hard to go back and try to pick up the pieces and I really didn’t feel like I had the stomach for it at the time.

SM: So part of it was the momentum? You lost that momentum that you had prior to going to Vietnam in term of being educated?

MM: Yeah, I’d say that was part of it, sure.
SM: The other part was this not having the desire or the patience?

MM: Yeah.

SM: What did you think about events as they unfolded regarding Vietnam, and in particular the Paris Peace negotiations, the accords as they were signed in 1973, the decision not to...to completely turn the war over to the Vietnamese and the decision in '75, '74 and '75, not to provide them with any additional military support?

MM: I was delighted with it. Even while I was over there I thought the war was wrong. I thought it was a big mistake. I was never a fan of the war at any time and I was just delighted it was finally ending. At no time did I ever think that we had any reason to be involved in it, and still do not.

SM: What did you take away from the war personally that’s been important for you?

MM: I can't say there’s really anything positive that came out of it. There’s been a huge negative, of course, but in terms of anything positive, no; I can't think of anything. I don’t have any fond memories. Under the conditions we were at out in the bush, we didn’t get acquainted with each other. You didn’t become buddies, if you will. You remain very distant from yourself. You became emotionally numbed; at least I sure did. There was nothing positive about it.

SM: Well, how about us collectively as a nation, what do you think we should take away from our Vietnam experience?

MM: I think we should be very sure before we have any commitment of soldiers anywhere that we know there’s a definite national interest and in fact an overwhelming requirement that they be committed rather than just going on an expedition like we did in Vietnam.

SM: You don’t think that the initial reasons that we were trying to contain communism, prevent the spread of communism to south Vietnam, and then the domino theory that it would go into the rest of Southeast Asia, eventually India, the Pacific Rim; you don’t think that that was a laudable reason for the operation?

MM: No, very definitely not. The domino theory thing came from one off the cuff comment that Eisenhower made back in the ‘50s. It was never a theory, it was an excuse that kept being brought up and it was kind of a catchy phrase that a man on the
street could at least understand because the man on the street can always picture
dominoes being tipped over. But in terms of theoretical underpinning, its non-existent. I
lost my train of thought.

SM: Just that you had mentioned that you thought that we should take away from
the war that there should be absolutely a very strong reason for going of course, and I was
just wondering what you thought of that as the…I mean, most Americans in 1964-'65,
and actually most Americans through to '67 and early '68 would have agreed that it was
important to stop the spread of communism in Asia, Southeast Asia, and so I was
wondering what you thought about it as a theory or as a reason for fighting in Vietnam?

MM: Its one that I've never been able to buy, never at any time.

SM: Why do you think we were there, then?

MM: I don’t know, and I’ll tell you what, if there were a good reason that
question wouldn’t still be being asked. I mean, you wouldn’t be asking me. You
wouldn’t see on the little Vietnam boards here and there people asking the same question.
I mean, just the fact that that question has to still be asked I think explains the answer that
we should have been there, that there was no reason. If there were a reason, it would be
clear. I mean, nobody would be asking the question.

SM: But the thing is, I think if you asked the question in 1965, people would
have said, “Well, to contain communism.” The reason was known at the time, but it
seems that maybe we’ve grown to doubt the reason.

MM: In 1965 our level of involvement was miniscule. We didn’t have a full
blown war going on. We were cranking up, no doubt about it, but there was no full
blown war in 1965.

SM: And what do you think about the way the government’s responded to some
of the issues surrounding Vietnam veterans? You mentioned yourself that you’ve been
troubled with certain aspects of PTSD, you’ve suffered from PTSD. Do you think the
government has responded well to the needs of our Vietnam veterans?

MM: Not really. They pay lip service. I’m in Houston and the VA has a
program called the Trauma Recovery Program which I’m in which is headed by a young
guy that just got out of school with a degree in psychiatry and he took the job because
nobody else wanted it and he really doesn’t give a hoot. They’re kind of going through
the motions, but in terms of actually doing anything constructively, I don’t know if
there’s anything constructive they can do anymore about it, actually. I mean, it’s too long
ago. Anybody that’s still got problems like I do, it’s chronic; you’re never going to be rid
of it for the rest of your life.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to talk about?

MM: One thing I think is worth well mentioning is the treatment that veterans got
when they came back. I never personally had anybody spit on me. I’ve had lots of
people tell me they did have that happen. I’ve had lots of people tell me they get verbal
abuse. The one thing that happened that kind of surprised me is I was denied standard
company benefits specifically because I was a Vietnam veteran.

SM: How so?

MM: Well, they just decided because I was eligible for Vietnam veteran benefits
such as they were that they didn’t have to provide standard company educational benefits.

SM: Because you had the GI bill?

MM: Yeah, which at the University of Chicago doesn’t come close to covering it.
I mean, that’s a real expensive school. But, because of the fact I was a veteran, for that
reason they denied me the standard company benefits.

SM: Did you ever experience any other discrimination based on your Vietnam
veteran status?

MM: No, no, although I never made an issue of it. I mean, that’s something you
never talked about. It’s something that was a big hush-hush subject that was taboo; you
didn’t mention it. You didn’t have that period in your life. It just didn’t exist.

SM: Anything else?

MM: Well, I don't think so. Gosh, we’ve talked about a lot of stuff.

SM: Yes sir. Well, thank you very much.

MM: Okay, well thank you, Steve.

SM: Let me go ahead and stop this real quick. This ends the interview with Mr.

Marvin Mathiak.