JB: Okay. This is Jonathan Bernstein conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr. Thomas Brown. We are in the Special Collections Library Interview room and we’re accompanied by Steve Maxner Oral Historian for the Vietnam Archives. Mr. Brown can you start off with a brief biographical sketch of your background.

TB: Okay like where I grow up?

JB: Yes, yes.

TB: I grew up in a small town called Halfway Texas, which is fourteen miles west of Plainview Texas, which is not very far from here. Graduated from Plainview High School, graduated from Tech…with the exception of the time that I was in the military I’ve been in Lubbock all of my life and I am currently work for the local independent school district, this is my thirty-third year and I’ve been a teacher, coach, administrator, counselor, whatever you…Like I say the only time I really left Lubbock was the two years I was in the military.

JB: Now growing up I guess you said the preliminary questionnaire…worked agriculture in the cotton fields. [?] was like that?

TB: Right. Like I say growing up in a kind of a…Halfway has a population of about 300, you know, a couple of cotton gins and elevators, things like that. My father was the county commissioner so most of the jobs I did were agriculture related. One of
the things from the time I was very little I always wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to go
to West Point. I had an older brother who was drafted here in the Korean War and I
thought that was just fantastic. My mom and dad are bawling and crying and I said,
“Why you cryin’ man?” I got to visit him at Camp Chaffee Arkansas. He was
stationed out in New Mexico and I thought ‘this is the life man! It’s really what I’d like
to be doing.’ But I didn’t, like I say I didn’t really volunteer. I applied to go to West
Point, but I kind of piddled around on it and I missed the deadline and then after I got into
Tech decided ‘ah well maybe I don’t want to.’ So…but even when I was drafted I
didn’t really regret it. I thought, ‘Well, let’s see what’s going to happen.’

JB: Did your brother give you advice going in?

TB: He said…he was infantry just like me, but he was scheduled to go to Korea
and during the last two or three weeks of training his arm kept swelling up and he had
broken his arm when he was younger and it had a steel pin in it. So he got orders to go to
Korea while the fighting was still on, but instead of shipping him they took that pin out
and he had to recuperated for a couple of months. In the mean time they assigned the
armistice of PanmunJom, then they had to find a place to send him so off all things they
sent him to Holloman Air Force base. They had one or two companies as security guards
at Holloman Air Force base. So he spent the rest of his time on an Air Force base. That
was…I still thought the military was a pretty hot idea.

JB: So you were drafted in March of ’67?

TB: No I was drafted in September of ’66.

JB: How did that strike you?

TB: Well actually I tried, I mean I wasn’t actually trying to get out of the draft
but I was trying to get out of school before I was drafted and I was up to my senior year.
I was not the world’s greatest student at Tech. I got academic suspension twice. It’s
wonderful now and I’m a school administrator, but I was a machinist and I wasn’t serious
the first couple of years I was up here and I shouldn’t have even gone to school.
Anyway. I had been out of school for a year, I was planning on going back and I went to
my draft board and I said, “If you’ll just give me one year you can put me on the May
draft list.” And I was going to be twenty-four at that time, which I thought I might even
get out of it; I was married. But I think there’s a little bit of political problems on the
draft board in Plainview. My father had been involved in a lawsuit with one of the guys
on the draft board and I honestly think that he decided, ‘Ah…I’ll get back at him. I’ll
pull his son, I’ll put him in the Army.’ Which I accepted; it’s no big deal. I went in the
Army. I thought I had a hundred hours of college; I was a machinist, skilled machinist. I
thought oh I’ll be a motor pool mechanic, I’ll do something like that and of all things I
ended up in infantry. It kind of surprised me, but that’s kind of the way the military does
things…but I also accepted that.

JB: Now I guess going in, could you describe your training?

TB: I thought we had, you know, really good training. One of things that…I was
older then most, well maybe not that much older, there were quite a few…that particular
time in the Vietnam Era they were drafting a lot of older soldiers 21, 22, you know along
in there. Out of my basic training company there were probably only like about five or
six that volunteered, the rest of us were all draftees. When I got sent to Fort Polk for
infantry training there was only two, they were all U.S. draftees. But I thought the
training was very good. One of the things I’ll always remember, I was a squad leader
because I was older I guess and had a little bit of ROTC training, but I always remember
getting a sergeant aside at one time. I said, “Sergeant, could I talk to you for just a
second?” He said, “What do you want?” I said, “Let me just…can I just tell you
something? You don’t have to yell at me, I’m going to do it! I will do it first time!”
“The yelling is part of the training.” “Okay.” When I went in I just tried to be the best
soldier that I could be and learn everything…a lot of the guys kind of goofed off and I
had a feeling that I might get sent to Vietnam. So I said I want to know how to do
everything back to the ‘T’ and I would say that I was a good soldier. Being a machinist
you know like taking things apart and things like that, field stripping M-14 and a M-16…I knew how to do it and put it back together and make it work right.

JB: Okay. Actually this brings up our next question. What type of weapons
training did you receive?

TB: Of course in the basic… At that time we were trained I basic training on the-
14 and of course I thought it was a really good weapon. Let’s see that was, I guess basic
training all we had was M-14 and grenades. When I went to Fort Polk I got… One of the
things that I got to do, I went to it’s called Leader Prep School. It sort of gave you a two-
I got a crash course in what we were going to for the next nine weeks. So I got to fire nearly all the different weapons. There we carried M-16s...So we had M-16s; M-60; the LAW, Light Anti-tank Weapon; M-79; 3.5 rocket launchers; C-4 explosives; grenades...The only thing that was a very, I thought was poor training we were trained on a radio called a PRC-10, which you had to calibrate it when you’d call somebody. The latest one at that particular time was PRC-25, which I got when I went to Vietnam. Another thing that’s kind of unique, I got to see my Army scores and of all the scores I had on all my test my lowest score was in radio and I was a radioman when I got sent to Vietnam. The Army has funny ways of doing things.

JB: Was it fairly extensive training with the radios?
TB: Yeah...well not really before I went to Vietnam but the one thing I really appreciated about Fort Polk they treated you like dogs; you didn’t go anywhere, you didn’t go any liberty. Basic training was pretty you know, we worked hard, but I got to see...I was married. My wife got to come down three or four times on the weekends, but we couldn’t spend the night out. But compared to AIT it was a piece of cake. When we got to Fort Polk it was run, run, run; yell, yell, yell; you know we would work late at night and the weather was not real good down there, it was kind of rainy and damp. You also carried full field...everything. You carried everything with you; your trench and tools, steel part, mess kit, [?] shoes, poncho...everywhere you went you carried [?] and you were kind of, you were carrying about thirty pounds everywhere you went. So that...and you double time almost everywhere you went so when I got to Vietnam I strapped that thing on and I could walk with the best of them. We got some good training.

JB: Did they do any specialized training to prepare you for Vietnam?
TB: We had a week of Vietnam simulated training where we spent the night out and you go on like twenty-five percent alert one night, then fifty percent, and then a hundred percent. By the end of the week you’re pretty well in shock, but it was pretty realistic and it was a lot of woods and things down in...they put a lot of bamboo and mud and things like that. So it was fairly similar to what I encountered when I got to Vietnam.

JB: Arriving in-country... What’s your first impression?
TB: Well first impression I had was I thought it was in late afternoon...it was like
eight in the morning. We’d flown through two or three different time zones and I was
thinking ‘man I’m ready to go to bed!’ Got over and it’s like eight o’clock in the
morning. I guess…and then you had this civilian airliner coming in and you’re getting
off and then here’s a whole bunch of soldiers getting on. You know, you take probably
about thirty minutes to get off and they get on. The one thing that I always remember
was that as you’re walking past them wearing khakis and they’re all coming in fatigues or
whatever…they’re saying, “Eh, you’ll never make it. Now look at that fat boy, look at
this guy!” You know making fun of you…thinking ‘you guys shouldn’t do this, I mean
we’re over here to try to just survive for a year,’ but you kind of had to go through that.
First place they took us was a place called Ninetieth Replacement and they put us on
buses. One of things I remember was it had all of these screens and things over the
windows like we were prisoners. I thought, ‘Well that’s stupid. I’m not going to try to
escape.’ I found out later that to keep them from throwing stuff at you! You know,
you’re thinking a different way… Another thing that I remember as we were driving from
the Bien Hoa Airbase to…or Ton Son Nhut I can’t remember it was, to Ninetieth
Replacement you see the Vietnamese in the fields. Two or three places you’d see car
force or jeep force. Jeep force? Those jeep force places had other things that they did
there too. (laughing) So you got…hm. Then we went to the Ninetieth Replacement and
it was hot and dusty and they had I believe it was three formations a day. You slept in
these big tents and they told us where to go in case of attack, bunkers and things like that.
Of course you didn’t have any weapons and the chow that you get there it didn’t seem
like they really…I mean they just slop it on your tray and ‘well that’s not too good.’ But
they had three formations everyday and they’d call off somebody in fourth division, first
division, first cav, you know different units like that. I was there a couple of days and…
First detail, they’d put you on details and the first detail I got on was one where you
empty the barrels under the latrine and I thought [?]. We’re marching and I’m pretty
smart by that time and I figured out…and as we made a left, column left, I made a
column right and I hooked it. (laughing) And I ran…One guy said, “Hey, hey!” And I
ducked behind a tent. I went and found another detail that was putting up tents and so I
told the guy the next day, “I want on this detail.” And he said, “Alright, good.” So I put
up tents for a couple of days instead of the other detail. But anyway, all these other units
I had heard off, but when they called out about twenty-five of us and they said, “Mac-V.”
I said, ‘what in the world is Mac-V?’ Somebody said, “Ah, you’re going to be a security
guard.” And I said, “Hey security guard! That might not be too bad!” And then we went
to a place called Copper Compound, which we were there for a week to get training kind
of orientations for the Mac-V and it was a [?] Hotel, which again wasn’t what I had
thought. So it was…some things you know, I thought foxholes and things like this and
all of a sudden here you are back in town. It’s kind of a strange feeling.

JB: It must have been quite the culture shock.

TB: Yeah you know and then you go in this hotel room and they don’t have a
bathroom in there, but you go down the hall and they have a shower. They have two
whiskey bottles full of water. “Man what’s that for?” “Well that’s for you to drink.”
They supposedly would purify that water; the other water was not portable. And even
this place, which was strange, you had to buy your own food, which I didn’t go over there
with a lot of money, probably had forty bucks or something. But you had to buy what’s
called a Chit Book, you could use a chit book to buy your lunch. If you want to go to a
bar you’d have to use a chit book. So you couldn’t use money or I guess you could in
some cases, but you had to use these chit books. Sometimes you’d by a five-dollar chit
book and just to eat and have four dollars left or something. Then you’d leave and they’d
have your four dollars and you never went back to that place to use your chit book. I
didn’t particularly like that system, but that’s the way it was.

JB: That’s different from MPCs?

TB: Yeah. A chit book can only be used in that one place, where MPCs can be
used anywhere. The same way with…they said you couldn’t, you know you needed to
change your money. Well I found out pretty quick too that you can get more money on
the black market or just walking down the street; a hundred and eighteen to one you’d get
like a hundred and forty to one. You start learning the little tricks of the trade.

JB: Absolutely. Now when you arrived at your unit…first impression?

TB: Well to get to my unit…before we left the Copper Compound they issued us
all green jungle fatigue and of all things they gave us carbines. Out of about four or five
of us I was the only one that had ever fired a carbine before. My brother had one; I can’t
remember we got it from somebody when I was a kid. These were M-2 carbines, which were automatic and they gave us magazines and bandoliers of ammo and I was showing the guys how to load the magazines, things like that. We rode a convoy down to Sa Dek, which is probably about ninety miles, eighty miles. We had to cross a couple of rivers and whatever, but… Just after we left Saigon and go on the out coast they stopped, told us, “Lock and load!” So we…and I’m up open on one side and a guys on the other side and another guy’s down here and we get about two miles out and he’s fettling with his carbine and fires a round and misses both of us by the foot, right in between us. I said, “You know what, put the thing on safety and…” blah, blah, blah and whatever. We’d get to Sa Dek and they didn’t tell us what we were going to do. They said, “Well you’re probably going to go to a place called Vinh Long,” which is advisory team 52. But the next day they had an opening, they said, “We need someone who can type.” “Me!” So about five or six of us went a took a typing test and I think I typed thirty-two words a minute, but this other guy could type forty-five on a little manual typewriter. He got a job as kind of like running around with his full colonel who did a little news letter for the Vietnamese ninth division, which was a plum job. But I didn’t get that so… anyway. The next day we went on into Vinh Long and I met this lieutenant colonel and this master sergeant and they were saying, “Welcome to Mac-V team 52” blah, blah, blah “you’re going to be an RTO, radio operator.” And I had visions of setting at a desk, “10-4 Buddy!” and all this. He said, “No, no. Backpack RTO.” He showed me this big map and he said, “See all of these little red stars?” I said, “Yes sir.” And he says, “You’re going to be at this one right here. It’s a place called Minh Duc. Do you know what this red star means?” I said, “No sir.” He says, “It means they got hit last night!” So anyway I waited a couple of days there until somebody from Minh Duc came in to pick me up. But again, one thing I brought up was about the money. I was almost broke; I was down to about my last dollar. I didn’t want to ask anybody…I didn’t know anybody. So I was sort of prepared to wade it out. They had a little commissary there, I went down and bought two or three large cans of sardines; they were like fifty cents a piece, a big old can like that (showing with hands). I set there one day and all I had was a big can of sardines! Next day hadn’t been [?] and I was getting down to the last one. ‘Well I’m either going to have to borrow some money from somebody.” About that time one of my
unit came in and I said, “Man I’m hurtin’ for money,” because he was going to stay there for a day or two so he loaned me some money, but I thought the Army should have thought a little bit more about how you’re going to get some money. But anyway…

Going out to the village to where I was going to be in a place called Minh Duc…

JB: [?] a second. What was I guess your impression when you trained in the states with M-14 and the M-16, you’re handed a carbine…what do you think?

TB: I thought you know I said, “What’s the deal with the carbines?” They said, “Well you are going to be stationed with the Vietnamese. This is the type of weapons that the Vietnamese have.” And there were some of Vietnamese soldiers riding on some of the trucks with us. Well they had M-1 garands, M-1 carbines, M-2 carbines, BARs, thirty caliber machine guns, even some grenadiers that had the old rifle grenade launcher. You got to fire blanks, turn that little screw on the end, and you can’t hit anything. But that was just they was just the way it was, I thought ‘Well I guess…’ Then only thing good about a carbine is the light. It can do the job, but it just doesn’t have the power that a M-16 or a M-14 has. It was kind of…I wasn’t real crazy about a carbine.

JB: Now what was the, I guess getting to the [?], the makeup of it?

TB: We had…it was…it’s called…on an advisory team you have the team headquarters, which is the advisory team 52. They coordinated everything in Vinh Long province. You’d have what’s called sub sectors and I was in one called Minh Duc. You would have usually like 5, 6, 7 men team. The unit that I was with had a major, a captain, an E-7, another E-7, an E-5 medic, and then me, I was a PFC when I went over as a RTO. We coordinated with the Vietnamese. This particular village had one artillery unit, a 2105 [?], and we had three companies of regional force soldiers and then we had probably another company of what’s called popular force so they were in the village providing security. We also work with the ARVN troops, which were out of a Vietnamese night division. So…where’d we work? We also worked the River Assault Group Navy, but there were no American units [?]. That was kind of a shock so I guess I will work with Vietnamese.

JB: In operating in the Delta area if you like, I was going to ask you if you’d operated with any Riverine forces?
TB: Oh yeah. I worked a lot with the Navy. We had...a lot of our operations we would go on what's called an LCVP it's just like a little landing craft. The only thing you think 'well that's great,' but except if you have troops on the shoreline you know, if you're out there by yourself you're kind of a sitting duck. You don't have a whole lot of, I mean you've got...they were supposedly a little bit armor plated but I think you could penetrate them pretty quick. I wasn't real crazy about riding; I liked it when I got off of it, I'd rather just be on the ground. But they had other Navy groups, we worked a lot with the Navy Seawolf choppers and we worked a lot with...The other American units that we worked with were out of the 114th Aviation battalion or something out of Vinh Long. Those were American chopper units.

JB: Did you do a lot of heliborne operations?

TB: Not a whole lot because our basic job...we had to...our area was kind of a triangle thing. Our mission you might say was to run operations in the air, keep the roads open, keep the bridges clear, keep the villages clear, keep the VC from coming up and down the canals. We supply all those outpost and bring troops in and out of all those outposts. Run operations like I say up and down with the ARVN troops that were out of Vinh Long. Just wherever we needed...we were advisors.

JB: What was your opinion of the Regional forces, popular forces?

TB: Well at first I wasn't really impressed with them, but as I got to know them they were just as tough a troop as you're going to have. Those guys were 110 pounds, 115 pounds and they were carrying an M-1 and then maybe a couple of belts of machine gun ammo and there stuff, whatever they're going to carry and...I'm not exactly sure how long they were in the military. It was either for the duration or it was for eight years. One of the things that I always...you know if I were in Vietnam for eight years and if I were to try to survive I wouldn't take too many chances. Plus if I were wounded I would have been Medevaced out in 15, 20, 30 minutes where a lot of our Vietnamese sometimes it took us a day and a half to get them out. To put them on a sampan, go down the river, then they get on the jeep, and then they go to deuce-and-a-half you know. Any time one of them got hit in a bone it nearly was always amputation that was the bad thing about it. You had to kind of look at their side of it...

JB: The ARVN forces?
TB: I was not impressed, that much impressed with the ARVN. The ARVN always thought they were better in regional force or the popular force and most of the operations we went in with the ARVN I mean, we’d have armored cav units and they’d come in there and act like they were really bad. Most of the time they’d get stuck first canal, they’d get stuck and couldn’t you know… They could only really operated successfully during the dry season, during the wet season with armored cavs weren’t any good. But the ARVN would also…they had chickens and pigs and kind of collect as they went along. Where as the soldiers I worked with, I lived with them on a day to day basis more or less, ate with them, and you know we shared food, we talked to each other as much as I could, I learn a fair amount of Vietnamese while I was there. They didn’t back off, some of those outpost would get hit they’d fight to the death. Sometimes…We had several of our outposts that were hit with a 57 recoilless rifle and you’re there with a M-1 and maybe a BAR and a carbine. If you get hit with a 57 a couple of times, a direct hit could kill about two to three people. So, they were tough!

JB: You had…I was reading over the questionnaire earlier and you had said something about ARVN forces changing tactics in mid-operations and just heading home?

TB: Yeah sometimes. That was frustrating. I remember one time we’d been taking fire from across the river and the Vietnamese were swearing up and down they didn’t have any intelligence that…there was maybe a couple of companies of VC and maybe the 306th was over there and they needed a chopper strike. So we called that along and talked to them and finally convince them to send an armed chopper strike. It would bring in…they put in rockets, machine guns, whatever. As they were online they were about a half a mile away, you could hear them coming. Then about that time the Vietnamese said, “Okay, let’s go eat lunch now!” “Eat lunch we’re about to put in a strike right here you know. [?]” “No, no, no. It’s all over. The VC’s gone now.” You know sometimes they, they just…I think a lot of times they wanted to see if you would do what they wanted you. Another time we had an outpost that was saying that they were being overrun and we got down there before day break and it was pretty risky to go down a road at night; anyway we got down there. What had happened was that one of the men had defected while all the others were sleeping and took all of their weapons and took
off. So they were scared that somebody would kill them so they said they were being
overrun. So you never knew what the whole story was.

JB: Were defections a problem?

TB: Not really. The people who lived around there...a lot of the farmers I mean,
they basically just wanted to be left alone and the VC would come in at night and hassle
them and try to hit them up for taxes and make them carry ammo, make them build a road
block or something. And they would either beat them or shoot them or threaten to do that
if they didn’t do that and then we would come in the next day and they would hassle them
and question them and...we found anything you know like, “Yesterday we came here and
you had a lot of rice, today you don’t have a lot of rice. Did you give it to the VC?”

Well you didn’t give it to them they took it. So you know, they just kind of were caught
in the middle. The Vietnamese they’d basically been fighting for the last eight, nine, ten
years. It was just a way of life for them so you just didn’t want to you might say “rock
the boat” too much. I think a lot of times the Vietcong knew where we were, we knew
where they were, but sometimes if you’re out on operation if you make a lot of noise they
can hear you coming and they’ll just kind of fade off into the...you played a game
sometimes...kept them thinking sometimes that you know...but then again there were
times when you wanted to hit them pretty good. You set up a blocking force and you’d
catch a platoon of them and you could wax them pretty good.

JB: So what were your first impressions of combat?

TB: Well. First time I got in combat I didn’t know I was in combat. I’d never
been fired at before and we were coming up on a canal and all of a sudden everything
started popping and bullets flying and everywhere. I thought we were doing all the
shooting, but when I came to the canal I kept hearing this pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-
pop-pop-pop-pop and I thought somebody behind me was firing. But when it’s coming
over you, when it’s comes right by your head it pops and then when you get up to the
canal you see bullets hitting the water. And we’re trying to cross this canal, which is
about six feet deep and we cross it by taking two sampans walking on one and then
walking on the other one. We got this little Vietnamese man who’s trying to hold both of
them together and...anyway. We made it across, but one of, we had a pretty heavy
American captain that actually sunk the sampan. (laughing) I mean it just...you had to
have pretty good balance. He sunk the thing and the Vietnamese was wet and we’re getting shot at. But finally we got on the other side and there was troops up in front of me and I said, “Where are the VC!” There was a treeline up there probably 300 meters ahead and the lead soldiers were firing the cardings and I started firing. I fired a few rounds and whatever. About that time that we were firing like I say with cardings and then here’s a VC out there going like this (showing with hands). You know, waving at us. (laughing) About that time the BAR man comes up and the BAR man gets that thing and dahg-dahg-dahg-dahg-dahg! They hooked it then because that thing a maximum I think could range about a thousand yards. [?]. Supposedly we killed two or three, we didn’t go up there, you know the troops went on up there and said, “Yeah we killed two.” But you know sometimes you checked it out sometimes you didn’t. That was…One of the things that my commander told me after that, he said, “Brown, you need to get one thing straight. When we get into a firefight you are the radio operator. You don’t shoot, you listen, you talk! You don’t shoot. You’ve got the…if they come right in on us then you shoot. The best defense you can have is a hand grenade. When they get close enough throw a hand grenade and you can do that. We need to know who we’re shooting at, who’s shooting at us, and if you’re firing you can’t listen to the radio and you’ve got to listen.” I said, “Okay.” Another advantage of being radioman was you weren’t point man, you know the Vietnamese were up front. So they would generally run into something before we started to catch the tail end of it.

JB: I was just going to ask you if carrying a radio made you a bit more or a target?

TB: It did, ya’ you were. First of all I’m six foot one and if you have a long antenna on it, you’ve got a ten-foot antenna and I’m the tallest one in the whole unit. All the Vietnamese were like five two, three. Plus they know that where I was there would be a major, there’d be a couple of Vietnamese radio operator with their captain. So it’s kind of like here’s a chief and here’s…you know they know where you are because they see all the radio antennas. You know you’re a big target, especially when you stretch out across the rice paddies. You know you’re going along a berm or dike, I mean you’re sort of trying to duck walk, you know getting down a little bit lower. It’s very awkward.
With a long antenna it whips back and forth and when you’re trying to run it throws your balance off.

JB: Wow!

TB: They used to kid me because I mean, I was a pretty cautious soldier. I watched where I step, tried to step where everybody else stepped. I kept my eyes open. I didn’t goof around much when we were in the boonies, just learned. But when everybody…if they’d say, “Duck!” or “Down!” or “Ban!” “Ban” means shoot, “Ban!” You know when they said the first like syllable the B or the D I was the first one down. So a lot of guys got whiplash from my radio antenna (laughing), but they said, “Man, don’t say down or hit it with Brown around. Brown will be down before anybody!” I was pretty you know…and I paid a lot of attention to where we went. This Major that I was with, he’d say, “Brown where are we?” And I’d look on the map and I say, “247-231.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Well, yes sir! Here’s the river, here’s this, this.” He made me learn a lot I mean, I knew where I was. The second officer that we had wasn’t as…He was an engineer officer, but he didn’t have much combat or didn’t have any field experience and so a lot of times he would ask me you know and a lot of guys wouldn’t care [?]. “Well I’m not supposed to know that? I’m just a PFC or a spec 4.” So that you know, I learned the names of the villages and the name of the people who…I remembered people who were in the village. Somebody could come into the village and I’d say, “Ah, ah, Kai Khe.” He say, “What?” That was a village called Kai Khe and Koi Bok or Op Lang or Vung Lin or you know. I would say, “[?]” “How’d you know he was a [?]?” I said, “Well I saw him down there.” A lot of that you know in a way I think probably came in handy.

JB: Did you have any Vietnamese language training?

TB: No, but I was a Spanish major here at Tech. So I was very interested in learning Vietnamese, but it was very difficult because theirs is a tonal language. You know like the word for married woman is Bah; it also means three and it also means cow. Like you’d say a woman, you’d say, “Cho Bah.” And ooooh. [?] I said, “Well you called her a cow!” (laughing) “Sorry, sorry.” You had to learn the difference, but the Vietnamese taught…you know, I’d tried to say, ‘how do you say…?” you know something and they would teach me. I probably learned like at least the numbering
system so I could give coordinates and things like ‘ambush, and wounded, and dead, and
how many,’ you know things like that. [?] I guess you might say the coordinate was the
main thing I needed to learn.

JB: Now later on I saw you transition…you transition over to American weapons.
How far into your tour did that happen?

TB: Really we never did really get weapons. The only way we got weapons was
to trade. We would capture weapons and we would take them into Vinh Long and trade
with the chopper pilots. So like first weapon that we had got was an AR-15, not an M-
16, but we had a Navy PBR boat that got sunk in our area and they…The boat got sunk
and they choppered the wounded out and whatever and the SEAL team was supposed to
be on their way to come in and probably either raise the boat or demolish it. Before the
SEAL team could get there we conned a couple of the Vietnamese, we tied ropes on them
and they would dive down into the water, which is probably I’m guessing about fifteen-
twenty feet and it was muddy you could probably only see that far. They dove down on
the boat, we got a M-79, a grenade launcher, a couple of AR-15s, a bunch of stuff. We
got off of the boat so we could get back, anyway. So that was an AR-15. I scrounged up
a M-14, but it was an M-14 automatic with a bipod mount, which is pretty heavy; you
know and you try to carry that. And then again, after I’d been there a while, major said,
“Brown you don’t need to be carrying. You need to carry that carbine, it’s lighter…” and
whatever. Plus I didn’t say that I…The first operation they said, “We’re going to have an
operation, you’re going to take off probably about five thirty in the morning.” No body
said anything so I was loaded for bear, I mean I had enough ammo to…I had, at that time
I had that M-14 I had about probably 200 round of ammo. I had a 45 with three clips. I
had about six grenades, extra batteries. I mean I had steel pot…I had everything!

JB: Wow!

TB: Most the morning when we took off I had all this crap on, all the other guys
had three or four magazines, M-16, carbine, whatever. They just kind of ‘uh hu.’ Of
course I never knew whether they were going to go out for a day or all day…and I made
it alright you know because I was in pretty good shape. Later on you’ve got more in tune
and sometimes the major would tell us where we’re going. I just had to kind of guess.
He say, “Brown get your radio.” And I used to ask, he’d say, “It’s not your…you don’t
ask. You just get the radio.” “Yes sir.” And I say… I never knew but I’d try to be prepared whether I was going to be there a half a day, all day. But the one things that always…every time I went somewhere I always in my mind I would plan an escape. I always thought ‘if I ever got hit by the big force how would I get out of there?’ I’d always…I’d memorized canals and I’d go by a house that had a sampan, a little bitty peanut hole sampan. I put that in my memory, I said, ‘You know if I had to hook it and we get hit down here a hundred yards down the river I can come back, I can get in that sampan and go down the river and it will take me back to Minh Duc.’ So I know a lot of thing like that, you just…[?] said, “Well Brown, what would you do now?” I’d say, “Well I’d go back there and I’d cut across here and I’d jump in this canal and do this and…” whatever. I said, “I’m a survivalist I mean, I don’t know how to get out of here, but I have to get out of here.” So you pick up things like that.

JB: You had mentioned in the questionnaire you did a lot of medcaps how did the civilian population react to that?

TB: They liked…everybody would come in…we had a real good medic. We had two different the first medic was really, really good, but most of the…it was a real good will for the people because almost all the kids had scabies, lice, and we’d always carry a lot of kind of anti-louse medicine and we carried a lot of I guess they were placebos, they were just pills. Like one lady I was trying to talk to her and we…at that time we didn’t have an interpreter and I’d say, “Dau?” which means a pain. and I said, “Nu Bou?” [?]. Everything I had if she had she had a pain and I said, “How old are you?” and she said, “Ninety-two!” I said, “Okay doc. She needs some of those red pills.” (laughing) He’d give them vitamins you know and things like that. But a lot of times when you would give them so many pills for this and this and this they’d go back and trade. ‘Well I’ll give you a red one for a green one…” (laughing) A lot of skin diseases because they get a cut or something and the water was nasty and sometimes they didn’t clean it good and so we’d clean them you know. We had one little girl one time they brought in that had about a 105-degree fever and she’s like probably about ten years old. They had here all bundled up and it was probably 95 degrees there anyway so the first thing we did was to lay her on a table in this little house. We just stripped her clothes off of her and “Ah, ah, ah, ah!” You know, what’s going on. The medic had a couple of bottles of alcohol and I
mean we just started pouring alcohol and I started rubbing all over with the alcohol and
fanning her and whatever. We knocked that fever down to about 101 really quick! Then
we got her in a sampan, took her down the river, and they...she just had probably a ear
infection or something like that to cause her fever to go so high. But they just didn’t
know what to do sometimes. They’d do the wrong thing. So you just...A lot of medcaps
you know, you’d see people in the village and you’d treat skin rashes and diseases and
things like that. We did a lot of good in that area.

JB: What, I guess, type of installation were you operating out of? The firebase
or...

TB: It was just a village and we had like let’s say, right next to us was the
Vietnamese headquarters and then we had like three sort of barracks, metal, long, long
metal barracks that Vietnamese families and soldiers lived in. We lived in kind of I guess
a prefab hooch and one end of it was where we cooked because it had been added on, it
was just a thatched roof that the Vietnamese...we had a regular butane stove that was one
good thing we had. I did the cooking since I was the lowest ranking person and we
would go to Vinh Long, but whenever we’d go to Vinh Long we’d go to the airfield and
buy supplies. So I cooked spaghetti, hamburger, and whatever we could get. So much of
it we had to get was dehydrated, you could get fresh, you’d get Spam and cans of
spaghetti and you know. Occasionally you could buy frozen meat, but whatever you
bought, if you bought frozen hamburger meat any time you brought it back out it’d be
thawed; you had to cook it, you couldn’t keep it. We went on operations with the
Vietnamese. We ate chicken, duck, fish, you know whatever they had we had.

JB: You were still having to purchase your own food at that point?

TB: Now not when we went with the Vietnamese we didn’t. We got a free meal!
I guess they paid for it. Sometimes they would stop...Of course the soldiers would bring
their own stuff and a lot of times there’d be a deal of rice and whatever, but sometimes
the officer would stop somewhere and supposedly he paid. We don’t know, he says, “I
paid, I paid.” They would kill an extra chicken or two and a big bowl of rice and we’d
have rice and chicken. Whatever they were having at that little house is what we would
eat so. I eat everything you can eat from chicken, duck, veal...rat, you name it, I ate it!
It didn’t bother me.
JB: How’s rat?

TB: Well it’s stringy. It’s very stringy, but…They had a sauce called nuoc mam and anything I don’t care how bad it is if you cover it up in nuoc mam you don’t taste it. From the first time I really ever had rat, I knew it was rat and I asked one of them what it was and he said, “Venison!” There hadn’t been a deer down in that area in a hundred years. “Come on very good, very good venison!” Some of the people ate red in there, but it was…you didn’t tell everybody if you had rat. It was kind of like you know, it wasn’t really real cool that you ate rat, but the rats were probably cleaner then the chickens. We just ate it.

JB: Excellent! Would you like to take a break?

TB: I’m fine.

JB: Okay and we’re back. Now in the questionnaire you’d mentioned you had a jeep assigned to you that you took care of. Was that taken out on operations or was that strictly…?

TB: We probably never went in the jeep. The area that I was in had so many canals that most of the time we either walked or we took a sampan or we took a LCVP or something like that. So the jeep was strictly used to go into Vinh Long, pick up supplies, or go down Highway 4 to another outfit or something like that.

JB: Alright. Now out on operations, did you encounter booby traps and other stuff like that?

TB: Yeah. I said again one of the good things was that by being a radioman you’re not the point man so occasionally you’d hear something, BOOM! Somebody had kicked a grenade trap or something like that. Once or twice we had a command detonated you know where those were the kinds that were…the VC would a lot of time would dig up one of those 105 Browns and that didn’t go off and then set a fuse on it and then run their wires out maybe like a hundred yards into a tree line, when you came by they set it off. With a 105 you could knock down one or two people.

JB: Easily.

TB: They had…after you…once you got over the shock or whatever of it you know, you’d find those wires running into the trees. Well then they had five minutes to get away and they’d be gone. Things like punji pits and the punji stakes and things like
that… The thing about those were they had to be, the really had to dig them fresh because
when you put leaves or something on it it was so hot over there you could spot it pretty
fast. You know and about an hour later you could look down the trail and you could kind
of see where the punji pits were because the vegetation had already wilted and you could
spot it pretty quick.

JB: Wow!

TB: Plus again like I say, I always step, I tried to step where the other guy in
front of me stepped and just little things like that. I was pretty cautious, trying to be a
pretty observer.

JB: Okay. Now you were in-country for Tet of ’68?

TB: Right.

JB: What was that like in your sector?

TB: Of course I was in a sub-sector, which the people out in the boonies didn’t
catch it as much. What happened during the Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong hit CanTho
and they hit Vinh Long, which were the two major cities in our area and one of the things
that they did so that units out in the bush couldn’t come in to sort of relieve them, they
blew up a bridge between us and the highway. So if we got out we either had to go by
river or we had to go by sampan or we had to walk out. We repaired the bridge after
about a day, but…I remember the Tet Offensive was probably like about, I’m not real
sure what time, probably like three thirty- four o’clock in the morning. We were not on
the radio, but the Vietnamese were on monitored radio all night. We came over, banged
on the door, and he said, “Get on the radio! Lots of things happening in Vinh Long.” So
I get on the radio and you hear lots and lots of traffic, you know, the armored cav units
were getting hit and then the airfield was getting hit. You’d switch frequencies to this
that and the other and everybody was getting hit! You know, “What’s going on?” It was
kind of interesting because they had never really been in combat in the city and some of it
was almost kind of comical because they were always kidding us about, ‘Well you guys
out there you know, you don’t know how to live,’ blah, blah, blah. Well then all of a
sudden they were getting what we’d been getting all year and there’s lots of confusion.
You know, ‘Is somebody over there? Where’s these people? Where’s…We need some
support here! We need this, we need that!’ You know, that’s one of the worst things and
one of the first things in a combat situation a lot of times is there is a lot of confusion. You don’t know who’s fire and who and how many are there and…One of the things that they found out later that they thought the VC were shooting 50 calibers. Well come to find out in one of the things, one of the scenarios was that the RAG River Assault Group boats were firing 50 calibers and the armored cav thought they were coming from the VC. So you had the River Assault Group firing at the armored can units.

JB: Oh geez.

TB: You know 50 calibers can do some pretty good damage in tearing up houses and everything else and that went on for about thirty minutes before they finally figured out they were shooting at each other instead of the VC! We got sporadic sniper fire during the Tet Offensive. Just… you know they had the snipers sitting at three or four different spots. They would fire into the village and just things like that to keep you harassed. They didn’t want you going out to this bridge that’d been blown. They had three or four snipers out there that’d just pop at you when you…You could walk across the bridge, but you couldn’t get a jeep across it so you were kind of, it wasn’t totally destroyed. So we had to go out and get rid of the snipers first and then we started repairing the bridge; took in [?] and lumber and whatever. We were told not to come into Vinh Long because there was too much heavy fighting in there so we…We just took care of our little area while all the stuff is going on during the Tet Offensive. After about three or four days we were running low on ammo so I did catch a chopper to go into Saigon, one that was flying by, I got them to come by and pick me up. The Viet Cong had taken over the MACV headquarters, which was another hotel. The MACV people had to evacuate into the airfield and that was kind of like they were going to make their stand at the airfield, but when the Viet Cong were in the MACV headquarters what was funny was that instead of stealing weapons and things like that they stole watches, stereos, personal items, things like that. They left a lot of M-16s, M-60s. They could have had a lot of stuff like that, but they stole. Well, they were just common thieves!

JB: That’s odd.

TB: They used…trouble of it they used it as kind of a hospital. You know, you’ve got…they got into some of our medical supplies there at the headquarters and you know bloody bandages everywhere. Well at least somebody got hit pretty good. But
they eventually retook the MACV headquarters and…but it was pretty chaotic there for
about twenty-four hours during the Tet Offensive. One of the sights I always remember
that I won’t forget, when I went in. I went down, walked down the street to, I can’t
remember, to try to see if I can get more food supplies or something, but right in the
middle of the street there was a crater like somebody dropped about a thousand pound
bomb. I said, “What in the world happened here?” What had happened there was an
armored personnel carrier that was full of ammunition, 105 rounds or something. He was
taking it to another unit and VC hit it with a B-40 rocket or something.

JB: Geez!

TB: And it exploded all of that ordinance and it blew that crater in it. I mean it
was probably ten feet deep and about you know, 20 feet wide. I mean just like a huge
hole. You could see the sewer lines and things like that. There was nothing left of the
APC and I’m sure there was nothing left of the driver. “Gah-ly!” And then all the
houses in that area were just about leveled for about fifty-sixty feet.

JB: Wow!

TB: But the Tet Offensive finally the first time we ever had any American units
come in we had part of the U.S. 9th division come and sort of retake the airfield. I
thought it was kind of unusual. They had these floating barges that had 155 howitzers
and before they would even make an assault they probably put out two or three thousand
rounds of 155, just saturated this area. I though, shoot. anybody can go in there after that.
And they came in and kind of mopped up the place and then things kind of started getting
back to normal after a couple of days after the Tet Offensive.

JB: How did…What was the, I guess, the Vietnamese unit reaction to Tet?

TB: Well, one of the things that disappointed me was that one of the elite units in
Vinh Long that was supposed to be protecting Vinh Long was the Vietnamese Rangers.
During the Tet Offensive, I mean, they were stealing television sets and breaking into
houses. They took advantage of the chaos and I don’t know whether anything was ever
done. I don’t think anything was ever done to them, but you know, they were…there was
a lot of looting. Vietnamese just took advantage of the chaos, which I certainly didn’t
think that was a real good idea, but that’s what they did.
JB: Now any, again going back to the questionnaire. You mentioned something about the funny instances of an Air Force medic with a CS grenade. Could you relate this story?

TB: Yeah you know. I’d often thought I’d like to…you don’t think there could be much funny going on in a combat zone, but everyday there was something hilarious. It just…I remember a lot of it and… That particular instance we were out in the boonies and the only person we had left to monitor the radio was this Air Force medic. He was assigned out there to help us and he wasn’t much good, but anyway. That chopper was coming in and he called and said, “What should I do?” I said, “Typical procedure. Throw smoke and he’ll identify and he’ll come in” and blah, blah, blah. So he…first grenade he looks at it says ‘CS’ on it. He thinks that means Colored Smoke. CS is riot gas. He goes down and when a chopper would come in all the villagers would come out because it either meant some big wig was coming in or somebody was wounded or something like that. They’d land in a little soccer field right in the middle of the village. So they’d all come out when the chopper’s coming in. Well when the chopper comes down and he throws the grenade, there’s not too much, but when the propwash hits that CS it blows it all over the village. And all the people start running and the chopper pilot’s saying, “What? What’s going on? What’s going on down there?” He thinks that they’re taking fire or there’s something going on. Glasgow was this guy and he says, “I don’t know what’s going on!” He said, “You know it smells like tear gas or something!” And said, [?], “What kind of grenade did you throw?” He says, “Well it said CS, colored smoke.” I said, “Oh my gosh!” (laughing) You know the chopper finally comes in. That was one of the you might say humorous incidents. Another time I was in a jeep ambush and Glasgow was in there with us. We turned the jeep over on it’s side and as it threw him out, it was during the rainy season, and he landed in the mud and his whole body from about the waist down was stuck upside down in the mud and his feet are kicking! (laughing) And he’s trying to get lose and you can’t, mud’s like quick sand! So we pull Glasgow out of the mud and then he’s got, you know he’s trying to get his eyes cleared and the VC are shooting at us from the tree line and we’re laughing like crazy! Another time this one unit below us used to order…they couldn’t get out to buy their food so they had this black guy that would order and he talked real slow. He’d say (slowly), “We
need one gallon apple juice.” Whatever like this and I could sort of imitate him. So his
unit was here, we were here, and the headquarters was here. So my radio signal was
stronger so he ordered, he was ordering all of this stuff. One of things that everybody
hated was this soup that somebody had sold the government, it’s called Mickey Mouse
soup and it was…They ordered thousands of cases of split pea Mickey Mouse soup! So I
said (imitating), “We need four cases Mickey Mouse soup.” (laughing) I cut in on his
transmission so they delivered four cases of this crap and they had to pay for it. “Well
you ordered it!” I could here later on a few days, “We didn’t order this stuff!” “You
ordered it! We wrote it down here.” So this Colonel Goutchenwritten, he was on a
mission to find out who had done that. (laughing)

JB: Did they ever get you?

TB: No. (laughing) So anyway, they’d always say, “Well Colonel, how’s the
soup?” “You better watch it! You better watch it!” He was a lieutenant. (laughing) So
that was kind of a standing joke. Another time we had the inspector general was out
there. He was a Brigadier General and he had a civilian retired guy with him. They were
standing out in front of our hooch and I could hear in the background that the Vietnamese
were going to shoot and the artillery’s going to shoot. When I looked over there they
were going to fire down at a village called Mi An, which as seven kilometers away. So
they had to fire their maximum range so they’d put the most powder in that thing. It fired
directly over our hooch! I looked at the major, he said…you know he just kind of shook
his head, “Don’t say anything.” They fired that howitzer right over us and it, you know,
it would knock things off shelves. This general and this other guy man they hit the deck!
They thought they were dead. We started laughing. We almost got court-martialed.
“How didn’t you tell me?” “Ah sir, I didn’t realize that.” He said, “You’re lying! You
lying!” (laughing) You just do things like that just to sort of to pass the time away.

Another incident I was always saying that I was one of the first one’s down. We were at
an outpost and I had, that day I had a M-14, and the VC all of a sudden just cut out from
across the river and I ducked just as quick as I could. When I did I caught my ear on the
magazine of my weapon. At first I thought I’d been hit. I thought I was…I reach up
there and there’s blood all over my hand. It just cut a gash right here. Then I realized
that I hit the magazine. Well our medic was about a half a mile away. After the shooting
died down we thought we’d play a trick on the medic. And said, “Doc, doc! Brown’s
been hit; he’s been hit! Get up here as quick as you can!” Well he wasn’t in very good
shape. It was hot, it was a hundred degrees. We could see him, he was running with his
field pack. He was running just as hard as he could and about the time he got right up on
us I fell and I had all this blood all on the side of me. He jerks my helmet off and he
starts looking at me and everything and then we all start laughing. And oh he cussed, he
yelled, he said, “If everyone of you get hit, you’re all dead! I’m not treating you!”
(laughing) You had to pull a few tricks like that every now and then. [?] was part of
getting through the day?

JB: Break up the monotony.

TB: Yeah. And I had another captain that…I used to do all the cooking and he
would…everything I think he never was really satisfied and everybody else liked it. But
he said, “You know I wish we had this. I wish we had that.” I found out one day that he
hated asparagus so next time I went in I bought two cases of asparagus. Every meal we
had asparagus! (laughing) After that he quite complaining.

JB: Very cool! Now what did you, I guess, see as our mission over there? Were
we accomplishing anything?

TB: Well you know, like when I went over there [?] were told to stop
communism, whatever it might be. When you get over there and then you really see the
difficulty of war in Vietnam is kind of like what’s going on in Afghanistan right now.
You’ve got gorillas and you don’t have trenches, you don’t have one unit here and
another unit right here. In a gorilla war you can’t just bomb everybody; you can’t just do
these things. You kill innocent civilians. The Viet Cong looked just like the NVA, just
like the regular Vietnamese. So you could tell who, you might say, who the enemy was.
You know you’re basically trying to help the Vietnamese, but you also, the longer you
stay there the more you found out a little bit about like sort of graft and corruption. The
U.S. would give money to build roads and it would go into some province official’s
pockets or it’d go into some major or some lieutenant colonel would skim off some of the
money and things like that. So then it sort of just… you know you hoped that what
you’re doing will help. The main thing you wanted to do was just to get the country at
peace again so that they could grow their crops, whatever it might be. The Viet Cong
were just as adamant about you know, they wanted to get the Americans out of there and
get the South Vietnamese out of there and have their type of government. I think that…I
think we introduced the Vietnamese to a democratic type way of life and some things like
that and even though they’re under communism right now, a lot of those people they
make extra money by selling this, doing this, doing this. So they have kind of a free
enterprise system. Somewhere down the road they’ll come back, it will be a democratic
[?] because they…The communism you still have the graft and corruption sometimes so
you know, eventually it will come back to where they have a more equal system over
there. That’s just, you know, kind of what we’d hoped that we had done. I think the
biggest mistake we made over there was still trying to fight their war for them. We
should never have committed that many American troops. We should have stayed with
the advisory effort and as long as you’re…when you start putting our troops going out
and battling the enemy and whatever instead of the South Vietnamese, it should have
been the advisory effort. Train them, teach them how to do it, not take it on for
ourselves.

JB: Now, coming home. What was the experience like?

TB: Of course I made it the whole year over there and I was very happy to come
home. One of the things that I think was a little different between me and some of the
other soldiers, used to get what’s called short timers’ fever, short timers’ cramps, and a
lot of guys when they get down to the last thirty-forty days they’d try to get a job working
in a warehouse or something so they couldn’t get killed. I saw a lot of guys do that and
so I said when I get down to my last few days, I’m going to pull it until the last day. I
got on an operation the last day I was there! I said, “I’m going.” The said, “Well
Brown you can go on now.” “No! I’m out here, I’m going to do it!” So I came in nasty
dirty and got on the chopper and flew into Saigon. Of course I got out a couple of days
early, but as it happened when I got on the plane…One of the things that I might add that
I always thought my year would be totally okay if I could see Westmoreland. I’m
waiting to catch a van to go to Cobra compound and I’m all dirty and nasty and I’ve got
my bags and stuff there, my car bean, and whatever. This jeep comes up and this other
car and armored deal and whatever and there’s Westmoreland at the gate. I popped a
salute on him Well at least I got to salute the man before I left Vietnam. But got on a
plane, got to Okinawa and some emergency leave people bumped the last twelve of us on
the roster so I had to spend the night in Okinawa. I had to catch a cargo plane, flew to
Hawaii. On the way to Hawaii it developed a fuel leak and I thought that I’m going to
die in the Pacific.

JB: In a C-141, anyway. We made it to Hickam Field. We spent two days in
Hawaii because I couldn’t get another flight out and I caught the same plane going into
Oakland and fortunately they got the fuel leak fixed. Got to California and caught a ride
from San Francisco to El Paso and that went pretty good, but when we got to El Paso I
got…and one thing that’s kind of ironic, I got bumped by a bunch of college kids, which
were kind of hippies or whatever. Here it is, it’s ironic…I had to spend an extra eight
hours in El Paso because these college kids got preferential treatment over me and should
of come home…Anyway I finally got into Lubbock and. My family was here to meet me
and it was real nice and everything, but the one thing that you were not really encouraged
to wear your uniform. You know it was just…I wasn’t spit on or anything like that.
They only bad, I guess you might say the only incident was I had some time left in the
Army and a week before I was going to get out of the Army, I was in Fort Campbell
Kentucky, and my wife and I wanted to celebrate. So we went to Nashville. Most places
back in those days…in a really nice restaurant, you had to have a coat and tie. So I didn’t
take really a coat and tie with me so I wore my uniform. Went to this really nice
restaurant and I said, “We’d like a table for two,” and he says, “I’m sorry. I hope you
don’t take this the wrong way, but you can’t come in here with a uniform on.” And I
said, “I don’t understand.” He said, “Well you know, it’s not anything against you, it just
causes problems sometimes.” And I said…and I didn’t push it, I said, “So you’re saying
with a uniform on I can’t come in here.” He said, “No.” I said, “Okay.” So we went
down a couple of blocks to another restaurant and I said, “Is it okay? Can I come in
here?” He says, “Yeah, come on in!” I said, “One other place wouldn’t let me.” He
said, “Well it’s not a problem. Come on in.” But I thought that was pretty ironic that
you know, you spend a year and then come home and you know…If I had been in there
to get drunk or you know, but I was with my wife. I thought that’s a bunch of buddies
you know whatever. That was really the only thing that…and you know that when you
check out of the Army there was no band, there was no nothing. Just sign the papers and
you leave. It would have been nice to, I thought, well if somebody would at least played
the song and said, “Thank you Tom for your service to the country and enjoy!” That was
it. Come back…I came back to Lubbock on Saturday, started at Tech on Monday. So I
didn’t get much of a break.

JB: Wow! That’s quite the whirlwind.

TB: Yeah. But it was just…there was a lot of anti-war. There wasn’t too much
here at Tech, but you didn’t say much about being at Vietnam and they had the Kent state
thing and all kinds of things like that going on.

JB: Were you aware of anti-war sentiment?

TB: Oh yeah. You’d read it in the papers and whatever. And so if you
mentioned you were at Vietnam it’s like nobody wanted to hear about it. Not that they
wanted to…they just didn’t want to hear about it. “Oh you’re a Vietnam Vet, okay well.
Well how’s the weather? How’s the Tech football game? You know what do you want
to talk about?” “Okay.” You know, it’s like put behind you. And probably the most
difficult, one mistake the U.S. government made…you went from a rice patty one day
took four or five days you were back in the states and we had a leave time. In my
opinion they should have sort of took you to Saigon for a week, they should have taken
you to Hawaii for a week and kind of brought you home gradually, kept you with military
and things like that. Sort of de-escalated you, you might say because you’re going from
pretty high sensitivity and night vision and everything and all of a sudden you’re back
home with your family and friends. It’s a little too quick. You couldn’t sleep at night,
wake up and…it took a while just to get used to things like that.

JB: I was going to ask if you had any problems in readjusting?

TB: Not really. You know I probably adjusted better then, I would say better then
most people and I never did feel like that government owed me anything. I just did my
job and… Another thing that was kind of ironic was that two days after I reported into
my unit in Tennessee Martin Luther King was killed. So I got put on a riot team and I
left my wife and was at the airport for two weeks. I didn’t have to go, but we were
standby for Washington D.C. or Nashville or wherever they needed us. And the rest of
my time I was in the Army I did riot training. So I was training to… In fact most of my
friends that stayed with that unit got sent to Chicago for the ‘68 Democratic National
Convention. They got sent up there, which fortunately I got out. I got out in July on the eighth! I got out a little bit before they did. But it was, you know…get out of fighting over there and come into fighting in Washington D.C. and Nashville and wherever it might be.

JB: So…any…Oh, you said in the questionnaire again, I keep referring back to that, but… If you had to do it again you’d be a LURP or an Officer. Why?

TB: Yeah. You know you always…[?] I was a… I had one of my commanding officers say, “Brown you’re a good soldier because you pay attention, you listen, you really try to improve yourself.” I think you know, I could have been a good LURP, a Long Range Recon Patrol, because I always…wherever we went I knew how to get back; I’ve watched things; I knew how to set booby traps; I was the only person who knew how to fire the LAW, Light Anti-tank Weapon; just things like that. Plus you know I think I would have been a good officer. I had a chance to be an officer, but what they were doing to you then is that you could take your basic training and then if you went to OCS they’d put you in a holding company and you might stay in a holding company for two months. Then you’d go to OCS, then you’d go to your artillery or armor or infantry and then you’d go to Vietnam. So all you were really doing in a lot of instances was just adding another year, year and a half.

JB: Right.

TB: Plus OCS officers weren’t really well thought of you know…

JB: 90-day wonders.

TB: The number one was West Point and then number two was ROTC and then number three was OCS. But I think I would have made a good officer. You know, you always…I was never in an American unit. I would kind of liked to have been in an American unit just to see what it was like, but I don’t think I would have been a doper and all that stuff. I just wasn’t that kind of person, I was more responsible then probably your eighteen year old and your nineteen year old.

JB: Was there any drug use that you were aware of?

TB: The unit I was with, none. Probably, I mean a few guys would get drunk, [?] things like that, but I was always very careful about that because sure as you’d have four or five beers I mean you might get up at three o’clock in the morning going outpost got
hit and you’ve got to hump it. I wanted to have my head clear. I wanted to be perfectly clear. If I ever drank too much it’s only when I went in, I’d go to Vinh Long once every while and I might drink five or six beers, something like that. I would want to keep my head; I wanted to be straight. I sure don’t want to stagger around trying to find my stuff.

JB: Certainly makes sense.

TB: Yeah. I think that’s part of the reasons that I came home. I always remember one time I was writing a letter one night, it was real quite and I heard something go DOUNK! I immediately knew what it was, it was a mortar! I grab the radio, my steel pot and my M-16 and I was in the bunker before the mortar hit.

JB: Wow!

TB: I mean, just (making noises) automatic, BOOM! And I was yelling, “Incoming! Incoming!” And you know your senses are pretty quick. If you [?] you just paid attention to you know…I knew the maximum affective range of a 105 shell and 155 and this and this and this and this. You know I thought well if I ever need to know that I want to know what the killing range is, just things like that.

JB: You had mentioned earlier that you had some ROTC experience?

TB: Well I was, as of all things, I was in Air Force ROTC when I was here at Tech. I was not, I was a real hell raiser when I was in first couple of years. I think I probably still have the…hold the record for demerits! I was in subordinate to an officer, I was out of uniform, I was actually court-martialed.

JB: Really?

TB: And they were going to drum me out of there, of course ROTC my freshmen year. A friend of mine was a lieutenant colonel in there and he was a pre-law student. He took my case and they didn’t read me my rights, they didn’t do this, anyway, I still got the demerits and all kinds and got busted. But I was just…First year or so in college I probably would have made a good Marine or I would have made a good, you know something like, because I was mean and ornery and things like that.

JB: I can relate I had a similar experience.

TB: (laughing) You know, even one time I had a goatee and you weren’t allowed… what I would do I would wear a bandage over my chin and I would tell them that I was in an accident. Well I wore that for three weeks in a row and they knew what
was going on. Then it came up to Thanksgiving holidays and I shaved it off after that.

He said, “We know you had a goatee! We know you had it!” (laughing) “You don’t even have a scar. You don’t even have a scar or scratch!” I said, “Well I had plastic surgery.” “You lying.” (laughing)

JB: That was great. Did that help you at all go into the Army?

TB: Yeah really, I mean, just marching in the drill. I mean I knew how to move troops and things like that. I turned twenty-four during basic training and I made up my mind that I wanted to try to do the best that I can and learn everything I can and you know be the best soldier that I could and so… Most the test and things that I took you know, I scored pretty well in the top. I wasn’t the absolute top, but I knew how to do the stuff and it came in handy later.

JB: Great. Anything…any closing thoughts, comments?

TB: Well I say it’s a…you know it’s…you know, I think the Vietnam War… The one thing that I disagree with a lot of people is we did not lose the Vietnam War. I never lost anything was ever were in, we never lost anything. The Vietnamese lost it, but we didn’t. If I had it to do again and you know… If I were in charge with the Vietnam War I would have run it a whole lot differently. I would have had small units, I would have had guerilla units in North Vietnam doing the same thing they were doing to us. Why don’t we send Vietnamese up there to do the same thing that they’re… blow up roads, do this do that and the same thing that they’re doing to us. You know make their life miserable just like they were doing to us. So you know some of those things if we had done those instead of trying to pick targets…and also instead of letting…Washington was trying to run the war and a lot of the casualties were inflated. You know you killed ten VC, well three of them are probably farmers and just happened to get caught out there. You know, just some things like that…that’s kind of unfortunate. I don’t regret my time, I did what I was basically told to do and I’d do it again. I think if you’re called to serve in your military you do it, unless there’s something that’s bad you don’t do it.