Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. Today’s date is the 3rd of February 2004 and I’m beginning an oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel Frank Vavrek of the United States Army. I am in the Special Collections Building Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech and Colonel Vavrek is at his home in Orange Park, Florida. Morning sir.

Frank Vavrek: Good morning, how are you?

LC: Very good, thank you. Sir, I wonder if we could begin by just discussing a little bit about your early background and some biographical data. First of all, where were you born and when sir?

FV: Well, I was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1943 and actually grew up though in a little town called Nemacolin; it’s a coal-mining town.

LC: How far is that from Harrisburg?

FV: Maybe a hundred miles. It’s right on the western edge of Pennsylvania, West Virginia.

LC: Is it a safe assumption that your father was connected with the mining industry?

FV: Oh yes, he was a coal miner; worked coal mines, steel mills at all his life basically.
LC: Okay, and was he a Pennsylvania native?
FV: Yes, he was. My grandfather was an immigrant from, I believe it was Austria.
LC: Really?
FV: Yes.
LC: Tell me a little bit about your mother. What was her maiden name and where was she from?
FV: Well, my mother died when I was born of childbirth complications at childbirth, so I didn’t really know her.
LC: No, not at all.
FV: So, I was raised on a farm mainly by my aunts and uncles.
LC: Would that be on your dad’s side?
FV: On my dad’s side, yes. He brought me there, then my dad…[dog barking in background] well…I got my dog barking.
LC: That’s okay.
FV: When I was, let’s see, about five years old, my dad remarried to a local girl, my step mom, my mother, Donna Vavrek.
LC: And what was her maiden name?
FV: Dugan, her maiden name was Dugan.
LC: Okay, D-u-g-a-n?
FV: D-u-g-a-n, yes.
LC: Okay, and did your parents have much schooling?
FV: No, neither one really completed high school.
LC: Okay.
FV: My dad completed grade school, then went to work, whatever work they could find. Of course, my mother, I don’t think ever worked. When I say my mother now, that’s my stepmother.
LC: Sure.
FV: Never worked at all.
LC: How many kids were there in your entire family?
FV: Four in our family. It was me, then my two stepbrothers and my stepsister.
LC: Okay. How far away from you in age are your stepbrothers?

FV: Let’s see; there’s about seven, eight years difference between us.

LC: So, you were the oldest one of the pack?

FV: Yes. I came into the marriage. (Laughing)

LC: Yes right, that’s right. (Laughing) You were part of the goods that it came with; it came with your dad.

FV: Yes.

LC: And so you were just about, did you see four or so?

FV: Let’s see, I think it was five.

LC: Do you remember that, do you remember?

FV: I have vague memories. I know it was a difficult time. You know, as a child, you’re introduced to a new stranger and all, so there was some difficulty I can recall between my stepmother and I in the early years. Mainly, it was probably my doing because I was probably more rebellious. You know, I was taken away out of my aunt’s homes where I guess I was pretty well spoiled from what I can gather. (Laughing)

LC: I could see that, yes. (Laughing) And that kind of disturbance is always a little, you know, unsettling for everybody.

FV: So, you know, and it was a new environment, so yes, we struggled there.

LC: Growing up, did you favor school or were you involved in sports?

FV: Yes, I did well academically. In high school, I made honor roll each time. I was involved in track and football primarily. I played a little basketball, but I wasn’t really good at basketball. I did all right in track, that was probably my best athletic event.

LC: What did you run in track?

FV: I ran the mile, half a mile, pole-vaulted; those were the three things I did pretty well.

LC: Now, what high school did you attend?

FV: It was Carmichaels. It was then Carmichaels or Cumberland Township High School. It’s now Carmichaels Area High School.

LC: Okay. So, would it be safe to say that it’s a rural high school with kids coming from a broad area?
FV: Yes, pretty wide area around there, yes. I think our graduating class was probably ninety.

LC: You said you played football. What positions did you play?
FV: End, basically end.
LC: On the defense or...?
FV: Both sides; offense, defense, I got to catch a few passes.
LC: Okay. Which did you like best? Did you think football was really your home or was it track?
FV: No, I think track was more my precise and stature and I had more stamina.
LC: What about...?
FV: I was kind of light then, I wasn’t real heavy.
LC: Were there any coaches that were particularly significant for you?
FV: Oh yes, Coach Stuvack. He was a hard-core guy, you know.
LC: Can you tell us a little bit about him?
FV: He’s just a big, burly guy that I can remember and the assistant coaches too. There was another one called Lapcowicz; was his last name. These guys rode us; tried to keep us on a straight track, you know.
LC: Right.
FV: I mean when we smoked cigarettes and all, they’d pull us aside and tell us it’s not good for us and all that and kind of led us and guided us. And not just in sports, but physically and morally, kind of jerk a knot in our ear every once in a while.
LC: Exactly. Now, how did your parents support you or how did they feel about your academic work and the fact that you were doing well in track?
FV: They were proud of that. We weren’t a rich family. Like I said, working in a coal mine back then.
LC: Sure.
FV: And there were times my dad was unemployed because there were strikes in the coal mines. I mean, we were just making it with living on the farm. Of course, we had the farm, so, you know, seemed like there was always food, [so we were never really hungry].
LC: Okay.
FV: I don’t remember any periods where we were devastated hungry or lacking for any kind of clothes because we were always well.

LC: Did...go head.

FV: Yes.

LC: I was just going to ask, did you work on the farm as well?

FV: Yes, sure. Well, I had daily chores, getting up; we’ll feed and water the cows, the chickens, milking the cows. Those were all standard chores; getting up early in the morning, doing that kind of stuff. And also in the summer, when not in school, I would work on another adjoining farm and earn some spending money. Not much, but go down there and help them bale hay and harvest the corn and all that stuff in the fall.

LC: You mentioned that there were occasionally strikes at the mine.

FV: Yes.

LC: Did your dad have any kind of position on, for example, unions or any of that?

FV: No, he was not union, he was just a worker. He was a member, union member. And when they called strikes and all, I mean, they just flat stopped working.

LC: And that was tough. [Sometimes, strikes lasted for a long time and unemployment funds would be inherited. That’s when we lived on welfare.]

FV: That was tough. Then, the later years like through high school, the mines shut down. I mean, they laid off people because, you know, the work [wasn’t there]. And the coal kind of just stopped at towns, like dried up now, there’s no coal at all coming out of the town now.

LC: Have you been back there recently?

FV: Oh yes. I’ve been up there just this past summer. My mother still is living there. She’s living there by herself; my father died. I went up, my brother; he has a farm with his wife and they manage some garden, so we [my wife and I], went up there in late summer, harvested some tomatoes and green beans. Helped them, spent a week up there with them and that was enjoyable. [We helped fix up some things around the farm.]

LC: What was it like going back up there? Have you visited often or was this…?

FV: We try to visit once a year at least. It doesn’t always succeed, but, yes, we love to go back because my roots are there. I grew up there; it’s my home ground, the
hills, the people, the family. You know, most of my family is there. My sister and I are
the only two that really left the area in pursuit of careers, different careers, but the rest of
them, my brothers, both my remaining brothers stayed there, most of my cousins are
there. They just grew up there and they kind of, the roots go in and they just won’t go.

LC: Yes, I have the same thing.

FV: They go to work; they sit there. I don’t care if they starve to death; they’re
not going to go out of there.

LC: That’s right. I have the same thing up in Michigan, so I know what you’re
talking about.

FV: Yes, it’s kind of home.

LC: As far as your own thinking about your career when you were in high
school, were you thinking that you would follow your dad and work in the mine?

FV: No, I always aspired to go beyond that. I mean, that was what most of the
guys did was either graduate from high school, get a job in the coalmine, get a job in the
steel mill. That’s some solid work, it was good income, it was steady. That was mostly
the mindset and I was more adventurous. I wanted to reach out beyond that. I didn’t
have any clear grasp of what I wanted to do, but I just didn’t want to stay there and get up
everyday and go to the mine, do your job, come home.

LC: Where do you think that spark such that you wanted something other than
the safe route came from?

FV: Through education, reading, things I read in books. In school; teachers
inspiring me as a student. Let me see, in my senior year, I won an essay contest.

LC: Tell us about that.

FV: ‘What freedom means to me’ or something like that. I can’t remember
exactly, but as a result, I was the area, I won the area championship, which also won me a
scholarship to an in-state university, to Penn State, University of Pennsylvania or
University of Pittsburgh.

LC: Wow.

FV: With all academic scholarships.

LC: Right.
FV: Okay, but I never used it mainly because of when I applied and everything, I had applied to Penn State and they sent me a form said, you know, you’re accepted and I needed to come up with the admission fee and everything and the scholarship didn’t cover that and of course, when I asked my dad, it was like, I can’t remember, one hundred, two hundred dollars. And my dad’s philosophy was, “Hey, college is not what you need, you need to get you a job and go to work and start earning money and get yourself established.” The main thing then too, there was the draft, so before you could get a job, you had to put in your two years. [So, he wouldn’t give me the money. We didn’t have much money to live on then either so I think he thought the money would be better spent on good and others.]

LC: Right.

FV: The most employers when you went to apply for any kind of real job like with the coal mines or with the steel mills, there were two things you had to do. One, they asked, “Where’s your discharge papers?” And number two, “Are you a member of the union?” So, if you met those two things, then they would talk to you and hire you. Otherwise, you know, they wouldn’t even talk to you. They said, “Come back later.”

LC: Yes, so you knew you had to get your service.

FV: So, you knew you had to have your military service out of the way. Joining the union was no problem, you just go down with fifteen, twenty bucks in your hand, you can join the union. [They would take your money even if you didn’t have your military service obligation fulfilled.]

LC: Right.

FV: But you got to be a member, then you go over and apply. That’s the way it was. So, I said, “Okay, well, I’m not going to go anywhere.” And the military somehow appealed to me. I don’t really know how, but in all my readings, I always admired the adventures of the great heroes. You know, Kit Carson, [Daniel Boone] and I just can’t think of many now, but all those, they struck out and they risked their lives at great peril and there was adventure and that kind of appealed to me. So, I decided rather than to go to…well, when I asked my dad, you know, I had that in the back of my mind, but when I asked my dad for that money, he said, well, I needed to get a job. That was the first thing
and most important thing, so I didn’t push it anymore. Said okay, college is not in my line, so that’s why I’ll join the army.

LC: Frank, did you have any feelings about not being able to take up that scholarship?

FV: Yes, I regret it now looking back. Yes, I could’ve taken it, but it would’ve led me in a new life and it may have led me in a different way than I really went, so I don’t know. It’s things you look back and you say, “Well”, but no, I didn’t take it up and I joined the Army and gave up that scholarship and worked my way up through the ranks.

LC: What year did you graduate from high school actually, ’56?


LC: Okay. What did you see before you then? You weren’t going to go to college. Did you know that you had to go head and enter military service and did you have any particular plans for what that service would look like?

FV: No, I just said, “Okay, I got to go join the Army, no career intention.” That’s something I had to get out of the way, get my check mark for before I could do anything else without the college. So, I joined and in the process, I began, I kind of assimilated right in and kind of like, it was an adventure. I got to do things I never was able to do before and they were fun things. There were physical things, you know, shooting, the running, the PT. So, I was in there and I was good at it and I kind of fell in place.

LC: Now Frank, did you decide particularly that you wanted to be in the Army as opposed to another branch of service?

FV: Yes.

LC: Okay.

FV: The Army kind of appealed to me more than any other service.

LC: Would that, based on your readings, have you…?

FV: Yes, most of it, yes.

LC: Were you interested in, for example, the Civil War period or…?

FV: Civil War, yes, I’m kind of, not a real buff, but yes, the Civil War enthralls me.

LC: But drawn to that
FV: And the ordeals that, the inhuman ordeals that I’ve read, you know, and the
anguish and I just wonder how people lived up and could I live up to those same kinds of
standards under those conditions. Not that I really knew I was going to go to war, but
you know, kind of life style appealed.

LC: Yes, you had that in your mind.

FV: Yes.

LC: Did you go and talk to a recruiter or how did you actually enlist?

FV: Yes, I got my dad and I said, “Dad, I’ve been working odd jobs and stuff like
I said for a couple of years.” I went home, I quit my job, I said, “I’m tired of this. All
I’m getting is just part time work here and there. I’m getting money in my pocket, but
I’m not going anywhere.” I’m living in a one-room apartment house or something and
struggling from week to week just to stay alive. So I said, “This is not getting me
anywhere.” So I said, “It’s time for me to do something.” So, I went home to him, asked
dad, said, “How about taking me to the Army recruiter. I’m going to join the Army.”
And he didn’t argue. He did, he took me there one morning. I talked to a recruiter, set
things up.

LC: Where was that Frank?

FV: In Waynesburg, Pennsylvania.

LC: Do you remember that recruiter at all?

FV: No, I don’t know who it was or anything.

LC: Okay.

FV: I mean, said I wanted to join the Army. He goes, “Fill out the paperwork”,
everything just fell in place.

LC: What was your initial enlistment time for?

FV: Two years.

LC: Okay.

FV: Well, no, it was three, I’m sorry; I volunteered. I was a volunteer, so, I had a
three-year obligation.

LC: Okay.

FV: Draftees had two years.

LC: Right. Did you select a specialization at that time?
FV: Yes, I picked infantry. I said I wanted to be in the challenging field and I said infantry, even though I tested out for other skills, because I had a good academic background in high school.

LC: Right.

FV: I wanted a challenge, the physical challenge more so than anything.

LC: So, soon there after I imagine you were off to Basic.

FV: Yes.

LC: Okay.

FV: Went from there then down to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

LC: Okay, well, tell me about your Basic first of all. That began roughly when, do you remember?

FV: In November 1963, I remember.

LC: Okay. And you went down to South Carolina to Fort Jackson.

FV: Yes.

LC: Do you remember that trip?

FV: Yes, it was by train from Fairfield, West Virginia. I had to go down there to an induction station and did your physicals and swore you in and you got on the train and down through the eastern US over night on the train sometime, I don’t know, I forget when we got in. It was like in the middle of the night, we got in down there in Columbia, South Carolina, bussed out to the base. Everything was kind of confusing; it was all new, new challenges, sergeants yelling at us. (Laughing)

LC: Right. (Laughing)

FV: We’re standing there in the middle of the night wondering why these guys are hollering at us. Trying to get us organized, but…(Laughing)

LC: Do you remember about how many guys were out there getting yelled at with you?

FV: Oh, we had a couple hundred. I mean, it was a whole like company full.

LC: Really?

FV: Yes, coming in. I mean, that train just kind of picked up guys [all the way down from West Virginia and others came in from other places as well].

LC: Along the way?
FV: From where we were, picked up others, and we all assembled out there in the middle of the night.

LC: Did you get to sleep that night?

FV: Yes, I think eventually they got us into a bunk somewhere.

LC: Tell me about your routine at Basic. How did things kind of shake out? What were you doing during the day?

FV: Well, it was very physical. I mean, it was up in the morning early; probably earlier than most of us ever really had to get up and clean up, file out for the physical training; very first order of business. Then they hit us pretty hard with PT, I remember back then.

LC: Right. How did you do with that?

FV: I did fine.

LC: You were in pretty good shape?

FV: I was in pretty good shape, so it didn’t bother me. I could do what I was always made; never had any problem with that.

LC: And did you actually in some way kind of enjoy it, like get into it?

FV: Oh yes. We’d run and all that and then that was no hardship at all.

LC: Right.

FV: And then learning the basic drills; that was kind of monotonous. You know, march left, right, on right. But learning that and learn getting in step, we did that. You had your basic military subjects, you know, courtesy, etiquette, ethics, all that stuff.

LC: Do you remember any particular instructors there?

FV: No, I can’t recall any.

LC: Okay. Nobody sort of left an impression on you?

FV: No.

LC: Okay.

FV: Not a single one of them.

LC: You mentioned earlier about taking the oath when you were sworn in.

FV: Yes.

LC: And I noted that you actually referred to that in the form that you filled out for us.
FV: Yes.

LC: Do you remember taking that oath?

FV: Yes, you stood there and you swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States and defend this country whether your life; that was pretty impact. It’s a pretty strong commitment I thought.

LC: And you took it seriously, it wasn’t just a step to go…

FV: No, yes, you’re right. I mean, it’s you’re going to do this, that probably conditioned by all that I heard before you know that you’re going to step out to the forward edge if called, then put your life on the line if need be. So, I really got into it because I took this stuff serious; you know, the shooting, throwing hand grenades was all important stuff for me.

LC: Now in November 1963, of course, the president was assassinated; I wonder if you remember that?

FV: Oh yes, I do, I was home. I hadn’t entered yet.

LC: Okay, oh really.

FV: I had seen the recruiter, I was coming in the Army, and that day I was at the house when that announcement [of JFK’s assassination] came on TV. I was just waiting for the recruiter to call and tell me when to report to the induction station.

LC: Really?

FV: So I was home.

LC: How did you feel, do you remember?

FV: Gee, I don’t know. Well, something impacted on me; I listened with awe, I was just awe struck, like, “Did this really happen” and had no idea what it was. I was ready to go though. [I was just dumbfounded; I just couldn’t believe it. This was something very big in my lifetime.]

LC: Yes, and did you pay attention to it over the next couple of three days?

FV: Oh yes, yes, because you know, “Are we going to war?” Those kind of things crossed my mind.

LC: Yes, yes I’m sure.

FV: “Are we into the big war now, or what’s happening here?” I mean all that stuff was coming over the air. It was just uncertainty really.
LC: And just a few days later then you…
FV: I went in right after, yes. All that pretty well settled down and the recruiter called and told me to report in down there in Fairfield, West Virginia for the induction station.

LC: There at Fort Jackson during Basic, did you feel like you were getting, like you were sort of peering over the edge of a new possibility for yourself in terms of a career? Did you start to think about that?
FV: Yes, I was thinking about that. I didn’t mind it. The sergeant would get in my face when I’d make a mistake and it was, “Yes sergeant, will do.” You know, and I’d do it and I’d struggle harder; it would inspire me to do better if I did something wrong. These guys, I didn’t see them as an enemy. I mean some guys do. They’re thinking, “Oh boy, this is awful” but I saw it as an inspiration. And as a result, I was able to move up to what they call the Acting Jack; they wear the armband, even though I was a private, private nothing, I got the armband for platoon sergeant, so I moved up into student leadership type of roles.
LC: Right away.
FV: Because I guess I clicked.
LC: And they could see that.
FV: And I guess they could see that, so they pulled me out, made me the platoon sergeant and I could pick up on stuff real quick.
LC: And did that sort of kind of fuel the fire in a way?
FV: That kind of fueled the fire, says, you know, “This must be for me because here I am, look at this.” You’re not getting any pay or anything, but I enjoyed it and I enjoyed being the leader, issuing the orders, trying to solve the problems and conditions and these things weren’t in my textbook stuff, this is stuff where you had to plan a ground, move over ground. It’s more like a chess match I guess. [The solutions are not always yes or no. They entail more than just knowledge, but require interval fortitude.]
LC: Did you do weapons qualifying at this point?
FV: Yes, I did weapons qualifying.
LC: What were you training on?
FV: Basically while in Basic training, it was just the individual rifles, M-14’s, throw hand grenades, shoot the rifle, and that’s basically it.

LC: And did you qualify with the M-14 at that point?

FV: Oh definitely, definitely.

LC: Have you had experience with handling guns and stuff when you were younger?

FV: Yes, you know, 22’s, shotguns, shooting. I mean, I could shoot a rifle; I wasn’t scared to shoot it.

LC: So you’re familiar in some way.

FV: You know, going rabbit hunting. Generally though, it was just, you don’t really aim, you just point and shoot. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

FV: But here they were teaching accuracy, hitting the targets, scoring points and stuff. It taught me a little more.

LC: Now when did you come out of Basic training?

FV: Let’s see, it was eight weeks, so…

LC: So sometime maybe in…

FV: November, December, probably January or so, but then I went into Advanced Infantry Training.

LC: Right away?

FV: Yes, so Basic was eight weeks and then straight out of there, right at Fort Jackson into Advanced Infantry Training.

LC: Okay, tell us about that. What kinds of things did you learn?

FV: Now in Advanced Infantry Training, we learned more, you know, squad maneuvers, squad tactics, more crew-served weapons firing machine guns, mortars, other kinds of weapons to get qualified with those. You know, expanding your knowledge of infantry techniques and infantry skills and getting qualified in all that kind of stuff. Again, that was, you know, like the active platoon sergeant.

LC: Were you feeling more and more comfortable the more things they brought to you?
FV: Yes, right, because by then, you know, we had all the Basic drill and all that, so we’re kind of familiar with courtesy part, familiar with the marching, all that kind of stuff was coming second nature.

LC: Right, the essentials of the military.

FV: Yes, so we were concentrating more on honing those kinds of skills like shooting those machine guns, qualifying on them which were a little more difficult to master than the standard rifle and things like that. People getting qualified on these crew-served weapons and things of the tactics. The tactics I think always maneuver bestly; the thing was moving cross-country, navigating, getting your people deployed, finding the objective, that kind of stuff.

LC: Did you have mock field trials and exercises?

FV: Oh yes, we did.

LC: Can you describe one…?

FV: They were like patrols, they give you a mission here to move from here, you know, there’s an objective; either recon it or something like that and report back information and that kind of stuff without being detected. So, it was like a game. It was playing it like a game, playing tag in the woods.

LC: Right.

FV: We weren’t really shooting at each other, but you know, we were still playing a game.

LC: Right and there was some strategy and some thinking involved.

FV: There’s some strategy and you’re trying to be sneaky.

LC: Right (Laughing) And how much time were you spending in classroom as opposed to out in the fields maneuvering or working with the weapons?

FV: Let’s see, I’d say, well, there’s more time out in the woods with the weapons and the tactics than it was in the classroom. There were things in the classroom where we’re learning about leadership, the principles, fundamentals of how you lead people, inspire people, what you can do, that kind of stuff; most of that, I think, probably about three-fourths of the time was out any in the field somewhere.

LC: Okay, and were you making friends and kind of gelling with a group at this point?
FV: Yes I was, plus I had filed at this point for OCS. Let me think I guess it was my Company Commander who suggested, somebody suggested it to me. I don’t know how I went about it, but somehow someone said, “You know, you ought to put in for OCS” so I filled an application out and I had a forward interview, all that kind of stuff while I was in the AIT. [Advanced Infantry Training]

LC: Do you remember that interview?

FV: Yes, I had to get all dressed up, had to go in and they asked you all kinds of weird questions. On one of them and I don’t know how I did on this one, they kind of asked me how I felt about girls or something.

LC: Oh really?

FV: And I’m wondering, “What in the world?” How do I feel? Well, that was a tough one to answer at that point. I can remember, I stumbled on that, I don’t know if I gave her a good answer, but anyhow, they recommended that I go.

LC: And later did you think of what the reason for that question was?

FV: That one question out of all the technical questions, that one was kind of, just kind of stuck with me, you know stumbled me.

LC: Threw you a little bit.

FV: Threw me.

LC: You probably weren’t expecting.

FV: Even though he asked you, “What’s the range of your weapon?” and then, “What do you think about girls?” I go, “Oh my goodness.”

LC: (Laughing) Yes, that was kind of left field, huh?

FV: I don’t know, they probably were just checking me out. I guess my sexuality.

LC: Probably.

FV: Because there had to be a point, and that’s probably what it was.

LC: Okay, and evidentially you passed.

FV: I must’ve gave the right answer.

LC: That’s right. You handled it fine apparently. So, the board that you were interviewing with then apparently recommended that you move on?
FV: They recommenced I go to OCS so instead, I was on orders to go to Germany after graduating from Advanced Infantry Training, so those orders were cancelled upon my selection of OCS and I was put hold status pending the next available class. Let’s see, this all was like ’64 and this is like in the spring or so and I entered OCS in October 1964.

LC: So the summer of 1964…

FV: So that summer I just kind of laid around up there at Fort Jackson doing a bunch of nothing.

LC: Okay, like daily duties…

FV: Well, daily duties, but I maintained physical fitness. Me and a couple of other guys that were going to OCS, we were kind of put in a headquarters company and we’d go run and we just had details. Whatever duties they assigned us to do.

LC: Right, but you were just in effect marking time until…

FV: Marking time, waiting for the OCS class, yes.

LC: Do you remember some of the guys that you were with at that point, who were going on to OCS or did they take different paths?

FV: Yes, one of them was my real good buddy, ranger buddy, Bob Taft. He was killed in Vietnam; he died.

LC: Yes, I think Bob was with 1st of the 7th, is that right?

FV: 1st of the 7th, yes.

LC: And we may have a chance to talk about him later.

FV: Okay.

LC: But you already knew him at this point?

FV: Oh yes, we were there together at Fort Jackson waiting for this class to open.

LC: Oh okay, so then…

FV: So, we kind of go out at night, spend whatever money we had and spent the rest of the month out there on Base.

LC: And just kind of wait for time to go by?

FV: And wait, and running, keeping in shape.

LC: Now, what did you know really about OCS before you got there? Did you have any information?
FV: Well, yes, I heard that it was going to be tough, that it was going to be a physical challenge and a tough mental challenge. So, we were trying to prepare ourselves. We had officers stationed at Fort Jackson who were products of OCS talked to us.

LC: That was kind of informal?

FV: Yes, it was all informal, but it was like, “Here’s what’s going to happen, here’s the way the things work.”

LC: And was that helpful to you to get…

FV: So, yes, so you kind of had your mind, mentally, you were able to say, “Okay”, have to be prepared to take a lot of this mental…well, I don’t like to use the word, but this “mental bashing” you know, and they mentally tried to break you at that point.

LC: For the purpose of weeding people out?

FV: Yes, I guess to see if you’re strong mental character fortitude, if you’re willing to stick it out and really put some mental pressure on you as well as physical.

LC: Did you regret not getting to go to Germany or were you looking forward to OCS?

FV: No, I was looking forward to OCS.

LC: Okay, so the Germany…

FV: That was opening up a new opportunity, so no, not going to Germany didn’t.

LC: Who cares, right?

FV: Who cares, yes.

LC: Okay. (Laughing) When you actually went down to Georgia at Fort Benning, do you remember that?

FV: Oh yes.

LC: Okay, can you tell us what you remember about it?

FV: Yes. All I remember is I was PFC by then had the wings on my uniform. I had gone to the barbershop because they told us, “Get your haircut”, so I had my haircut. They said, “Don’t come in there with long hair and all that.” With apprehension, but, I walked up to the company dragging my duffel bag, signed in, once you signed in, then that was it. I don’t know, I can’t remember too much after that. The Senior Candidates,
stand attack officers just got all over you, yelling at you. We were dropping for push-ups, every time we turned around, we did something wrong. Trying to get to our room assignment, get our duffel bag up there. Every thing we did was wrong.

LC: Right.

FV: Walk wrong, talk wrong, weren’t carrying a duffel bag right; I mean, it didn’t matter. It was wrong. It took awhile to get up to the room to try to get your gear in and then of course, setting the gear up, didn’t follow SOP because we had no idea what the SOP was.

LC: Right, therefore you couldn’t follow it.

FV: They were always on us constantly. I mean, minute after minute until bedtime. Then of course, after bedtime, I think it was ten o’clock at night, you were to go to bed; everything got quiet.

LC: And you’d probably just collapse more or less.

FV: Yes, and then you are going, “Oh my goodness.” You’re too tired. At least that first night, I don’t know how you go to sleep; you’re expecting somebody going to jump at you and tell you’re not sleeping right.

LC: Now did that kind of pressure with the instructors and officers sitting right on top of you and in your face all the time, did that continue?

FV: Yes, all through the first early phases of OCS, first couple of weeks, I guess they called it hazing and it was pretty rough.

LC: Yes, and how did you do with it?

FV: Well, I did fine. I mean, under your breath, you might said some nasty things, but you held your tongue because many others would break and they’d have enough of it.

LC: And did some people leave?

FV: Yes, I can’t recall how many, but yes, some people flat said that this…

LC: Not worth it.

FV: Not worth it, yes.

LC: How long were you actually at Fort Benning for the OCS training?

FV: 23 weeks.

LC: 23 weeks?
FV: Yes.

LC: Okay, so well into early…

FV: So October, so we got graduated in April 1965.

LC: Now, in there, were you giving any thought to American policy at that time and…

FV: No, the policy, no, all we were giving thought to was leading troops in combat.

LC: Okay.

FV: What our role as a young officer is to lead by example so we had to be honed in our weapon skills and of course as an officer now, we had to know all the weapons; machine guns, grenade launchers, bazookas, the mortars. We had to know all of those things, how they worked and everything, to know how to employ them and all, you know. Now our knowledge and everything couldn’t be just focused on just one weapon or something like that, it had to be everything across the board.

LC: And did you also have to know not only how to deploy them in the field and how to operate them, but also, for example, how to take care of them?

FV: How to take care of them, we talked about leadership which is welfare of your troops, accomplishment of the mission; you combine those two aspects and how do you do it, you know, and that was the big focus. The idea was take them and bring them back alive.

LC: Right, and do whatever it takes really in there to get the mission done.

FV: Yes, employ, use the weapons, use the artillery, all this stuff.

LC: Go head.

FV: To destroy the enemy position or whatever was occupying and bring your people back out alive.

LC: How exactly did they train you to assume command and assume leadership?

FV: Well, you had student leadership positions and they put you into can scenarios and saw how you reacted; what your concerns were. They evaluated how well you could plan and think, how well you issued orders and communicated to subordinate elements. How well you did all that.

LC: So, again, you had sort of mock setups that you would go through?
FV: Yes.

LC: Okay. How many were in your class?

FV: I can’t think in the OCS; we had quite a few. Probably had about one hundred and eighty people.

LC: Okay. And did the OCS classes only form just so many times a year?

FV: Then, I think we only had like four classes in session at one time. That was prior Vietnam War?

LC: Yes.

FV: So it hadn’t built up.

LC: It hadn’t accelerated it to the point.

FV: At that point even in OCS, we knew there was a war going on, but it was strictly guerilla war, advisory kind of war. American troops had not been committed. I don’t think anybody; if anybody was thinking about it, it wasn’t down at our level. It might’ve been at high levels, but our training and all was just conventional, general war against the big axis, blocker, whatever.

LC: Okay, so you’re really thinking about in general…

FV: We’d think about Soviet Union…

LC: Yes, European conflict.

FV: The war in Europe.

LC: I should ask you this now, what point did you actually go to Ranger School?

FV: Okay, right after OCS.

LC: Okay.

FV: Graduated from OCS and entered Ranger School.

LC: Now how did it come about that you were selected for Ranger School?

FV: We applied when our Chain of Command OCS recommended us, so kept on commissioning our orders, took us right over to Ranger School.

LC: Now how many guys went over there?

FV: There were quite a few. Maybe about one-fourth of our class went from OCS into Ranger School.

LC: Did Bob Taft go with you?

FV: Yes, he was my Ranger buddy.
LC: Okay.

FV: He and I; what we call Ranger buddies, they teemed us up together and we were to take care of each other in Ranger School. We were commissioned by then, the Ranger training really gets into the difficult part of the infantry.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: You know, where we normally go walk cross country and all that, this stuff was water operations, operating behind enemy lines in small units. You know, you don’t have everybody on your right and left. You’re pretty well self-sustaining there.

LC: Where did this training take place?

FV: It took place in three locations. Phase one at Fort Benning. We spent about three weeks there, then we moved north into North Georgia, Dahlonega and we did mountain techniques up there, mountain climbing, working in those mountains and everything.

LC: Isn’t that where the gold strike was?

FV: Yes, up through those hills.

LC: And those are some serious mountains too.

FV: Yes they were, and we learned how to do the climbing, tying in, using the petons; do actual mountain climbing stuff.

LC: Okay.

FV: To be able to operate in that kind of terrain and the final three weeks in Florida in the swamps simulating jungles and all that. There we learned water survival skills and working in and around the water waves and all that.

LC: This, I think it’s generally known as incredibly physically demanding type of training.

FV: Very. They stress you not only moving it; it’s not so much peak physical training, it’s each of those phases is actual patrolling operations out in that environment. You have a mission is assimilated enemy country and you’re behind enemy lines, you’re not working in conjunction with other troops on your right and left, so you have to constantly be alert at all times, maintaining security. You’re a small group, you want to be undetected and you live on minimum rations, you try to sustain yourself from the
local, whatever land they have to offer or friendly partisans, if there were in fact any
friendly partisans around, which you know, people friendly to your cause.

LC: Right.

FV: And try to sustain yourself through that, so that meant going long periods of
time without eating. Yes, I got very hungry. That’s one of the things you did do and you
learn how to continue to operate and you operate at night without sleep.

LC: And some people don’t make it through this also, is that fair?

FV: Absolutely, they broke down physically and some people broke down
mentally because of the lack of sleep.

LC: Lack of sleep.

FV: It’d just break them.

LC: Frank, how do you think you managed to make it through? What was it that
was driving you to complete this successfully?

FV: Just pure determination. People, like the friends like Bob, each were
encouraging each other. I mean, there were times we’d get discouraged. I’d be at the
point where I don’t think I can make this anymore, and they say, “Ah come on.” You
know, you help each other and pull each other along.

LC: Now, Bob was sort of your training buddy you said?

FV: Yes, we call him Ranger buddy.

LC: Ranger buddy, okay. And were there other guys too who were important to
you and whom you were important to in this time period?

FV: Well, yes, there were a lot of friendships. A lot of us knew each other
because we graduated, gone through OCS together.

LC: Right.

FV: And then we were in the Ranger class, Joe Marm was another one and he
went through Ranger class, I’m trying to think. So, these were friendships, we were
friends with each other.

LC: Right.

FV: And this kind of thing, you know, and when we get down and we knew each
other, so we could confide in each other and that helped.

LC: Yes. So, you didn’t have to be like Superman around?
FV: No, you didn’t have to be like that. You could tell these guys, you know, “I’m about fed up with this” and they tell you, “Well, one more day. You can make one more day here”, give you some kind of encouragement.

LC: Right, exactly. And was that really, would you say, crucial to getting through this essentially?

FV: Yes, I think it is crucial that you have a partner, have a buddy or somebody to do that when you really get to feeling down.

LC: I think in the forms you filled out, you also mentioned that pride had something to do with it too?

FV: Oh yes, definitely.

LC: Can you talk about that for a second?

FV: Well, you know, I guess it’s up to being able to accomplish things that you thought maybe never were able to and to being treading the same ground where others have gone before you and to prove, well, you’ve proven to yourself more or less, but saying, “I’m as good as they are. I’m up to the challenge.” That makes you feel good.

LC: Now, can you describe for example what your time down in Florida was like? Where were you, do you know?

FV: Eglin Air Force Base. Then it didn’t matter. It was swampy; you’re always wet and miserable. It’s dark, during the day it was probably so hot, but beating around through the thick brush at night, swamp in the water. You’re trying to be quiet, as quiet as you can without making much noise. Locate the target or the enemy position, the objective you were assigned, attack it, destroy it, catch him by surprise. Then as a small unit, you know, you had to get back out of there real quick, so you had to learn your abstraction by foot or by boot or how you’re going to be attracted.

LC: And did you have, for example, simulations of injuries so that you would have to be responsible for getting…?

FV: Oh yes, every once in a while, the Cadre would say, “Okay, you’ve got three casualties” and you’d designate someplace, so you’d have to carry him on your back or carry him in and transport him.

LC: Was there any kind of ceremony or anything when you were done with the training, when you’d actually successfully completed it?
FV: We had a graduation ceremony.
LC: Where was that?
FV: Fort Benning; it’s the big Infantry School.
LC: Okay.
FV: Went in there, dressed up in our khakis and we all got our Ranger tabs in the formal ceremony.
LC: And how did you feel when that was happening?
FV: You feel proud, you felt you’d really had gone through something tough and able, I succeeded; meet the challenge.
LC: What would your rank have been at this point, Frank?
FV: I was a 2nd Lieutenant.
LC: Okay.
FV: I had just gotten commissioned, so I was still a 2nd Lieutenant.
LC: Okay.
FV: Hadn’t been to a unit yet, but…
LC: But that was coming pretty quickly.
FV: Well, we knew it was coming. While we were in Ranger School, we got orders to 1st Cav Division.
LC: Okay.
FV: But while we were in Ranger School in the Florida Phase, they came in one day, we was there eating lunch and Cadre came in and said, “Okay, the following change in orders have been announced.” And we didn’t know anything about going to Vietnam at this point.
LC: Okay.
FV: But all our orders got changed. Like I was on order 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell, Kentucky and others were different units. Well, they came in and said, “All the following orders” and they read our name off of it. It was practically our whole class.
LC: Really?
FV: I was signed to the 1st Calvary Division in Fort Benning, Georgia. I’m going, “Wow, what’s going on?”
LC: Something’s happened.
FV: So then we started talking and other people said, well, we heard this, we heard that…and finally we connected and said, “Uh oh.” Then they did tell us we were going to Vietnam, but we kind of figured out that’s what is it. And it was long after that that President Johnson appeared on TV and made that announcement. He’s ordered the 1st Cav Division to Vietnam.
LC: Right. So, about what time would this have been?
FV: This is July of 1965.
LC: You just mentioned that you thought, “Uh oh” when you sort of found out that you were 1st Cav…
FV: Yes, why, you know, why the change? Well, we knew, we could sense something was amiss. When they come in, they change everybody’s orders, everybody’s now reassigned to 1st Cav Division; we go, and “What is this about?”
LC: And you said that you guys kind of worked it out on your own?
FV: Yes, we’re kind of just talking to each other and others hearing this, hearing that and said, “Okay, we’re going to be going into combat.”
LC: Do you remember President Johnson’s speech?
FV: Yes.
LC: Okay. Did you actually watch it, as it was happening?
FV: Yes, live and said they had confirmed everything, yes.
LC: Can you describe if you remember what your thinking was at that time?
FV: Well, I just thought we entered a new threshold of life that this is what all we’ve been training for in the last year or so that I’ve been in the Army, this was it. We were going to be put to the test.
LC: Frank, what did you know about Vietnam, if anything at that point?
FV: Nothing.
LC: Was there any chatter amongst the guys about what it must be like or was it just kind of a vacuum?
FV: It was kind of a vacuum at that point. We had no idea what…you know; Vietnam was real low on our radar…we knew there was something going on over there. Anybody that went was strictly advisory, guerilla type war. Not what we were mentally
all keyed up for, but now suddenly it was taken. Now we wanted to know, what is

Vietnam, what’s it all about, what is going on?

LC: So you stayed then at Fort Benning for a little while?

FV: Well, we joined the Cav Division that reformed. You know, they pulled the

colors back from Korea.

LC: Yes.

FV: Reformed the Division at Fort Benning, at the Harmony Church area. So,
after we graduated from Ranger School, we all went out and checked in, were assigned to
our units, our various units. Bob and I got split up at that point. He went to the 1st of the
7th Cav and I went to 1st of the 8th. In the same Division, but different battalions.

LC: Different battalions.

FV: Yes.

LC: When you say that the colors were pulled back from Korea, for someone
who didn’t understand that, could you say what that means?

FV: Well, what they mean is they took the [First] Calvary Division, you know,
the national, the colors, the standards for the Division?

LC: Yes.

FV: And re-activated the 2nd Infantry Division which is currently stationed in
Korea. So, they brought the colors, the Division Standard back to Fort Benning and
reorganized. What they called reorganize the 1st Calvary Division airmobile and they had
made it that airmobile division.

LC: Did you know really, I suppose with Ranger training you had an idea, but
what airmobile tactics really were?

FV: No, 11th Air Assault Division guys mostly did that.

LC: Yes.

FV: But being Ranger, we weren’t too familiar with airmobile operations other
than we had conducted some raids using helicopters in Ranger School.

LC: But you didn’t really sort of put it together with this kind of new operational
tag?

FV: No, so what we had to do was as we got in the division, was kind of train and
learn as a new member division. Now, there were old 11th Air Assault people already
around that had practiced and trained under that 11th Air Assault test concept. So, they were kind of familiar on how to do all this. So, whether it was kind of new for me and Bob and all the rest of us, it wasn’t too hard for us to catch on.

LC: Okay.

FV: I mean having been what we’ve been through in training, so it was just a new way of getting to the job. You know, getting to this where you need to go.

LC: Do you remember any of the guys who were introducing the concept and how exactly was it introduced to you?

FV: It was kind of just in our units; pretty rapid because here you are in your unit and say, “Okay, here we’re going” and if you didn’t know what to do, you had to ask somebody. “Hey, what am I supposed to do?” And they say, “Well, just wait for the helicopter, get on it and go.” Kind of rough; it was kind of like learn as you go type of thing. [The concept was already introduced to others. Mainly the senior leadership. We were young lieutenants and hadn’t trained in airmobile concepts. It was all new to us. So we had to learn on the job. But because we were Rangers and highly skilled, we were able to adapt rapidly and learn the techniques of Air Assault].

LC: Right, you had to pick it up.

FV: Pick it up.

LC: At what point did you actually receive orders that you knew the 1 of the 8th was going to be deployed overseas?

FV: When I got to the division, you know, when President Johnson made the announcement.

LC: Okay.

FV: That was it, we knew then for sure and until then, nobody said nothing official, although we all suspected. And then when he came on TV and said, “I have now ordered the 1st Calvary Division to Vietnam”…bingo! I said, “Okay.” So, we notched it up another gear as far as our intensity, mental intensity and all that. We notched it up.

LC: Right, because now you’re pointed in the direction that you’re going to go.

FV: Yes, now we knew for sure. We had no doubt about it.

LC: Now at what point did you actually group to embark for overseas?
FV: Okay, at what point...it was there at Fort Benning, we filled our units. You know, NCO’s, Cadre, enlisted. Got our companies filled, our platoons filled. What we call POR qualified them, you know, shots, get the shot records, everybody qualified on their weapon. Make sure everything was working. Pack up everything, set out. The big thing I remember, we had the old white t-shirts and the old white nametags and everything and said, “Well, we’re going in” so we dyed everything green including our underwear and towels.

LC: Really?

FV: And the big story was there in Columbus, Georgia that we ordered everybody to take green dye and dye all their white stuff, so people were going into laundry mats in town after the soldiers had been in there and used the green dye in this washing machine, so other civilians and families would go into these laundry mats with their white clothes while a lot of that dye was still left and their whites would get dyed green. (Laughing)

LC: They were all getting fatigue wear as well.

FV: Yes, because we had done that. I remember that was a big thing.

LC: Yes, I bet it was. (Laughing) So, you guys had to actually do your own dyeing?

FV: Yes, take all our white t-shirts, under shorts, all our white towels and stuff and dye them green.

LC: That’s interesting. At some point then, you got ready to actually to go overseas and I gather you were going to go by ship, is that right?

FV: Yes.

LC: How did that come about?

FV: Okay, when we got our movement orders at Fort Benning, we assembled sometime in the middle of the night, I can’t remember, but it was late. We had all troops assembled and commercial buses came in and we were dispatched under platoon control. I was a platoon leader, 2nd Lieutenant, so I had one bus assigned to me and all my troops would be on that bus. My platoon was about 43 members and we were given directions to go to Savannah, Georgia, told not to check in till about [5:00 P.M.], let me see, this is maybe two or three in the morning. We loaded a bus and departed Fort Benning and then
on our own, we made our way across Georgia to Savannah. We were told not to get there
till maybe five o’clock in the evening or something because we wont be able to board the
ship until then. So, we were on our own, the bus was under my control and we stopped
here and there and had some hamburgers and stuff. You know, trying to time our arrival
there so we wouldn’t get there too early.

LC: Okay.

FV: We get into Savannah Harbor…yes?

LC: I was just going to ask Frank if you remembered stopping and getting
something to eat?

FV: Yes, we stopped in some small town. It was like we had been driving for a
while and troops were getting hungry and we didn’t want to move too fast, so we all had
to make a bathroom break and everything. I remember telling the bus driver to go head
and pull into a hamburger place. I can’t remember, it was just whatever we saw along the
road. I can’t remember what it was or anything and troops got out and ate hamburgers,
drank coke, went to the bathroom and we kind of laid around there and when we went to
get back on, we had one soldier missing.

LC: Oh really?

FV: Yes, we took our head count and one of our squad leaders reported one
soldier missing.

LC: What happened with that?

FV: He didn’t get back on the bus. So, we got off the bus again, we figured out
who it was, got him by name and everything and said, “What is going on?” So, got back
off the bus, talked to the NCO’s and two of my NCO’s said we’ll just to stay here and
they would go check with the local police. And they did and they looked out and one of
our guys had attempted to go AWOL. He was caught hitch-hiking.

LC: Oh no, hitchhiking, oh no.

FV: He broke away from everybody, went out down the road and he was trying
to beat feet.

LC: Yes, right. And what happened to him?
FV: Well, we took him, nothing; we didn’t do anything. We got him back and we said, “We’ll watch him.” Sergeant said, “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it.” We didn’t do anything to him.

LC: Did you find out what was going on with him later on?

FV: Well, the more we found out, I can’t remember his name exactly, but he got killed later in Vietnam I remember. But he was stubborn. He was from Russia; he was an immigrant. [His name was Wilbur W. Ivanov].

LC: Okay.

FV: His family background was pretty skeptical. He was like an only child. He didn’t have much family or anything here and he’d join the Army and was just trying to serve, but I guess he didn’t want to go to war and he was a stubborn case. He caused his NCO’s a lot of trouble because he was always an independent kind of guy.

LC: Oh okay.

FV: He just wasn’t a team member.

LC: Right, and as time went on, that kind of became clear.

FV: Yes, and it became clear. He died quite by accident. Being as stubborn as he was, I remember we were loading helicopters one day to get lifted off and his squad leader told him to carry some ammo, some extra stuff and he got upset about it. The sergeant yelled at him, telling him to pick it up and carry ammo, you know, got in his face. So he grabbed the ammo cans, hunched his soldiers down, stuck his head down and he walked right into the tail rotor of one of the helicopters and that’s how, when they explained how he got killed, what happened. So, it wasn’t really in combat, it was just his attitude that did it.

LC: Wow. Okay, so you were going to go back, you were going to be moving the buses on. Now, you’ve got the would be AWOL guy that’s back on the bus.

FV: Yes, we got him back together, had everybody together again, so we just moved on to Savannah to the Harbor. Got there about, I think it was the prescribed time, before five o’clock or something like that.

LC: What happens when you get there?

FV: Well, there was just a big long line of guys still there on the peer side boarding the ship. Of course, we were carrying our duffel bags; everything we had, all
our military gear. So, we got off the buses and found our place in the line and just moved
on board the ship, got our names checked off on the manifest and got on the ship there in
Savannah and waited for everybody else to load. The officers got to go up into what,
wardrooms. They had about four of us per room and the enlisted men had to go down in
the hold, you know, where they stack them down there like fire wood.
LC: Sure. What was the name of the ship, do you recall?
FV: USS Geiger.
LC: Okay, and at this point, Frank, did your family know what was going on with
you?
FV: No. I hadn’t talked to them. We weren’t allowed to tell anybody.
LC: Oh really?
FV: Yes, we were told not to say anything by phone or anything like that. My
family was up in Pennsylvania, so, no, I hadn’t told them.
LC: Okay, had you been writing back and forth to them while you were…?
FV: No, I was busy. I was trying to get troops; there’s so much stuff I had to do.
I mean, I was working from early morning until late at night trying to get troops, you
know, all the last minute stuff taken care of for deployment.
LC: Right, and at this point you’re fully responsible for over forty men.
FV: Right, yes, so I didn’t do much writing, yes. I was trying to get all that done.
By the time evening would roll around, I’d be tired. I’d go home and go to bed. I’d get
up early the next morning back at it again. Then on the ship, we didn’t have any
communication off the ship, but then we could write though. So, there was a lot of free
time on the ship.
LC: Okay, now you left out of Savannah…
FV: Yes.
LC: And what was your route, do you remember?
FV: Yes, we went south through the Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Zone and
come around out into the Pacific. Then we made a stop in Hawaii there at Pearl Harbor.
We got to get off the boat there and that’s when I called my parents.
LC: Tell me about going through the Canal, do you remember that?
FV: Yes.
LC: Okay, had you ever been down there?
FV: No, this was all new. This was all a new experience. So, we’re just all hanging over the sides of the rails of the boat and looking and enjoying the scenery. It wasn’t too much to see, but it was an experience.
LC: Sure.
FV: It took, I don’t know, it took about eight hours or so to get through the Canal.
LC: That’s right, it takes a long time.
FV: Yes.
LC: So, then you went out, a lot of time passes I presume when you got into…
FV: Got in the Pacific and then days or maybe weeks, a week or two passed…
LC: Then you got out to Pearl?
FV: We pulled into Pearl Harbor and we got a shore liberty like about eight hours or something; just get off and head back.
LC: Really? So, what did you do?
FV: What? Went to a bar, started drinking, had a big dinner. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Okay, what did you have for dinner, do you know?
FV: Probably steak or something.
LC: Okay.
FV: Well, I was with the battalion commander, so most of us officers, I think we went to an officer’s club there or something. Had a big dinner, you’re just standing around the bar drinking Mai Tai I remember.
LC: Oh really?
FV: Yes, the first time we ever had those with fresh pineapple. Oh, I can remember how good that was.
LC: Were you with primarily now the battalion commanders at this point?
FV: Yes.
LC: Okay, and were you seeing or were there on the ship other battalions besides your…
FV: Yes, there were three other battalion or two others. There were three of us, three battalions together.
LC: Okay, do you know the numbers of the other guys that were on the…?
FV: The 2nd of the 8th and the 2nd of the 12th Infantry; yes.
LC: Can you tell me a little bit about the commanders that you were with? Who did you report to for example?
FV: I reported to Colonel Kenneth Mertel.
LC: How do you spell his last name?
FV: M-e-r-t-e-l.
LC: And he has written a book, has he not?
FV: He wrote a book, what’s the name of that book?
LC: A year…what was it?
FV: The Year of the Horse, okay, yes I remember that.
LC: Yes, that’s right, okay.
FV: That kind of pretty well outlines you know, our whole battalions movement and everything.
LC: Right. What kind of a guy was he? How did he impress you?
FV: He impressed me as a pretty erect, straightforward, he was a gung-ho; go get them kind of a guy.
LC: Did you feel confidence in the guys that you were reporting to?
FV: Yes, I could feel confidence in him in the way in his mannerisms. He was out there running with us. I mean, it wasn’t just issuing orders, but he was there with us, inspiring us through personal example.
LC: Really?
FV: And things so, when you’d see him coming around, you wanted to show him that you were as good as he was, if not better. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Right. So, he was kind of inspiring you to improve?
FV: So he was inspiring us, yes.
LC: And that’s pretty important, isn’t it, I mean, in terms of how you’re adjusting.
FV: You build like this comrade, this family because you know, this is your family and there’s nowhere else to go right now.
LC: Sure, that’s right.
FV: No matter how good or bad you feel, this is it. These guys all around you are guys you live with, sleep with; eat with.

LC: And would you say at this point, you and others were looking for the best in each other rather than kind of looking for faults or shortcomings reasons?

FV: Oh, absolutely trying to get along. I mean, you’re living side by side, day in, day out and you know your lives depend on each other and you’ve got to be able to count on each other.

LC: And you felt that already even at this point?

FV: Yes. You kind of build this comrade and if somebody doesn’t fit in, like there were times that we had some that didn’t fit in and you kind of push them out. I don’t know how you call it, yes.

LC: Frank, you said that you called your folks from Pearl.

FV: Yes, from Hawaii. That was first I’d talked to them.

LC: How’d that go?

FV: Oh okay. They thought that something was happening. They hadn’t heard from me in a couple of weeks.

LC: Right, so they had an inkling.

FV: And they thought, well, yes, and then I called them from there and told them that I’m on my way because then we were underway so I guess, I don’t know if we were allowed to or not, I just told them I was. That was the first time I told them.

LC: And they were supportive, would you say?

FV: Well, it was just like, “Okay, what can we do about it?” There’s nothing that can be done.

LC: Concerned?

FV: Yes, they were concerned.

LC: Tell me about the rest of your trip over. Did you stop again after Hawaii?

FV: Yes, we moved on. You know, on board the ship, it was just pretty monotonous. We had PT on deck everyday and we would just sit around, discussions about tactics and stuff with our NCOs and there wasn’t too much else to do.

LC: Was it incredibly crowded on the ship?
FV: Oh, it was very crowded. I mean, with the troops and everything, it was really crowded. You couldn’t move too much. Of course, we’d rotate units to the deck throughout the day and then just do PT on deck that was the fun thing. That was the funnest part of it because the rest of the time we’re just sitting around, talking, or just laying around not even doing nothing.

LC: Would you say you were getting a little bit like bored or antsy?
FV: Oh yes.
LC: To get on with it?
FV: Hanging over the side, slight little movement of water created interest, you know, get something different.

LC: Right. About how long did this whole crossing take from Savannah all the way out?
FV: Almost a month.
LC: Really?
FV: About thirty days on that ship, but we did make another stop in Guam. Now here we weren’t given like shore liberty. We left the boat as a unit, formed formation, went to a beach, we had a cookout, drank some beer, back to the ship in our PT outfits which were shorts and t-shirt. You know, back on in just a matter of maybe two or three hours.

LC: Do you remember that “beach party?”
FV: Yes. It was like, go to the beach, we had beer, and they got grills out and cooked hamburgers.

LC: Did you go swimming at all?
FV: I got to swim yes, in the water, splash around and drink some beer and then form back up and get back on the ship.

LC: Did you have seasickness at all?
FV: No, I don’t think I ever did get seasick.
LC: Okay, that’s amazing.
FV: I mean the guys were all playing games with each other.
LC: Oh, I’m sure.
FV: “Ralph.” (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)  
FV: Trying to get each other to, you know, and sometimes it worked.  
LC: I believe you.  
FV: Some guys would get sick.  
LC: I believe you. (Laughing)  
FV: Now down in the hold was different. Those troops down there were living  
all clustered together in mass and I mean, the smell because all the body heat, body odor,  
temperature down there wasn’t as cool as it was up in the ward room where we officers  
were.  
LC: Was the Geiger really a troop ship or…?  
FV: It’s a troop ship, yes. I mean, these are like big open bays and cots were like  
four high.  
LC: About how old was it at that point?  
FV: Probably a World War II ship I guess.  
LC: Was it?  
FV: But down there, these are big open like bays and the temperatures were up  
down there, they weren’t cool, as cool like up in the wardrooms. With all those people  
packed in there plus all that body heat would add to it and the smell and the ship moving.  
At least we were up topside where we could have reference with the horizon; look  
outside. These couldn’t see out, they’re all enclosed down there and the ship’s rocking a  
little bit, so some of those guys would get sick.  
LC: Oh, I’m sure they did.  
FV: And all it would take to be one to get sick down there, and that odor would  
permeate through there and whole bunches of them would get sick. It was a different  
story down there for the enlisted men.  
LC: Yes, that’s pretty tough and to do that for a month is…  
FV: Yes, you’d go down there just to inspect them every now and then, but it  
wasn’t like we had to live down there. That was tougher for them.  
LC: Yes, I’m sure it was. Sir, do you remember arriving actually at Vietnam?  
FV: Yes.  
LC: Where did you come in?
FV: Offshore at Qui Nhon Harbor.

LC: Okay, and how did you get from the Geiger to land?

FV: Okay, we had to go over the side on, well, it was a series of steps that went
down into a landing craft and walked down those steps. You know, water was bobbing,
it was not like a amphibious evasion, but it was kind of rough getting all your gear down;
you know, carrying duffel bag plus all your combat gear and weapons.

LC: And making it down the…

FV: To get down the ladder, there was a lot of stuff went flying down there
smacking people; a lot of stuff was dropped. (Laughing)

LC: Now did you guys go in by company or how were you…?

FV: Yes, we went in by unit, by company and platoon on the landing craft and it
just rolled up on the beach, dropped the front rim. Of course, the beach was secure. We
didn’t have any ammo, so thank goodness the beach was secure. We didn’t get our
ammo until we got on shore. Then we issued the ammunition out.

LC: Okay, when you actually get to the shore with your men, what were the first
things that happened? Were you directed to wait or go to a certain place?

FV: No, there were people there directing us, said, “Okay, what unit are you
with?” and moving us into marshaling areas what they call.

LC: Okay.

FV: They said, “Okay, you’re with C Company, 1st of the 8th, over here.” And
you’d march over there and form up with your company.

LC: Do you know what day you actually arrived there, sir?

FV: No, it was, I guess August, July, August. End of August I know.

LC: Okay.

FV: Somewhere, it was pretty hot.

LC: So probably some time in August 1965.

FV: Yes.

LC: After the sort of marshaling areas and sorted themselves out, were you
finally issued with ammunition?
FV: Yes, we were issued our ammunition there, rations, other things that we needed and we had safety instructions. We didn’t want everybody lock and loading and all that kind of stuff, but we got magazines loaded. Do you hear noise?

LC: No.

FV: My battery might be getting weak here.

LC: I’m talking about your arrival and that you were issued with ammunition. At this point, did you have a firm notion of what the mission was that was in front of you?

FV: No, just still that we were going to be combating a guerilla force.

LC: Okay.

FV: Our warfare tactics would be different than I guess what we were trained. We weren’t going to be against tanks and all this kind of stuff.

LC: Right.

FV: But again, our Ranger training, well, mine, would help adapt to this kind of environment very easily.

LC: Had you had much instruction on the way over there as to what was going on in Vietnam?

FV: We had some historical lessons, people giving us classes and discussions about the history of what’s happened in Vietnam about the French and their experience in there and that kind of stuff, so knowledge wise, it gave us some idea of what we’re up against.

LC: Did that help you kind of acclimate what it was you were supposed to be doing?

FV: I don’t know. It was kind of hard. Knowing the tactics on the ground, it was a little different.

LC: Okay.

FV: We didn’t really know what the heck to expect yet.

LC: When you moved off the beach, what happened?

FV: We moved from Qui Nhon over to An Khe, the main division base camp, we set up. Went by helicopter.

LC: From Qui Nhon to An Khe?
FV: From Qui Nhon, yes, they’d come in by helicopters and pick us up and carry us in. Now, my platoon, our helicopter had a malfunction. As we were lifting off with our company, our helicopter had to abort and come back in on land. I don’t know what happened, but we had a malfunction so we had to unload and it knocked us out of our order of movement.

LC: Okay.

FV: So, my platoon, I had to pull them aside while the others, they continue with the order of movement and then bring me back in later that night, so it was not until night that I arrived in An Khe with my platoon. The rest of the company, the rest of the battalion was there and had no idea where they were because now we was kind of like on our own.

LC: Sure.

FV: So, when finally they got our platoon there, we tried to get everything together and I’m just out there in the middle of the night trying to find whoever I can to see if they knew where our battalion is. So, I had to get our platoon, moved at night through all these others. It’s just people moving everywhere just like diffusion, find our battalion, get linked back up and then find out where the heck we were supposed to put up for the night. That was kind of a mess.

LC: Yes. That night and also the next few days, what were your first impressions of An Khe? What was the state of it when you were there?

FV: Well, we were inside the compound and so we weren’t committed on the line yet. We weren’t like directly nose-to-nose. The 101st Airborne Division had a brigade in there. It was providing the perimeter security for us. And it was kind of spooky because at night, weapons were firing off in the distance all around us, tracers were going up in the air, there was explosions. We had no idea what the heck was going on.

LC: Really?

FV: I mean you’d be waking up every little noise you hear. We didn’t know what was going on until we could get organized and then finally we’d get a side and they moved us out onto the perimeter and relieved the 101st.

LC: How quickly did you guys move out?

FV: Oh, it was a matter of days. It wasn’t too long.
LC: Really?
FV: And finally we were out on the defenses looking across the wires and we were…
LC: Your….go head Frank.
FV: Here we were, we were on the perimeter, on the front line.
LC: And you were on the perimeter providing defense for the base.
FV: For the base, initially yes.
LC: And was that the battalions assignment or…?
FV: Yes, our battalion. Well, it was the whole division so we weren’t actually conducting any great offensive operation initially.
LC: Sure, right.
FV: So, we were just in getting country, getting acclimated, getting organized the first few days, yes.
LC: And once you were actually assigned to the perimeter security, you and your platoon guys took up what kind of position. Can you describe where you were?
FV: Okay, the first time we were committed was over around the An Khe airfield, so we dug in positions. Let me see, I think there were already positions there, so it was just like a matter of moving in and taking over and then just making any kind of improvements to it to enhance the comfort and we were there, I don’t know, maybe a couple of weeks. And looking, man on alert, watching for movement at night, it was mainly we were in these static defensive positions around there to prevent any kind of enemy infiltration. And I think a lot of this stuff in the night, the troops would hear movement, I mean it was just skittery, nervous type of stuff of first being there, not knowing what it’s like out there. And then nighttimes were the worst because the bush just moves in the breeze and they want to open up on it.
LC: And is that pretty much what happened?
FV: Yes, because guys nerves are on edge. It’s the first time in real combat; your life is on the line and a dog would move out there and guys would start shooting first.
LC: And was that pretty much what you were allowing them to do?
FV: No, we were trying to control it. We were trying to keep it down because one guy panic and shoot at something and not really know what he’s shooting at and everybody else would get on edge and then you know.

LC: It’d just kind of go up from there.

FV: At times, the whole line could just about open up and you had no idea. I mean they’re just shooting at nothing, so you had to kind of calm them down, try to get the discipline in them to make sure you know what you’re shooting at.

LC: Were there any actual probes during this couple of three weeks that you were out there?

FV: I don’t think there were, no.

LC: Can you tell us what happened after your perimeter security assignments?

FV: Well, we went out and started our first, what we call offensive, where we reached out beyond that wire and started our airborne, or not airborne, but airmobile operations.

LC: Right.

FV: I remember the first one we went on as a platoon was what we called an eagle flight and this is just you take your platoon and you get about four or five helicopters, load your platoon up and we go flying around. Not any place in particular and it’s like scouting for possible danger or something for enemy activity. You’re out scouting and I remember we saw something in some clearing somewhere. Something moved, it was hard to say what, so we said, “Well, let’s go check it out” and we went down, landed the platoon and sure enough, we got into a hornet’s nest and punji sticks. It was the first casualties we took. Casualties were mainly from the punji sticks and platoon sergeant; I knew I lost a platoon sergeant then. He took one in his ankle. Some of the troops got stuck with them, so we started to move, but then the gunfire started picking up. So, we thought, “Uh oh”. We might have gotten in over our heads and the whole time, I got radio contact of company command and all that, so they decided to pull us out, which they succeeded in doing and we took maybe four or five casualties. Nobody KIA, but just wounded. They managed to pull us out of that and then prepped it with artillery and everything and then made a major company size assault in there. Because you know, a
platoon was only like forty some people, so they went in real heavy then and cleared it
out.

LC: Did they have contact, the larger force?
FV: No, by the time when they pulled us out and by the time they fired the
artillery in, the enemy had withdrawn.

LC: About how long of a time between your extraction and the time that the
larger force came in…?
FV: It was a couple of hours.
LC: Okay.
FV: So, they had time to pull back, but we were a small force in there, and I
mean, the punji’s were in there to get us and they probably were trying to get us, the
helicopters again put us in and got us out. And of course, on our way out, we drew fire
and some of the helicopter’s got hit.

LC: Did they?
FV: Oh yes. It was definitely…
LC: They were there.
FV: They were there.
LC: Frank, can you describe the punji sticks and how an actual injury would
occur from one of those.
FV: Punji sticks were sharpened bamboo and they had a way of doing it. They
would bake them so they’re real brittle, they’re sharp and stiff and long narrow points and
they’d hide them in the thicker grass or bushes and they’re hard to see. They’re on a
slant and a lot of them were just small. They get you in your lower leg and they were low
so you didn’t know they were there and if somebody popped a shot at you and you started
to run and you weren’t looking for those things. But we hit them even before because
guys just walking didn’t see them, all of a sudden they go through and some of the guys,
they’d actually go through their leg all they way through and they not even realize that it
did it, it was so sharp and slick. And then of course, there’s dirt and everything, so
there’s the infection. They have to worry about treating these things afterwards.

LC: Did you know about these beforehand? Did you know about this as a
weapon before you…?
FV: Yes, we knew that they used all kinds of things, yes. That was a firsthand experience of seeing it.

LC: And you said that several guys actually were injured at that point.

FV: Yes, I think it was either four or five men injured by punji sticks that day.

LC: But you didn’t lose anyone in that particular exchange that day?

FV: No, no one was killed.

LC: That was actually your first…

FV: First contact, yes.

LC: Contact, yes. Frank, how did you feel that you did in that situation as a leader? Did you feel you were prepared and handled it well?

FV: No, it was kind of tough because we couldn’t see the enemy that good; didn’t know exactly where he was, no idea how many there were. I mean, you could sense for the fire, but the fire…the group would start shooting in one area, then another area and it was kind of tough. It was confusing.

LC: And a little frustrating it sounds like.

FV: Plus the punjis, now you were kind of stuck because you couldn’t just move, you kind of had to stop because, you know, “Where are all these punjis?”

LC: So, you were extracted out of there by the helicopters?

FV: So, we back up, got on back on the helicopters, and they pulled us out, yes.

LC: And did you go back to An Khe and report what had happened?

FV: Right, yes, back to An Khe and gave our initial report and everything that we encountered.

LC: Now, who did you actually meet with when you got back to the Division HQ?

FV: I know it was company commander and battalion, probably battalion commander, but he was getting information right as it was happening because we were on the radios, so he knowing there’s actually…he’s already preparing for the attack, but he’s getting the artillery prepared. He was going overhead with the artillery, he was getting artillery in there to help cover us as we came out and get the enemy off of our back that we could get on helicopters and get out of there and we’d go back to the rear
and just talk to the staff. So, he’s already on the sight, the planning is going, but getting
the artillery, getting the follow up company assault, all that, it just takes time.

LC: He’s already pushing that forward.
FV: He’s pushing that forward, yes.

LC: And you guys were able to rest and recoup for the rest of the day that day?
FV: For the rest of that day, yes, our casualties went in the hospital and then the
rest of us just kind of laid back on our gear, smoking cigarettes, going “Wow.” That was
our first real taste, yes.

LC: Was there a hospital facility right there in An Khe?
FV: Right, we had our division hospital there.

LC: And did you go over and see your guys or how did that work?
FV: Yes, we did. One was my platoon sergeant and he had this punji somewhere
through his lower, near his ankle and everything. He later come back. They cleaned him
and some of those guys came back. I guess some of them might have got like in the
thighs or up higher. I don’t know what happened to them.

LC: But your sergeant was able to come back?
FV: But he came back.

LC: What was his name, do you remember?
FV: Roy Martin.

LC: About how long was he out trying to recover?
FV: I think about a week.

LC: Okay. Were those punji sticks treated with anything, do you know? I mean,
was there any poison or anything?
FV: Some of the infections are worse than others. Some of them, they said, were
treated with like animal dung and then smeared on them.

LC: Right, to increase the infection.
FV: And some of them, a mustard type agent because some of these guys would
get pierced and they’d have real big blisters.

LC: Really?
FV: And the word was that there was like a mustard agent that was on those
punjis, so they would try to contaminate those punji sticks; they not only stuck you, but
then later they’d complicate the recovery because of the serious infection, usually using animal dung or something like that.

LC: To compound the problem.

FV: Compound the problem.

LC: Did you ever take one of those?

FV: No, I never got stuck with a punji stick.

LC: After this initial contact, did you keep going out in the field on these airmobile operations?

FV: Oh yes, you’d go out and conduct patrols. Basically, our job was looking for enemy. We had no idea; we just operate in this area to recon, move around, and look for signs of enemy activity.

LC: Your area of operation was roughly how far from An Khe at this point?

FV: Well, it depended now depending on the operation. Some of them would go pretty far.

LC: Okay.

FV: We were generally in Central Highlands, all the way across, An Khe, all the way from the ocean, all the way over to Cambodia.

LC: Now, in November of 1965, of course, there’s the battle that I think Bob Taft was involved in.

FV: The big Ia Drang.

LC: Yes. Did you guys know about that, what was happening?

FV: No, we didn’t. Part of our battalion participated in the opening actions of that engagement, yes.

LC: Right, that’s what I was going to ask, but it wasn’t your company?

FV: No, our company, let’s see. We were detached from our battalion in early November and we formed a group called Task Force Amos. Why our company was picked, but that means, we know, we left, we weren’t under our battalion control, we were under this Colonel Amos’ control, it was an artillery battalion, American artillery battalion. His mission was to support ARVN operations over on the coastline. So, we were separated from our division, had no idea what was going on. Not even radio contact with anybody in our division. We were working with ARVN and our company mission
was to provide infantry security for this artillery battalion. As the ARVN, which were the Army of Republic of Vietnam, that’s South Vietnamese. They were conducting operations over along the coast toward Qui Nhon and that area and they were in contact with North Vietnamese forces. Our artillery was firing in support of them. The artillery FO’s would go forward with those ARVN units and our artillery FO’s were right up there in combat, but where we were, sitting around protecting artillery, we were far enough back that we never got directly involved.

LC: Was the artillery arranged in several batteries?
FV: Yes, there were three batteries, a whole battalion of artillery.
LC: And were they stationary?
FV: What?
LC: Were they stationary?
FV: Well, yes, basically. They were towed though by truck. They were big towed versions.
LC: Do you know what the guns were, were they 105’s?
FV: 105 Howitzers.
LC: And you guys were essentially performing, your platoon, your company were essentially performing perimeter security?
FV: We were perimeter security, yes, so that enemy would not infiltrate in the guns and that; in case they would be attacked, that we were there to protect those guys.
LC: How long were you assigned to Task Force Amos?
FV: All the way, about a month and we missed the whole battle up in the Ia Drang. Now, while we were over there, all that was breaking lose. And of course, we had no knowledge that that was even happening other than there was a hiddenness, that there was some big combat operations up there.
LC: Okay, so that’s all you really heard?
FV: It’s just whatever our company commander could pick up on his radio because our battalion was up there; the rest of the battalions had been up there. So we knew that our division was engaged in a major conflict, but we didn’t have no idea of the intensity, magnitude, or anything of it.
LC: How did that make you feel kind of separated from the other guys?
FV: Well, we were doing our job, so it was like…
LC: You were okay?
FV: We didn’t feel anyway, we were doing what we could do. We were engaged
with the ARVN; we knew the ARVN were in heavy contact where we were.
LC: Right.
FV: Because this was a major push, but we didn’t realize this was a major push at
that point by the NVA, to cut the South Vietnamese in half.
LC: Exactly.
FV: But we didn’t know that. We didn’t have that kind of a perspective where
we were.
LC: Did you actually see ARVN? Were they around the battery?
FV: Oh yes, we saw them. We could see truckloads, convoys of them.
LC: Did you have an impression of them Frank as military personnel?
FV: No; at that point, no. They were new; we had no idea.
LC: Okay. Did you have any contact while you were guarding the perimeter
there?
FV: No, we didn’t.
LC: No probes?
FV: No probes.
LC: Okay. And at night, were there mortars or anything like that?
FV: Oh, our mortars, just ours, but we never came under any kind of fire. We did
all the firing.
LC: Okay.
FV: Nothing ever came in on us.
LC: And you were again in this sort of stationary position.
FV: Stationary; we were, yes, sitting there, supporting the ammo. Now, we
moved around and relocated those guns at times to help as the ARVN advanced. You
know, to reposition those guns and we had one interesting experience that I can recall.
As we moved at night to relocate these guns, in total black out, moving at night and they
set these guns up outside a village. Of course, it was dark so we didn’t know too much.
We did the best we could to provide security around them. Of course, we never
encountered any resistance or anything, but when daylight came, we’re looking at the
village and darn if there isn’t a pole sticking up and the Viet Cong flag flying on the pole.
So we decided, “Whoa, we’re close here.”

LC: Yes, that must’ve been a little…
FV: So we moved in during the night, but we never encountered any enemy. I
guess they were probably just as surprised as we were.

LC: Were you moving through villages?
FV: Yes, we would drive through villages in the middle of the night and again,
surprise probably was on our side because I guess they never expected us to do that and
likewise, but we only did it one time I think. So, if we repeated that, I don’t know if we’d
have such good success each and every time.

LC: Right. The Task Force was, you were detached from the Task Force at the
end of December roughly?
FV: So after November, it was after the major fighting in Ia Drang, we were
detached from the Task Force and rejoined our battalion.

LC: And where did you actually hook up with them?
FV: We hooked up with them back at An Khe.

LC: And how long did you stay there?
FV: We had Thanksgiving and all that and right after Thanksgiving, I guess we
got back up to the Ia Drang.

LC: You did this time?
FV: Yes, and we went back with the battalion and we went in up on terrain across
the river where Ia Drang from where the major X-ray and all that; continued pursuit of
the enemy forces or remnants

LC: And at this point, you were much more mobile?
FV: Yes.

LC: Did you have a base that you were operating from?
FV: Yes, well, yes, the base was the battalion base. It was up there in the Central
Highlands there around Pleiku.

LC: And did the base have a name?
FV: I don’t know, I think it was Camp Holloway.
LC: Camp Holloway, okay, yes.
FV: Yes.
LC: How long were you based out of there?
FV: Well, it was into December. Well, we were up there through December. I remember spending Christmas up there in Pleiku, which is Northern Highlands.
LC: Okay, can you tell me what happened at Christmas?
FV: Well, we went back with the battalion back into the Ia Drang in late November, early December and I know it was still pretty tense because then once we got back to our unit, then we really got the word of what happened up there. So, when we went in, I know we were tight, uptight I guess I should say because we expected we’re going to have some major, heavy contact. We knew there was a big, large enemy force, a lot of enemy activity in there, but surprisingly, I don’t think we even made any. If we did, it was just very light resistance.
LC: Did you reach a conclusion as to why that was, why you didn’t have any?
FV: Well, they had withdrawn and I guess nobody really knew and our purpose, flew us in, in hopes to try to cut them off any other remnants, but apparently they had already cleared back into Cambodia.
LC: So you didn’t really come into…
FV: Yes, we didn’t come into any kind of major contact. I know in our company, I can’t recall any heavy resistance.
LC: Were there occasional…?
FV: There was occasional firefights, but most of them, I think more was from our uneasiness and jumpiness.
LC: Okay.
FV: We were like on the edge because we knew they were heavy, we knew 7th Cav had taken heavy casualties.
LC: Yes.
FV: So we were kind of really edgy, but we didn’t find too much, so we pulled back out of there and headed back to An Khe. We had Christmas up there in Pleiku; I remember that.
LC: What happened on Christmas?
FV: We were all closed in around Pleiku in the base camp and just another day.
LC: Did you get anything special or did anything special happen?
FV: No, just a meal, nothing special.
LC: Nothing?
FV: I think we were under a truce at that time.
LC: Right, there was a Christmas truce.
FV: We had a Christmas truce and we were pulled back and we weren’t running any operations or anything, just enjoying the time. I know we did some practice parachute jumping and stuff like that.
LC: Now, after this restfit, let’s say at Christmas, and you were based again now at An Khe…
FV: Yes.
LC: Did you deploy out of there at some point?
FV: We went back to An Khe and then we conducted operations, I can’t remember exactly, just operations here, there. There was nothing major. I mean, we’d make contact, just light, minor contact off and on.
LC: I think that in the forms you described an incident where your men were deployed over three different hills and you’re pulling them back.
FV: Oh!
LC: Do you remember that?
FV: Oh, I remember that, yes that was earlier though.
LC: Oh okay.
FV: That was earlier than that. That was still like back in…
LC: When you first got over there?
FV: We first got over there, shortly afterwards.
LC: Could you describe that incident?
FV: Up on this mountain called Nughy Hong Kong. They had an outpost position and my platoon was designated to go up there and provide security for an artillery outpost they had up there and it overlooked the valley. There were three peaks on this mountain and so when they employed them, they employed each squad and there’s three squads in a platoon and each squad on a peak. So, we were providing
security to keep the enemy from, if he’d come up there, then he couldn’t get any one of
these peaks. They weren’t that big, ten men could fit on there pretty easily, but if you get
more than that, you got a crowd.

LC: Right.

FV: So anyway, when we got to day, we got the orders to pull off; nothing
happened, no incident or anything. I guess we were up there about a week and at night,
something was moving the bushes and guys would get jumpy about it, but nobody ever
shot at us or anything. So, the day they told us to assemble, pull the platoon back, they
were going to lift our platoon off and bring another platoon up from another unit and
replace us. So, I called my squads back off the knolls to the one that I was on, where the
helicopter LZ was and had everybody just kind of sitting around and waiting for the
helicopters. Since we hadn’t had any kind of activity, I mean, it was like; this is just
another day in a park out here for us. So, I took off and decided to go check these other
positions to make sure troops picked up all their stuff; weren’t leaving any of their gear
behind, do an inspection, they weren’t leaving anything behind. I walked down a path
down through like a little draw and back up the other side and I was walking underneath
this tree and I heard a bolt action rifle just like, “click, click.” “Click, click” as the round
was being chambered and it dawned on me that that was a bolt-action rifle. About that
time, I just dove for the ground; just dove backwards and a sniper shot and he missed me
thank goodness. So, I sprayed my gun and I only had my gun and one magazine of
ammo because I had left all my other gears back there with the troops and I sprayed,
emptied my gun in the tree and I didn’t see; I didn’t know, all I did was heard the shot so
I was laying there with nothing. Well, the machine gunner opened up and helped out a
little bit and this guy jumped out of the tree and got away. It was a sniper that just come
up there as we pulled back just waiting.

LC: He definitely had an opportunity to hit.

FV: So, as we pulled out, he’d come, I guess the guys had been there watching us
all this time.

LC: Probably.

FV: And he climbed up in that tree and none of us saw him do it until I walked
over, but when I got underneath the tree, fortunately I don’t know why he didn’t have a
round the chamber because I could hear that bolt moving that rifle and jump, just the time
I guess he was squeezing the trigger, squeezing that round off.

LC: Do you know how close that round came to you?
FV: Oh, it hit the ground right between the legs.

LC: You saw him jump out of the tree?
FV: No. I mean, I had rolled on my back, I just emptied my rifle full automatic
in the tree, not knowing, not seeing him and I started rolling again because I was afraid
he’s going to shoot again and the machine gunner, the guy was sitting over on the other
knoll about maybe thirty yards away, thirty, forty yards away. Saw him and opened fire
over me and I was still laying on the ground, he’s shooting over me. Of course, he was
shooting kind of high because he didn’t want to hit me, so he didn’t the hit the VC either.
He said he got away, ran down there and got away. So, I beat feet back over to the
platoon and I said, “Man, that’s enough of that.” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Yes. And you learned a few things?
FV: Well, I learned, yes, because never leave your ammo like I did. I left all my
ammo sitting there. All I had was that one clip in the rifle; never get separated from that.

LC: Because you have no idea what you’re going…
FV: You have no idea; when, where, what you might encounter.

LC: What was the machine gunner’s name who helped you out?
FV: I can’t remember what his name was.

LC: Did he describe the guy at all?
FV: No, he didn’t get a good view. All he could see, the more forms and when
you’re moving like that, you just see the form. You can’t get a clear picture; guys, you
know, black outfit and that was it and it’s so quick, it was just like a matter of seconds.

LC: And you were pretty much ready to get on the helicopter after that I’m sure.
FV: Oh yes, I mean, after that, I was glad to be alive.

LC: Yes. That incident really stood out in my mind, so I thought I’d be sure to
ask you about it. In the New Year, that in 1966, the platoon was asked to do what kind of
duties?
FV: Well, we did what they call search and destroy as part of the company with
assigned area of operations; and at times we’d move independent as a platoon and other
times we’d operate with the company. Most of this stuff is just walking around through
the mountains and the jungles and just looking to see if you could find anything that
indicated any kind of enemy activity.

LC: And what was the protocol if you did actually encounter people? Were you
supposed to actually engage them or were you supposed to call for help or what were you
actually instructed to do?

FV: No, it was out in these combat zones, it was anybody out there was enemy.

LC: Okay.

FV: And you’d fire first if you could, but usually it never worked that way. They
always fired first because normally we’re moving around, we don’t know where we are,
we’re out there beating the bush and these guys know where the trails go. It’s their home
and they can hear you, so usually they’re always tipped off or alerted. I mean, as we fly
in with helicopters, they know you’re coming in, so they’re always tipped off if we were
there, so they could either avoid us or try to set up an ambush any chance they get. It
usually was always they would fire first. Now, around the villages, yes, we had to be
careful. There, the rules were different. You couldn’t shoot first; you had to wait until
you received fire.

LC: What was the attitude of the guys in the platoon? How were they doing
morale wise with this kind of operational setup?

FV: Well, initially, they were gung-ho, but then they were okay morale wise, it
was just, “Why are we here though?” That was big the question, you know, “What’re we
doing?”

LC: What answer did you have?

FV: We’re here serving our country; it’s our job. And a lot of times it was just
point blank because you don’t have any other choice.

LC: Right, and did you have to do that sometimes, just tell them to get on with it?

FV: Yes, say, whatever reason it is, you’re here. Whatever reason you’re here,
you’ve got a job to do. You can’t walk away from it; there’s no walking away.

LC: Did you spend anytime thinking about why the United States was there?

FV: Yes, I wondered myself.
LC: And did you get any, I don’t know, reinforcement or support or information on that question that helped you kind of resolve your indecision?

FV: Yes, we wondered why if anything we were doing there, if it really doing any good because it was tough. The civilians, we weren’t winning the civilians over, that was no doubt.

LC: Even at this point you weren’t?

FV: No, they wouldn’t tell us; we’d go in and they would withhold information. They wouldn’t tell us. We’d ask for information, you know, where booby traps are, do you know where VC are; they wouldn’t tell you nothing and then we’d walk and we’d trip booby traps and we’d get people hurt and killed and we’d get angry at the civilians. Why didn’t you tell us, but now I look back and hey, we’re asking these guys to tell us their brothers, their husbands; where are all your men, we want to go kill them. And the VC were their sons, they were their husbands, these villagers.

LC: Very difficult position.

FV: And not realizing, yes, that they were in that kind of a lose…and it was part of ours that, hey, these people live here and they serve both sides and of course, they were more fearful of the Viet Cong and the communist part because they paid a terrible price if they didn’t obey those orders. Of course, they didn’t tell us, we were under our rules and we weren’t going to hurt them. Generally, we weren’t unless we had somebody go off the deep end, but they knew that they would lie…that’s the thing today, we’re the nice guys and we’re not going to hurt them, so they can lie to us and we’re not going to come in the middle of the night and shoot them in the head or something.

LC: Did you guys make much contact during early 1966 on these search and destroy operations?

FV: Off and on just like contact; scattered resistance until the big operation Crazy, Crazy Horse Operation in May.

LC: Before we talk about that Frank, can you tell me a little bit about what you were learning as far as the terrain and the trails and whether your guys should be on the trail or off the trail?

FV: Right, we were learning a lot about that, yes. Those trails were dangerous. We didn’t know; it wasn’t our trail. To walk those trails was deadly.
LC: Because why?

FV: Well, number one: It’s their home. They can watch the trails, they can see you and we’re the ones having to moving around and number two: They’re pretty good at booby traps and hiding those things. And those trails channelized you; they could ambush you easy enough because then they knew exactly where you were. So by staying off the trails, you weren’t committed to any one place where they can really lock you in type, trap you in. And also, you can’t go out and booby-trap the whole world you know what I mean. You booby-trap those likely places, so you can avoid missing a lot of these traps. As a matter of fact, you felt more secure out in the jungle because you’re in the middle of the jungle. Who’s going to walk way out here and put a trip wire in, in the middle of nowhere?

LC: It just felt less likely that there would be a trap there for you.

FV: But along the trail or something like that, you can set a booby-trap and somebody would walk along there, you can trip it. So, I always felt more secure out in the middle of the jungle just wandering and try to avoid those trails. Those were danger areas.

LC: And typically, can you describe how you would deploy your platoon? You had men out on the left and right and presumably someone on the point, can you describe that configuration, how you generally would operate?

FV: Yes, mainly the point man that was the key. He was always ahead of you, alerting you, that way if he ran into anything because the jungle was so thick, you couldn’t see very far. So, he’d be out in front and if there was something, he would call you to a stop before you got your whole platoon out there exposed out in an open area or up close to a trail or something where they might get shot or trip a booby-trap. Again, though, the point man’s job was pretty hairy.

LC: Yes.

FV: Because he’s out there and you have to change him off every so often.

LC: How many guys did you have who were actually point men?

FV: Everybody had to pull a tour out there.

LC: Okay, and did you have greater confidence in some guys than others?
FV: Yes, some guys were better; I mean they were more adept. I mean, it’s like hunting. Some guys have that sense and they’re better than others. And again, I guess some guys would volunteer if I recall, yes, because they don’t want to trust somebody else because they want to trust their own senses and not leave it up to somebody else and try to do that.

LC: Where would you have been as the platoon man?

FV: I always moved basically behind a 1st squad and that way if they run into contact, generally, I wouldn’t be right in the middle of the fire.

LC: Now who would stay next to you, who would stay near you?

FV: Okay, I would have RTOs by me, I’d have medic by me or the medic would be back by the platoon sergeant, but I’d have the radio communications so I could talk to the company, call for artillery, talk to my squads. So, I would try to stay back behind that 1st squad, that way if they encountered anything, and I was free, I could be free that I can try to look, see, evaluate the situation, talk on our radios, move other squads around and maneuver the unit and not get pinned down to where I’m fighting for my life.

LC: Right, and you’re keeping your men safe as well by manipulating.

FV: Yes, trying to keep them safe and getting artillery fire in and all that kind of stuff that they needed. Of course, it took awhile to do that; you want to be a hero. You know, young guy, he’s trying, follow me you know, but then you found out that really, you don’t do him much good if you’re out there in front, you get shot down.

LC: Right, your responsibility is greater than…

FV: If you can get them to get this fire in form and maneuver, and that’s your job.

LC: What kind of radio equipment were you actually using?

FV: We had the, what is called the PRC-25. It was a pretty good radio; that radio was. The squad radios weren’t any good.

LC: Why was that?

FV: We would try, we would have a PRC-25 with each squad, but again, the power of that radio was more than what you needed to talk to your squad, but the squad radios just simply didn’t work. They’d get wet, they’d get banged around and they just flat didn’t work.
LC: That sounds pretty dangerous. What did you do to make up for that? Was there anything you could do?

FV: No, we used the PRC-25 radios. These are the big, heavier radios though, but we talked to our squads like that and they had them. We could get them, I don’t know how in the heck we got them, but we got extra radios, put our squads with them.

LC: Did your platoon, first of all have a particular call sign that you were operating under?

FV: Yes, we were Left End 3-6.

LC: Okay, can you describe how that got assigned to you or…?

FV: Well, you just got assigned in, let’s see, our company was Left End and then let’s see, the other companies was Left Guard, I think Right Guard, Left Half; they used the football positions in the battalion and that was kind of our call sign the whole year.

LC: And 3-6 was what?

FV: 3-6; the 3 standing for the third platoon, and the 6 meaning leader, commander.

LC: Did you encounter, did your guys encounter booby-traps and did you have any injuries from that during this time period?

FV: Oh yes.

LC: Did you lose anybody?

FV: Oh yes, those were ugly.

LC: When something like that would happen, did the other guys kind of gel together more or would you say there was greater fear and upset?

FV: I don’t know, we would gel. We would run to the aid or basically we’d spread out, but mainly you just can’t run to the aid; you get the people in the media there who weren’t hurt who try to get the casualties. Usually, it was like a blown leg or arm; seldom would somebody get killed by one of these things.

LC: Right, it was just horrific.

FV: But it would be devastated; it’d blow a foot off you know, that’s serious enough.

LC: Oh yes.
FV: And try to get medical aid right away immediately. The rest of us would just
pick up the perimeter in case we’re going to come under attack, but of course, generally
there was nobody out there. These things were left and whoever put them in would be
gone.

LC: Right, and say you were in deep jungle and this kind of thing happened, how
did you get the seriously wounded guy to medical care?

FV: Well, you’d use that penetrator; the cable, the helicopter would hover over
the trees, but the jungle penetrator come down and strap the guy in there. The medics
would get the bleeding under control and they’d strap him into that penetrator and they
would pull him up through those trees.

LC: And you would call for dust off basically?

FV: Right, you would call right away; try to get one in bound as fast as you
could.

LC: Did you have an opinion of the guys that were flying those missions?

FV: Oh yes.

LC: Tell me how you felt about them?

FV: Lord Bless them.

LC: Yes.

FV: I mean those guys would stick themselves, their necks out to aid a wounded
soldier on the ground and they put the aircraft at risk, but they would do it. I imagine a
lot of them did crash and probably cost them some lives too, but to reach out just to help
a wounded grunt. I can’t say enough about them.

LC: Frank, can you tell me about what happened during Operation Crazy Horse?

FV: Now, we were with Bravo, Charlie Company I mean initially because we
flew in there, I don’t know if you’ve read that story yet or not. Have you seen it?

LC: Which one sir?

FV: For Crazy Horse.

LC: No, I don’t think so.

FV: You know on our battalion website notes?

LC: Oh, I did read a diary, yes.
FV: Under B Company and C Company?

LC: Yes sir, yes sir, but can you go ahead and describe it for people who wont have access to that?

FV: Well, our companies went in there; I’m in Charlie Company the first night into LZ Crazy Horse. We moved out on a high ridgeline, let me see, there was another unit in there, it was either 6th Cav, I think it was 5th Cav maybe. It had been there in heavy contact for a few days and we were like relieving them. They were coming out, we were coming in. We were fresh and they had been there fighting for a couple of days, so they were pretty haggard and tired. We moved up onto a ridgeline and kind of stayed on that ridgeline that first night. The next day, we moved as a company along there. We encountered some resistance, made some light contact, the lead elements did. I was like in the 3rd platoon and we were following the two lead platoons in the company and we linked up with Bravo Company in a valley. There was a creek down there and Bravo took the lead and stayed in the valley, started to move up toward another hill and we were moving up on our side only we were left of them on that creek to try to protect them from the higher ground and Bravo ran into the heavy resistance, the B Company did as they approached that hill. That’s where Lieutenant Crum and their 1st platoon took pretty heavy casualties. So, we had stopped at C Company and we had dug in and prepared a base or something they could fall back on and start to open an LZ and everything to try to get relief in there.

LC: Right.

FV: And so B Company was carrying a fight. Well, then they had one platoon that was pinned down, the platoon leader was killed, so Bravo Company Commander asked for help. Captain Mosey, our CO ordered my platoon to go over and link up with B Company and assist them. So, I moved my platoon out and this was heavy resistance. I mean, we could hear the 50-caliber machineguns. The first time I ever heard those things in combat. Those things are bad sounding. So, we moved over, I mean, it wasn’t hard to find B Company because all you had to do was move in a direction to that noise; the guns and those 50-cals that were firing at them and we found B Company and got on their right side and started up the hill. Of course, the 50-cals, those things would hit those trees, I mean wood would just splinter and fly; those were big bullets.
LC: Yes sir.

FV: And we took some casualties, we lost a couple of soldiers right off the bat and a couple of our guys did have some heroic actions.

LC: Do you remember any of those that you could describe?

FV: Well, yes, Michael Vanessa. He got killed there holding his ground. He was trying to take out an enemy with machinegun position to help out and got shot in the process and Michael really didn’t have to be out there. He was due to rotate shortly and he asked for permission to come out on this operation with us. The other one was David Jolly, he was a machine gunner in my platoon and he took a bad hit; got killed. He didn’t die out right though. Michael did and David Jolly took a shot through the chest a pretty bad shot, operating machinegun and he lived and died sometime during the night because it was dark and stormy, rain. We couldn’t get him medical evacuation. He just didn’t make it through the night. They did everything they could to try to keep him alive.

LC: Sir, did you put either of those men in for accommodation of anything?

FV: Yes, I think they both got Silver Stars.

LC: And did you oversee that and initiate that?

FV: Yes, just those two and by their actions. Samson, Jimmy Samson, he’s another one. He got a Silver Star.

LC: What happened?

FV: Well, I mean in the midst of all that, he just resisted until he was shot down. And these guys were instrumental. Each of them though, they were wounded or killed by holding their ground in position and by putting the fire and what they did do is they broke the enemy positions. They suffered, they didn’t back away, they stayed there, they held their ground, they returned fire, they did all they could and their actions contributed greatly to feeding the enemy on that hill.

LC: And helping to protect the rest of B Company as well.

FV: Well, trying to get B Company extracted and by driving the enemy off the hill. Now see, they were dug in on a high ground there. They’re looking down at us; we’re having to crawl up this thing.

LC: Yes. About how far away were they?
FV: Oh, we were almost, almost could reach out and touch them at times. We had gotten right up almost hand-to-hand.

LC: Were your men able to take out one or more of those 50-cal machineguns?

FV: Well, they abandoned them, sometime during the fight; they’d end the 50s and just cease firing. So, the fire we were putting on them eventually and later the next day, the guns were sitting there abandoned. They were dead, you know the enemy was around, but I don’t know if we killed them all, but those guns were still there, we were able to capture those guns. How and when those guns, I don’t know.

LC: But you know, that’s a major accomplishment getting those deadly weapons.

FV: Yes, we got the fire stopped, I mean, if they were okay, they could’ve just picked those guns up and carried them away so I imagine we did some damage.

LC: Sure, that’s right. Yes, yes sir. How many men did you lose in that?

FV: The two dead, Michael and Jolly and numerous wounded, I can’t recall exactly.

LC: Where was Michael from, do you remember?

FV: California.

LC: Okay, and David?

FV: David Jolly was like out of Michigan or something, Midwest.

LC: The next day, your enemy has basically disappeared.

FV: Yes.

LC: What did you do that morning?

FV: Okay, after that fight the day before with B Company and it was late into the night. It was into the nighttime before things became secure. Before we got the hill, Bravo Company got up on top of the hill, Captain Martin and all them were able to reach the crest of the hill. He had called to us and we’d ceased fire because his troops were up there and then we were ordered to back off and return to Charlie Company for the night and we’re picking up our wounded. Of course, the wounded were being assembled at the base of the hill and there were numerous of them.

LC: Okay.

FV: We might have had ten, twelve wounded men laying down there and platoon sergeant [Jack Belaher] had gathered them together.
LC: These are men in your platoon?

FV: Men in our platoon. The medics were down there and they were from the B Company too. So they had gathered a whole big cluster of men that were wounded and so we went back to our company, brought those men back that night, that’s when Jolly died. Of course, Jolly was alive when we brought him back, but he was hurt bad.

LC: Really bad.

FV: And he was still alive and we brought him back, sent him up there, the medics tended to him all they could during the night and he just died during the night.

LC: It was, I’m sure a massive wound.

FV: Yes, it was bad and it was through his chest you know around his throat down through his chest. The other guys were varying wounded; you know arms, legs, stomachs. Most of those men could walk back. I mean, the wounds were more flesh wounds and they weren’t that serious, so they were able to walk back.

LC: And your sergeant was assembling these guys?

FV: And the sergeant was assembling those guys.

LC: And had he been hurt at all?

FV: The platoon sergeant, no. No, he hadn’t been wounded.

LC: And what about you, were you okay?

FV: Yes, I was okay. I was fine. I was unwounded.

LC: Did the helicopters come and get the men out of there?

FV: No, we were in the middle of these jungles, there was no clearing.

LC: No clearing?

FV: No clearing.

LC: Okay.

FV: And that was the reason and it was raining so visibility was poor. It was dark and we couldn’t get them in there. So, we kept those casualties and the medics were working on them as best they could during the night. The next day, we secured the area. I was part of the security force for B Company. The rest of the C Company went back up on the hill back to where we had just pulled back from and they’re the ones. Captain Mosey and them went up there and they found all those machine guns abandoned and stuff. They found all that stuff. So Captain Martin was taking care of evacuations and I
was just providing security, you know, move my platoon over around the area and they cut out some trees, they cut down some trees and started to evacuate the more seriously wounded before who were alive. All of it was being done by wench; we had to wench them out so it was taking a lot of time. It took nearly I think the whole day to do this to get the casualties out and finally those who had died. Our two plus any of the others from B Company who had died, like Lieutenant Crum, their 1st platoon had many casualties. They had a lot of KIAs too. We’d get all of those casualties pulled out of there and we did that without incident.

LC: So the enemy really had just completely abandoned the area?
FV: Yes, and Captain Mosey had gone up the hill and found all their positions. They had just simply abandoned; they were all bloody and buried. There was some of the dead that they had buried up there.

LC: They had buried them?
FV: They buried them, yes, in there. You know, all their gear; 50 calibers and 30-caliber machineguns so apparently they had taken a pretty good pounding and so they finally just abandoned their weapons and ran.

LC: On a day like this, what would’ve happened to the enemy dead? Do you just leave them there or what?
FV: We just left them there.
LC: Okay. Would the commanding and the Intel people may have looked them over?
FV: Well, yes, the area would been marked, identified at the battle and we just simply left them there.
LC: Okay. And when did you actually, when were you actually able to extract the rest of your platoon from that area, did you stay there a while?
FV: No, we continued operating,
LC: Okay. You continued operating?
FV: Even though we had taken casualties.
LC: What was your strength at this point then?
FV: I don’t know, we were whittled down to maybe thirty or maybe less than that.
LC: But they left you insight and you just kept moving?
FV: We stayed there, yes, continued to operate. We moved to make contact to see if we could make contact with that enemy force again.
LC: Did you ever find them again?
FV: No, we never did find them again. Of course, when they moved, when they beat feet, they knew where they’re going. We couldn’t kind of just go running after them.
LC: That’s right.
FV: We have to spread out and we moved slow and cautiously and so they packed their bags and left.
LC: Now did you have a sense of whether these were VC or NVA?
FV: I think they were NVA. The sense was yes, the weapons they had, how heavy the amount of resistance, the dug-in fortified positions, their determination to stay and hot to fight.
LC: That was all…
FV: That all indicated NVA; the disciplined hard-core unit. The VC were ragtag. They would fight fiercely for short periods of time, you know, after thirty minutes, an hour and it’s over. These guys, I mean, we were fighting for hour after hour against these guys.
LC: And that was just a completely different game.
FV: It’s a different feel to it, different touch, yes. Plus the heavier weapons. I mean, you just can’t lug these 50-calibers around on your back. These are heavy weapons.
LC: Right. Sir, at some point, you had an R&R. Can you tell me where that was?
FV: Yes, I went on R&R to Hong Kong.
LC: Was that before or after the Crazy Horse Operation, do you remember?
FV: It’s harder to remember now. It’s hard to sequence these things. I mean, I can remember events and then put them in at the right time sequence, probably before.
LC: Okay.
FV: I think it would be before; it’s a break.
LC: How did your R&R come about? Did you have to apply for it?

FV: No, somebody said, “Okay, we’ve got an R&R. Go here, go there.” Mine was Hong Kong. Anybody that wanted it usually tried to make sure as a leader, you wanted to make sure all your troops got first cuts.

LC: Right.

FV: So, I guess nobody wanted it, so I said, “Well, I’ll take it.”

LC: Okay, and how long did you get to be away then?

FV: What was the R&R, seven days, seven nights?

LC: Yes.

FV: A week away.

LC: How did you actually get out of the field? Did you fly?

FV: Yes, you get on a helicopter, you leave your troops there under with the platoon sergeant and they continue operating and then you just jump on a helicopter, go back to the rear area and get cleaned up, put on a clean uniform. Go down to wherever the main, like Cam Ranh Bay or wherever they were flying you out of and check in.

LC: And is that what happened, did you get a plane at Cam Ranh?

FV: Yes, I guess it was somewhere like that; one of the major airfields and then you tell them where you’re going and everything and they say okay and they clean you up and give you all these rules and don’t do this, don’t do that and put you on a commercial airplane out of there and you fly.

LC: So you arrived at the airport in Hong Kong?

FV: Yes, that was fascinating coming in there.

LC: Yes, tell me about that.

FV: If you ever knew that, coming in like between these mountains and that runway kind of sticks out in the bay and all these buildings, you know, you can like fly right between all these buildings coming into that thing. That was neat; I can still remember that and looking up at those mountains.

LC: Yes, it’s a beautiful place. What were your impressions of Hong Kong when you first arrived?

FV: I don’t know, I guess just dazzled.

LC: Really?
FV: Because I had never seen anything like that before.

LC: Yes.

FV: I’m in Pennsylvania, I mean, I’ve been in a couple of cities, but wow; millions of people.

LC: And hugely busy.

FV: Busy, busy, busy. Boy, I’ll tell you.

LC: What did you do for seven days?

FV: Well, we did some shopping, originally, the idea was went shopping and I know I bought gifts for my family back home; these shops were apparently, you know, these were good buys and everything so did all that, bought me some clean clothes and stuff, civilian clothes. Wherever, ate, drank, went to the bars, drank some cold beer and stuff.

LC: Where did you actually stay? Did you stay in a hotel?

FV: I can’t remember the hotel, one of the hotels, I don’t remember. It was already booked in there or something.

LC: Oh, you just kind of slide into wherever they had you set up.

FV: Yes, wherever they have and they say okay and they go in and check in and everything. (Coughs) Excuse me.

LC: Sure. Did you enjoy yourself or was it hard to separate from the situation and your men in Vietnam?

FV: I enjoyed myself while I could; enjoyed. I went sightseeing, I took that ride up the side of that mountain in the trolley went to the gardens way up high; did sightseeing, what I could sightsee.

LC: Did you take a camera with you?

FV: Yes, I had a camera, but I don’t have too many pictures now. I don’t know what’s happened to them, but it was just a cheap camera too. It wasn’t a real good one.

LC: Right.

FV: I think I probably picked it up and I remember I had some pictures. I can remember, I don’t know where they are now.

LC: So you were basically being a tourist?
FV: Yes, more of a tourist, eating out at some fancy restaurant every night, going
to the bar, probably getting drunk, go back to the room, go to bed.

LC: Right, did you feel you were able to relax a little?

FV: I don’t know, I don’t really think so, no.

LC: Okay.

FV: No, I don’t think so because you knew this was just like a dream. It’s not
lasting and you knew that you still had time left in country. This was just a short break.

LC: Did you think about your guys and wonder what they were up to?

FV: No, I don’t know if I did or not. I don’t think so.

LC: What about going back? Can you describe how you felt or do you remember
now?

FV: It’s like something you dread, but you knew you had to do and you couldn’t
get out of it.

LC: So you just got on with doing it?

FV: You know you got to do it, you wish you didn’t have to, but it’s your
obligation to do it.

LC: When you returned and saw your guys again and stuff, do you remember,
were they happy to see you or were they like, you know, did they razz you a little bit
about Hong Kong?

FV: Oh, they razzed you. Yes, they wanted to know, you know, tell us what you
did. Give us all the details. (Laughing)

LC: Right. (Laughing) After Crazy Horse and the operation that you continued
on afterwards, what happened to your platoon next?

FV: Let’s see, we come out of that Crazy Horse Operation and it’s just wherever
they sent us here and there. Every day, I mean, you were out looking, you know, you’re
hunting and everyday was not, you know, there was not always contact everyday. You’re
just out there; you’re looking for signs of the enemy and many, many days just, it’s like a
walk in the park like I call it. Nobody ever shot at you, you didn’t find nothing, you’re
just beating your way. Here I am beating away through the jungle, fighting the ants and
all the insects and everything else and nothing when those days were okay. You could
settle down at night and nobody shot at you and you could go to sleep and wake up the
next day, still there. You shouldn’t complain, but the thing is though is as you go day
after day after day after day, you get lackadaisical. Your guard starts coming down and
you’re not as alert as keen and that’s when you let your guard down and seems like they
always knew when you were at your most vulnerable is when they hit you and catch you
when the guys are goofing around. They’re not carrying their weapons with them;
they’re leaving their weapons laying on the ground.

LC: Did something like that actually happen where your guys were not as alert as
they could’ve been and something like that?

FV: There were times; I can’t remember any specific, but yes, sometimes. You
know, you get a sniper shot, somebody takes just one shot at you and that’s it. It’d hit
somebody, you knew this guy’s been watching you and here you are, looking, looking,
looking at me, and then this guys camouflaged and he knows the terrain better than you
do and they’re keeping an eye on you and you know it when something like that happens.

LC: And after that of course, then you’re completely on.

FV: Oh yes, they put you back on your guard again and then nothing happens
again and they keep you keyed up that way.

LC: After Crazy Horse, did you get new men into the platoon?

FV: Yes, there were new men coming all the time; one or two and I guess our
strength because you were fighting Malaria, guys were getting sick, they were getting
injured accidentally. Sometimes it was just a punji stick would get somebody, somebody
get stuck with a punji stick. There’d be no enemy contact or whatever, and just sores or
sickness, that you were losing men and so there was always new men coming in all the
time. It wasn’t everyday, but you know.

LC: How did the new guys, how were they treated at first or did it vary by
personalities?

FV: The problem was with the older guys, the guys that were seasoned looked
down and says, you’re new guys; you didn’t trust them. You knew they didn’t know all
the operations, but you would try to train them. It was not like outcast, but it was like,
“Don’t do nothing unless I tell you to. No matter what, don’t do nothing because we
don’t want you making any mistakes.”

LC: Right. And yet at the same time, you also had to tell them what to do.
FV: And then you had to tell them, yes and train them. From the officer’s perspective now, it was a little different you know because we welcomed those guys in and we try to train them. The biggest thing was a lot of times these guys never even had to throw a hand grenade.

LC: Really?

FV: They’d thrown the dummies, but never had thrown a live one, so this is the first time this stuff was given to them and I know we’d bring them in, check their rifles, make sure the rifles could shoot because they would give them weapons back there and not check them and there’d be parts missing on the weapon sometimes.

LC: Weapons that had already been used?

FV: They were old weapons going back in the rear when they come in country, you know, just big pools of weapons and some clerk just says, “Here’s your gun, go.” And they’re not checking them, they didn’t give them a chance to shoot them and they come out to the unit and a couple of cases, the rifles didn’t even work. So, we’d have to make sure they had a good rifle.

LC: Now, were these M-14s at this point?

FV: No, these were M-16s.

LC: M-16s.

FV: But we’d check them, do test firing, make sure that they would shoot, check the guy out, make sure he knows how to operate. Give him a hand grenade; let him throw a hand grenade or two.

LC: Right, just to get the idea.

FV: A real live one, not on these safe ranges like you have on your station, this is just throw the thing out there. Of course, they’re nervous about that.

LC: Yes, and you kind of had to bring them along through these circumstances.

FV: And try to break them in like that, yes. They’d come out on patrol at night, and man, that first night was pretty tough for most of those guys because everything was just new for them. It was like us when we first went in.

LC: Yes, and they’re totally like on alert.

FV: Yes.

LC: And revved up probably through the night.
FV: Yes, every little noise.

LC: Did you, Frank, observe any problems with the M-16s? People talked about that and I just wondered if you observed any of that?

FV: No, I never experienced; I’ve heard that too. We encountered problems, but I don’t think necessarily because it was M-16s. We’d look at them and see part of the thing was we checked peoples rifles to make sure they work, inspect them; make them clean them.

LC: Right, and make them know how they work.

FV: We’d stop there at the end of the day; usually it was still daylight rather than pushing right until night. “Stop, okay guys, now it’s time. There’s no contact, clean your weapons. Now there’s an order of business, clean the rifles. Take care of this stuff.” I didn’t personally experience that great failure like I’ve heard the Marines and everybody else and I think that was the main thing. When these things got rusty and sometimes they did, they’d get pretty darn rusty. You catch a guy who hadn’t cleaned his rifle for several days, it’d just like be a chunk of rust.

LC: And you had to kind of put the boot to them.

FV: And that’s the jobs for the squad leaders and that to make sure that doesn’t happen.

LC: Okay, but you had to sort of…

FV: Right, you have to remind them, this has to be a daily regimen you know, like you brush your teeth everyday, you clean you rifle.

LC: At some point here, Frank, you were starting to get short as they say.

FV: Yes.

LC: Did you have that in your mind?

FV: Yes, I wondered if I was going to make it, but you try not to think about it because you never knew what one day to the next would bring.

LC: Right. You know, some guys would know exactly and would say ninety-three days or something like that and you didn’t really do that. You wanted to just kind of go through each day and that’s all.

FV: No, I didn’t do that myself. I just kind of said when time comes, the day will come and I’ll leave and then that was hard. I mean, it was like breaking yourself away
from a group of men. Most of us were the original ones and it was kind of hard knowing I’m going home and some of these guys are still staying here. It made you feel like you were abandoning them.

LC: Did you have any idea who was going to replace you or were you just going to be gone and someone else would come?

FV: No, all I knew was my day, I’m going to leave, and I had no idea who’s coming in.

LC: And several guys were going to be leaving with you I presume.

FV: Yes, most of us all who hadn’t gotten sick or wounded over the year, we would all be pouring out about the same time. But you know, still, there was some that came in mid-term and everything, you’d work with for six months or so and knew pretty well.

LC: Did your staff sergeant continue with you the whole time and was he able to leave with you?

FV: No, some of them got wounded.

LC: Okay, so you had some changes there.

FV: A platoon sergeant made it, then Sergeant Belcher, Jack Belcher; after, well Martin originally, but then once Martin was wounded, then Belcher took over, so he was there with me for about nine months. Most of the other squad leaders who had gotten wounded or rotated out and rotated over because they’re right there with the troops, their out in the midst of all the battles, they’re catching all the hard stuff.

LC: Yes sir. When your time actually came to leave, this is your first tour, what were you looking forward to? Do you remember?

FV: I don’t really remember because this is pretty traumatic; the whole experience was.

LC: Okay.

FV: I just knew I was coming out of Vietnam and I had no thoughts of the future. I was just coming out alive and that was more than you could be thankful for.

LC: Yes, after everything you had seen.

FV: I had no real plans. I didn’t even know I was going to stay in the Army. As a matter of fact, at that point, I probably said I’m getting out of the army because after
what I experienced over there through that combat, I don’t know if I want anymore of this.

LC: Yes sir. How many men actually came out with you? How many were from your platoon were able to leave with you?

FV: I don’t remember.

LC: Just a handful or?

FV: Yes, very small.

LC: Okay. Sir, let’s take a break for a moment.

FV: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel Frank Vavrek. Today’s date is the 4th of February 2004. Again, I’m in the interview room, The Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech and Colonel Vavrek this morning is at his office in Jacksonville, Florida. Is that right sir?

Frank Vavrek: That’s correct, yes.

LC: Okay, good morning, how are you?

FV: Fine, great.

LC: Very good. Sir, I think you may have recalled the name of a person that we were talking about yesterday?

FV: Yes, this is the fellow I had mentioned yesterday when we were talking who had tried to go AWOL as we deployed at Fort Benning, Georgia and moving by bus to Savannah. His name was William Ivanov and as I said, he was later killed by in country there in Vietnam when he walked into that tail rotor on the helicopter.

LC: How long had he actually been in country? Do you remember how long he was with you?

FV: It wasn’t very long, four months, about.

LC: I think yesterday you said something about he kind of just didn’t fit in or didn’t really have…

FV: No, he was kind of a loner. He didn’t really have too many friends. He was stubborn, bull headed type of guy.
LC: Were there other incidents that you remember?
FV: Yes, he caused trouble for his NCOs. I mean, argued with them about different things, just didn’t fall in place.
LC: He didn’t kind of settle into the job.
FV: But once we got in Vietnam, there was nowhere for him to go. He had to stay there with us.
LC: Right. Do you remember how his last name was spelled?
FV: Ivanov, I-v-a-n-o-v.
LC: Okay.
FV: And I knew he was from Russia. He was or his family had emigrated from Russia.
LC: Did he speak with an accent, do you remember?
FV: Yes, from what I recall, he did have a slight accent to his speech.
LC: Were there particular groups of people that he absolutely had a problem getting along with or was it kind of everybody?
FV: It was kind of; mostly it was the NCOs. I think among the soldiers, he was okay, but he had a problem with the authority. You know, tell him what to do all the time.
LC: Well, I’m glad you remembered that, it’ll help in the future.
FV: He had a place in our lives, even though; I mention that, you know, still had a place in our lives there.
LC: That’s right and all your men did, it sounds like.
FV: Absolutely, yes.
LC: Yesterday Frank, we were talking about the end of your first tour and you intimaded that you were unsure whether you might stay in the Army or not.
FV: Right.
LC: How did you resolve that question?
FV: Okay, I came back to the states, I still had an obligation of about another year left, so I reported into Fort Benning where my orders had me here as stateside and they assigned me to the Florida Ranger Camp as an instructor.
LC: Okay.
FV: So I went down there teaching Ranger students techniques, leadership, and physically and all that. Of course, the curriculum had changed in that course that we were now teaching, the guerilla war that we were fighting in Vietnam and trying to set all the scenarios rather than operating behind enemy lines and all that to try to train these young leaders in that environment based on our experience when we come back from Vietnam.

LC: I’m sorry, go head Frank.

FV: It just gave them some kind of idea what we experienced and what they might expect.

LC: Did you enjoy the teaching aspects of it?

FV: Yes, I enjoyed it. It was important, I felt we were doing something very important and I enjoyed it. Again, it was physically involved because it involved Ranger training, which is a lot of physical aspect to that; there’s challenges. Even as an instructor, although as an instructor, we could take breaks where the student, we were pressuring the students. So, we didn’t push ourselves to the limit all the time, but we would push them. I remember we were out on a training exercise and I got a radio call that says, hey, my time in the Army was up.

LC: Really?

FV: I was to get on a helicopter, head back, because I hadn’t extended. I had a two-year obligation and my term of my obligation had expired and I hadn’t put any paperwork to extend it or anything else. So, anyway, I said, “Well, I really don’t want to get out.” I thought, I had forgotten all about it, it hadn’t crossed my mind, so I said, “Well, I’m enjoying the work I’m doing and I want to continue.” So, they said, “Well, okay, what we’ll do is backdate the paperwork, you get in here and sign it, and we’ll try to get it in the system and see if it’ll accept it late” and they did. So, I went from two-year obligation to indefinite, what they call indefinite career status and that’s how it happened. I almost was out. (Laughing)

LC: It kind of snuck up on you a little. (Laughing)

FV: It kind of snuck up on me.

LC: Had you really just completely forgotten the end date of your…?
FV: Right, I was involved in the work there and everything and never thought about my time my obligated tour expiring and that I needed to do anything. I mean, I don’t know why, but never thought about it.

LC: Did you stay on at the Ranger School?

FV: So I stayed on there for maybe another year. The whole two years between my two tours, I was in the Ranger Department in the Florida Ranger Camp.

LC: Okay. Frank, I think that Ranger training is and particularly training then, it was specialized and pointed toward the Vietnam conflict would be of great interest to people in the future. Can you tell a little bit about how the section of the course that you were involved with in Florida changed between the time you took it as a fledging Ranger and the time you were actually teaching it as an instructor?

FV: Well, we modified it from where you’re operating within the conventional type unit, mainly behind enemy lines and putting them in the environment where you’re uncertain as to what the situation is around you. You have no idea where your enemy is, you have no idea who he is and so any encounters you make with other people or other forces, you couldn’t tell whether they were friendly or not and the ability of the leader now to respond to a situation that just comes up rather than trying to precondition himself to expect something to happen as you would under other circumstances. And then dealing with the chaos and the rapidly fluid type of situation to be able to issue orders to his squad to keep his cool, to stretch them out physically, make them move long distances with very little rest, very little food and still operate under those kinds of conditions and continue to function mentally in a good mental capacity as well.

LC: What kinds of mock trials or field trials did you set up or were set up for the trainees?

FV: Well, we’d have them move into an area of operations like they’d expect in Vietnam and they would stay out. When it wasn’t go out, accomplish your mission, come back, get a hot meal and everything. It would be, you’re out there and you have to learn to take care of yourself and preserve your unit. Search for and find enemy by reading enemy signs or set up ambushes, learn patience, quiet, how to do that and be quiet and remain in position. So, those kinds of things were enduring, and a lot of that is very boring because you’d go out and set an ambush up. Usually, you have to find the
likely sight of enemy activity first, find signs and be able to read footprints and other
signs that there’s activity in that area; something’s ongoing. Then you have to set up and
watch it. You know, of course there’s long, tedious, boring hours that there’s nothing
going on.

LC: Which replicates basically some pieces of your experience.
FV: Some pieces, yes.
LC: What was your role exactly? Did you actually go out into the field and setup
the mock ambushes or setup the mock evidence of activity?
FV: We wrote scenarios for the problems and we had an opposing force to role
play the enemy and we’d have these kind of scenarios that we made up as to depicting
some things that we had experienced in Vietnam and what we would and then we’d take
the students and basically we knew what was going to happen and let the student evaluate
them in how they reacted in these environments.

LC: Who was in the mock force? Who typically would be drafted into that
position?
FV: Okay, we’d get other army units, sometimes like 82nd Airborne, active duty
troops, they would send a contingent down and we’d use them. So we’d have to go out
and brief them on what their roles were to do and give them a time schedule to do certain
things as you would and then we’d counter the students, get them in the scenarios against
that.

LC: Although you were only at this point just still in your early 20’s.
FV: Still in my early 20’s, yes.
LC: You were sort of the old man as it were.
FV: Well then, yes. Oh yes.
LC: You had already been over to Vietnam.
FV: Been over there, yes.
LC: And I wonder, did the trainees who were coming up, I’m sure they were
ambitious and the cream of the crop really, young men, did they look to you for informal
guidance as well as what you were teaching them on the mock battlefields and in the
scenarios? Go head.
FV: Yes, I think they did based on the fact that we had experienced combat, survived it, and some of our guys had been in the Ia Drang in the 7th Cav and I mean, all of them were well aware of these actions and they were aware of who we were and what units we’d fought in and I guess they listened because they were young officers or young NCOs that when they graduated, they were going to go to units or deploy to Vietnam.

LC: Did you form any friendships with any of these young men?

FV: The students, no. We only knew them for the time they were there, like three short weeks, so it was like we didn’t have time to really get to know any one student.

LC: Did the length of training stay the same the entire time?

FV: Yes, the time of training and all that stayed the same.

LC: What about your co-instructors. You said some of them were probably from the 1st of the 7th.

FV: Yes, they were from the Cav divisions, Special Forces officers and NCOs and officers and NCOs from other units as well, but I think the Special Forces and the 1st Cav made up the predominance of our cadre.

LC: Were any of those men that you had known before either an OCS or in the field?

FV: Oh yes, yes, because we had been in OCS, some of us had gone through Ranger School together, went to Vietnam, served in the Cav division, others went to other units. Then our first year was up, so we were kind of back there, so yes, a lot of us knew each other and we already had bonds formed and friendships formed.

LC: Were there any men who served as trainers there in Florida that you’d like to name so that people who might be interested in studying the actual Ranger training could trace their careers?

FV: Yes, Jim Rackstraw I know was one. He was in LZ X-Ray with 1st 7th Cav.

LC: How do you spell his last name? Do you know?

FV: Rackstraw, R-a-c-k-s-t-r-a-w.

LC: Okay.

FV: He went on and he retired from the Army as a full Colonel and he transferred sometime in his career to the Military Police Branch.
LC: Interesting. Okay.

FV: Let’s see, there’s Lee Sanders, he was in the 1st Cav. I’m not sure if he was a 5th Cav I think. Lee Sanders, these are just a couple of names that come to mind.

LC: Sure, it’s very helpful to sort of flesh out who it was you were working with and what you were doing.

FV: Yes.

LC: At what point did the instructing at the Ranger School come to an end for you and how did that happen?

FV: Okay, I got orders back to the 1st Cav division after; let’s see, two years there.

LC: How did you feel when you got those orders Frank?

FV: I really didn’t; I felt scared because now I had a year under my belt.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: So I knew that combat wasn’t all glory and easy and there’s some tough roads. I knew and now I knew baptism of fire, so I knew anything could happen.

LC: Now this would’ve been in 1968 at some time.


LC: Okay, before we talk about you going back overseas, let me just ask you about a couple of events that happened that summer that I’m sure you probably remember. Do you recall, for example, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King?

FV: Oh yes.

LC: Do you know where you were?

FV: I was down there at Fort Ranger Camp and remembering that happening, yes. And it was a mess in the States. I mean, we were just like chaos.

LC: Okay, can you describe that a little bit?

FV: Well, I mean the States involving our Army National Guard and the Kent State University incident; it was just complete turmoil and of course, being in the Rangers, well, we weren’t directly involved. We’re kind of in the dark world what they called, the shadow world operating in the Army, so we weren’t out in the front line units where more of the guys might face off with civilians rioting and everything.

LC: Right.
FV: So, we didn’t get directly into that and of course, we had mixed race, but then when you’re operating in these alone behind enemy lines or stuff like that, then race doesn’t mean nothing. You blend, you all become one because you become dependent on each other and you respect each other for that, for what they’re capable of doing, not so much what the color of the skin is.

LC: Had you been observing any tensions between what white and black members of the units that you were training at all?

FV: No, because again, you’re talking about elite troops more or less.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: And race was not a factor because we were training to do one purpose. It was not what color your skin was, it was how well you handled physically and mentally and you did your job and you respected each other for that part of it.

LC: In the summer of 1968, also before you went over, in California Robert Kennedy was killed.

FV: Yes, he was assassinated. All this stuff I think by then, we almost like became common every day things.

LC: So what next.

FV: Things were pretty turmoil. The country was in such turmoil, but none of this was real surprising anymore. We knew there was a lot at play and we knew Vietnam by then by ’68, there was a lot of dissention about Vietnam. There was anti-war movements and everything else.

LC: How did you feel about anti-war protesting in general? I get that you were down in Florida and you were working within the military situation, you were off in fairly isolated circumstances, but you knew what was going on.

FV: I thought it was unpatriotic.

LC: Okay.

FV: I just didn’t feel it was right, the way they did it and everything because these guys were dying and fighting and here’s everybody protesting against them.

LC: Did you actually feel that it was protesting against men who were in the military?

FV: Yes.
LC: Really?
FV: Yes.
LC: Did you have any perspective or interest in the presidential election that year?
FV: No.
LC: Not really?
FV: No, not really because I was young enough in that it really wasn’t a big thing. We were in the Military and whoever Commander in Chief was, you know, we’d follow his orders.
LC: Okay. Did you have a break between the time that you left your instruction post in Florida and the time that you had to report…?
FV: Yes, I took leave with the family. I had married.
LC: Okay. You married somebody from Florida or?
FV: From Florida, yes. A young lady that I met there and we got married and we lived together about six months. Let’s see, we got married in late ’67, so this was about July of ’68, so we spend about six months together and I got orders. Of course, that was hard on her.
LC: Very hard I would think.
FV: She kind of didn’t think that was fair, but again, being married in the military and when she did and I said, “You know, we did this with our eyes open.”
LC: Yes, but still it’s tough; newlyweds.
FV: It is tough and I felt, in my feelings too were was I knew how dangerous it was now to go over there and there’s no guarantees that anybody’s going to come back alive from the previous experience, so I mean, it was hard trying to explain that and not leave them worried. I really tried to avoid the subject.
LC: Frank, did you feel that the work you had been doing in training had kept you sharp for this next round in Vietnam?
FV: Yes, but no matter how well trained, you are, if somebody has you in their sights and they squeeze the trigger before you know it, there’s nothing you can do. I mean, if they hit you, so you just have to mentally prepare yourself to stand up, fight, and if you get shot, wounded, or killed, that’s just the way it goes.
LC: And did you have that kind of, I don’t know, for a lack of a better word, maybe fatalism? Did you have that kind of sense of, “Well, I can only do the best I can do.”

FV: I do what I can to keep it from happening, yes. I mean, I’m not going to stand there and just let somebody take potshots at me. Of course, if they miss me, you know, it’s one on them. I’m not going to stand around and wait for a second shot.

LC: Right, right.

FV: But, if they get you with that first one and you don’t know it’s coming, there’s not much you can do or if you get overwhelmed. Like some of our units get overrun, there’s not much left to do but fight for your dear life.

LC: Right, yes sir. When you received your orders, did you know that you were going to be Company Commander?

FV: No, I had orders back to the 1st Calvary Division.

LC: Okay.

FV: Which was my second tour and they reassigned me back to the same division. Most other people never got that, so it was kind of unusual that I returned to the same division. So, after taking leave with my wife and that I flew on over there. Got on the plane and arrived and reported into the division and when they started to say, “Okay, then we have to further sign you down to units and stuff” I said, “Well, is there any chance I can go to 1st Battalion 8th Cav” because I said I served there in my prior tour over here and they looked and said, “Yes. We have a need for a Company Commander.” And so I said, “Hey, that’s good. Plug me in there, do it.” Bingo, that’s it.

LC: (Laughing) Were you happy about it?

FV: Yes.

LC: Okay.

FV: Yes, it was kind of unusual because here I was, I had a Cav patch, you know, you wear a combat patch on your right sleeve and then your unit patch on your left one. Well, I had 1st Cav patches on both sleeves. That’s what they call a sandwich.

LC: Is that right?

FV: Yes.

LC: I hadn’t heard that before.
LC: Where was the 1st Cav headquartered at this point when you were...?

FV: At that point, they were at Camp Evans up in I Corps up around Quang Tri. Quang Tri Province, northern.

LC: You had not been up there before?

FV: No, I’d never been in northern part of the South Vietnam and that was on the border, you know, where that demilitarized zone between the South and North Vietnam.

LC: And in general, what was the 1st Division involved in when you arrived there?

FV: 1st Cav Division...

LC: I’m sorry, yes.

FV: They were doing a lot of security missions around vital bridges in some of the towns like in Quang Tri itself. Still search and destroy operations, looking for enemy infiltration. There’s those highlands up there. Those were pretty rough mountains up there compared to the Central Highlands too, a lot tougher. They [the division] had been involved in the relief of the Khe Sanh. They had been committed there and helped the relief of that situation. They’d also been involved in a major operation in the A Shau Valley just before I arrived. They’d taken some heavy casualties in combat there, so when I got there, the division was pretty beat up actually because they were low on helicopters. We were low on troop strength because of those prior operations. They took a lot casualties, took a lot of damage to their equipment.

LC: Do you know what happened to the Delta Company Commander that you were replacing?

FV: Yes, he was out there. I went out, flew out on a helicopter with the Battalion Commander and got off, shook his hand, said, “Hi, how are you doing?” His name was [CPT.] Evans I think. And that’s all, maybe five minutes is all I’ve ever spent with the guy.

LC: Really?

FV: We changed, he got on the helicopter and flew back and I stayed there in the field with my company.

LC: Was he at the end of his tour or had he been reassigned or do you know?
FV: I don’t know. I don’t know where he went. He wasn’t in battalion; he left
the battalion.
LC: Okay.
FV: He did not remain in it, so he might have been at the end of his tour coming
back to the States.
LC: Now, as a Company Commander, can you describe what your
responsibilities were, how many men did you have, how many were you supposed to
have, how many did you actually have and what was your equipment compliment?
FV: Okay, as a Company Commander, you have three platoons under your
control or command. Well, four actually if you count the mortars, but we didn’t use
mortars very much, but we had three maneuver platoons or rifle platoons. Generally, we
should have about two hundred and forty people and our strength was running about one
hundred and twenty, almost about half of what we really needed.
LC: Wow.
FV: Again, this was due probably to prior operations. There were a large
numbers of casualties, Malaria was taking its toll on people. What we called jungle rot;
people not taking care of drying their feet out and taking proper care of your feet or stuff,
they were getting sores and infections. So a lot of these things was taking their toll plus
booby-traps. Oh, booby-traps up there were terrible. Compared down to what we call III
Corps in the Central Highlands, man, that booby-traps was just awful up there in I Corps.
LC: In I Corps, yes. Did you know that coming in that that was a particular
problem that you were going to face or did you get that?
FV: No, that was something I learned the hard way on the ground, yes. Troops
were pretty accustomed to it and when I would issue an operation or something, they’d
say, “Sir, this is booby-traps.” And I’m going, “What’re you talking about?” And they
would say, “Well” so we had to contend with that and walking around in areas around
those villages trying to avoid that and it was about impossible to do.
LC: Now you were still airmobile at this point.
FV: We’re still airmobile.
LC: How many helicopters would typically be assigned to move your three
platoons?
FV: Okay, well the first one over, we about had what was unlimited helicopters. All our Air Assaults were made with the Huey and we dispersed those helicopters after getting rocketed they call rocket alley up there around Camp Evans where a division was and getting all the rockets coming in. I guess being so close to the North, they could get that stuff in there and they reduced in the A Shau; the division took heavy helicopter casualties and troop casualties in the A Shau Operations. So they were cut down to maybe less than half of their compliment of helicopters. So, when we would conduct an operation, basically we would get four Huey’s and then the rest would be Chinooks, which was different in our airmobile operations because loading in a Chinooks, you’re putting thirty to forty people per helicopter. That’s putting a lot of people on one craft and if it gets shot, you’d have a pretty heavy loss whereas the Huey’s, you put eight to ten people on there and then, if one of those goes down, I mean you can see the difference in numbers. So, we tried to disperse out across so minimize, if any of them did have a disaster, that it wouldn’t be as great. But that’s how we had to adapt to our Air Assault techniques and operating up there in the northern corps around Quang Tri where a lot of villages, inhabited areas and we were restricted in the artillery fire. Where down in the Highlands; we would have air strikes go in preceding an airmobile assault and artillery just pounding the LZs and around it where we were going into to try to clear before we came in. Here, there was not a thing fired. You just flew in blind and it was a different feeling.

LC: In essence, were you really blind flying in? What was your Intel like?

FV: Oh, when I say blind, I mean, you went in without any kind of prep at all.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: You just flew in there without any kind of artillery prep. No, you didn’t go in totally blind, you could see and if you drew fire, but the thing is, is you would draw fire on your approach into it in your helicopters. Then you could either break off or if you were committed, you had troops on the ground, then you had to stay during fight. You couldn’t leave them, but if you could break away from it before your helicopters ever sat down, then you could do that and try to recover without getting ambush in there, but I know some of our units got ambushed pretty heavily because of that I guess.

LC: So there were a lot of villages and civilians around?
FV: Around and most of our operations was to fly and surround the village, putting our troops in at different points and trying to form and circle a village and then the South Vietnamese would come in with what they call their National Police Force and go into the village questioning and interrogating the inhabitants to sort out and route out any Viet Cong sympathizers or whatever was in there. It was really in their hands. Our job was simply to cordon off the village and not allow anybody to come out; just collect everybody into an interrogation point and set it up that way. Now, if we came under fire going in, then that changed the whole scenario.

LC: It allowed you to then go after whoever was firing.

FV: So, if we drew fire, then we can call for the artillery and bring in the air strikes.

LC: And what about the civilians in the village?

FV: Well, yes, there were civilians in the village and they would be caught in this.

LC: There would be a potential for civilian casualties.

FV: Yes.

LC: Okay. Let’s talk about in general, operations like the one you first described where your men would form a cordon around a village.

FV: Around a village, an area, yes.

LC: What was your impression of the South Vietnamese. I presume these are provincial police or something who would come in and...

FV: No, we thought they were pretty cruel.

LC: Really?

FV: Really. These guys didn’t put up with any kind of shenanigans. They would go in. We weren’t allowed to go in there. We had to stay outside with our troops and we were to stay separate from them. All we did was cordon the thing off, send the word we got this village secured and they would come in and just walk into the village and of course, but they were armed. But from where we were, we could see what was going on. We’d see them beating some civilians, we’d see them doing different things. Torturing them, beating them. We never witnessed anybody killing one of them, but supposedly then they would be bound and they would leave and they would take some of these
civilians with them. All we knew was they were taking VC sympathizers or whatever
and arresting them.

LC: Do you know where they took them?
FV: They went back under South Vietnamese control. I have no idea where they
went.

LC: Okay.
FV: Yes, we never got to talk to them, not where we were.
LC: Really?
FV: And when they were gone, we would round our company up, pick it back up
by helicopter and go back to wherever our night defensive positions were; on some high
ground away from the village.

LC: You know Frank, I know this is sensitive, but when you say that they were
beating them and that you saw, what you called torture, can you say exactly what
happened or not?
FV: Oh, they would beat them, kick them, they’d have their hands tied, slap
them, smack them with the rifle, stuff like that.

LC: How did you and your men react to this? Of course this is something you
could never do.
FV: We just ignored it. We just sat there and just did our job. We didn’t
intervene in any way in this process.

LC: Did you have any personal reaction? Obviously you’re a Commander and
you can’t give that away, but I mean, did you have a reaction inside yourself to this?
FV: No, we had no idea. We thought that, that was there their business. When
we got prisoners, we treated them in accordance as we were taught by rules of Geneva
Conventions and so on.

LC: Yes sir.
FV: Found them, interrogated them and we felt that this was their job and their
country.

LC: Were you particularly concerned about your men’s safety when you were
unable to call in artillery and so forth?
FV: Oh yes.
Like, for example, if you weren’t fired on when you were first landing, obviously there could be an ambush waiting for you.

There could be, yes.

And did that ever occur that you know of?

No, not to me. It did to some other units, but I know some other units would go in and would get ambushed. Somebody else would have to go bail them out. They would make contact and usually that’s how some major battles would develop because that first unit would come under fire and get pinned down and like I said, once they’re on the ground, you’re kind of committed into that fight.

That’s right, yes.

And so, you had to put more troops in until you could gain control of that battlefield and then there would be…initial unit in would take a lot of casualties.

Yes.

So that helo-relief forces came in, they get reinforced and artillery would come in and air strikes and would bail them out.

Tell me about the men under your command. Do you remember the platoon leaders who were reporting to you?

Yes, I remember some of them vaguely, yes.

Okay. How, in general, did you get along with this now larger number of men under your control? Did you thrive on it?

No, I was trying to teach them things because they weren’t all, they didn’t have all the training that I had. They didn’t have the prior combat experience and some of them were like, they were too, how would you say, too cavalier.

They were young, they hadn’t experienced real combat and it pushed our troops to points where they would endanger the troops I was afraid. Some of them did. I know I had one that was like that and he and I had a lot of discussions and I told him to calm down, settle back, trying to train him not to be so eager to win himself a medal of honor or something like that because he felt, man, this was his opportunity to really get out here and make something out of himself. Others, it would vary. Now, I had another one, another platoon leader, Warren David, he had been there for sometime, so he was
pretty seasoned and calm. He did pretty well. Some of them were more worried about
the troops than they were about getting the mission done. The troops being hungry, the
troops being tired, troops too hot. They would let the troops do things that compromised
their security sometimes. They’d just get lackadaisical, go to sleep on positions and stuff
like that. I told them they can’t do that, that they got to be hard on their troops, keep
them awake.

LC: Right, and don’t allow temporary comfort.

FV: Yes, and another problem we had at this point was all our really seasoned
NCOs had kind of faded out of the service. They were wounded or whatever reason, they
had been wounded in the earlier years, so we were what we called the New Instant NCOs.
These were guys that were in the Army, demonstrated some leadership ability. They
were sent to an NCO Academy, promoted to E-5 or E-6, and so they were assigned as
squad leaders and platoon sergeants and they weren’t any older than the kids. The kids
they were over and these were not seasoned NCOs that had been around in the Army very
long and they didn’t have all the history and tradition of the Army to back them up. So,
they thought, just like mostly like most of these younger guys. They weren’t really
leaders; they were buddies.

LC: Yes. Did that suggest to you Frank, a larger problem with how the military
was organizing?

FV: Yes, we did have a problem like that because our NCO leadership was
decimated.

LC: And that was true already by early 1968 you would say?

FV: Yes. It was just a war and the attrition of the war on them is just forced out.
So, we’re at a point where at times, I remember one time, I had like an E-4 because I had
no NCOs in one of the squads, so he was the squad leader. Of course, he had no
aspiration to be a squad leader. He didn’t even have two years of service under his belt,
but he did his best. Some of these guys tried to do their best. When you’re in a combat
situation, you can’t just say, “Oh, forget. I’m not going to do it.” You have no other
course, but they didn’t have the knowledge and the background and experience to know
what to do and how to keep their troops in order and keep them organized on the
battlefield, all this kind of stuff.
LC: Yes, and as a Commander, that complicated what you had to do.

FV: It complicates it, yes, because your troops are compromising their security, getting shot when they shouldn’t be, things happening that shouldn’t be happening, fragging. Somebody get hurt by a hand grenade, nobody there to teach them really, unless they’re playing around, doing different stuff, you know what I mean?

LC: Yes.

FV: So those kinds of incidents kind of got bad.

LC: Sir, let’s change tact just a little bit. I want to ask you about the heat. You mentioned it as being a problem. Tell me about some of the problems that came up for the troops as a result of the oppressive heat.

FV: Oh, it was hot. The climate, it’s a tropical climate, so it was always hot and carrying your gear, your rucksacks, so you had to worry about that. Make sure and try to get water either brought in. We used a lot of water from the creeks and streams there if possible in country even. We used halazone tablets to try to purify it. Sometimes we’d be so thirsty though, we’d run out of water because we had the old canteens that’s quart sized. Generally we had two of them, so you’d have two quarts of water when you start out, and you’re in ninety to one hundred degree high humidity, guys were beating the bush, climbing up these steep mountains and they’d get hot and consume that water and we would be thirsty. You’d be out there in the middle of the jungle and you couldn’t get any water until you either reached the top, opened up an LZ, got them to fly water into you or we’d take water from the steams, natural flowing streams that we could find. Sometimes you’re so thirsty, we had those Halazone tablets to put in there, but you had to wait twenty minutes to put in there, shake it up real good, wait twenty minutes before you drank your water. Well, they’d be drinking water right away.

LC: Right, sometimes that.

FV: And untreated water, yes.

LC: And that probably compounded sickness and problems like that.

FV: Right, they would get dysentery or something as a result of that.

LC: If you were able to open up a small LZ where you could have a water drop, how long did it take for you to get a supply to fly in like that?
FV: Oh, well normally, you’re on the radios and you would say, “Okay”, you know, you’d be talking back to your company XO or supply people saying, “Okay, we need water. We’re running low.” So, they’d have it ready. As soon as you got an LZ open, you call them, “Okay, I got one ready.” They’d send the aircrafts, it’d be five or ten minutes; whatever time it took to fly that helicopter out there. Then you’d have your water supply in those five-gallon jerry cans mostly and pass that around to the squads and they would refill their canteens, get their water. There was always more than enough then when you could do that.

LC: But that, of course, wasn’t always possible.

FV: No, that wasn’t because when you were in your operations is what you carried on your back with you. Now they have these bigger…but then there’s so much weight that you can carry, you just can’t carry unlimited amounts of stuff to wear you down.

LC: Tell me about insects and ants. I think yesterday you mentioned the ants were in the trees and stuff.

FV: Oh yes.

LC: Can you describe that, it’s kind of nasty but?

FV: Well, mosquitoes were always a constant pest. We had to always use the mosquito repellent at night because man, those things just eat you up alive almost and if you didn’t put that on, boy, you’d have whelps all over you. The ants, they had these ants over there in those jungle areas that just clustered like on ends of the tree branches or leaves right about shoulder height and if you’re moving through the jungle, if you’re not watching real careful, a soldier would walk underneath one of those branches, shake the branch, and I guess about a million ants would drop on him. Are you familiar with the fire ants?

LC: Yes sir, in the southeast, yes.

FV: Yes, so that’s what we’re talking about. You know, when the bit, they hurt.

LC: Just being stung by one hurts I know.

FV: Yes. So, these things would fall out of this tree onto a soldier; start biting him. It would be around his neck and his face because that where they’d land originally so one guy, you’d think one guy’s going crazy, he starts slapping himself and the only
way to get him, you’d have to rip his clothes off of him and just smack him and try to get
them off of him and then he would all be infected and festered up so we’d have to
evacuate him. He’d be an actual casualty because all that venom that was in you would
be reacting. You know, swelling, turning red, so those things were a real nuisance.

LC: People can actually go into shock from those, from a severe…
FV: Yes. So, we’d have to evacuate him, let him go back to the medical aid
station and get hydrated and everything else; keep him calm until he could come back out
and join us again. So, that was the worst part. Of course, mosquitoes just
constantly…you know, Malaria.

LC: And Frank, I think you also mentioned in the forms that there was an
incident with a big monkey who jumped out in front of someone who was on point?
FV: Oh yes.
LC: Yes, can you tell about that?
FV: Okay, yes.
LC: I don’t know if this was in your first or second tour?
FV: I think it was during the first tour in Operation Crazy Horse; when we were
trying to move to regain contact with the enemy if we could, so we were walking
cautiously if you can envision that and people were spread out and every little thing,
we’re looking around. Every little tree, every corner, every rock because we’re not just
walking up there like…because we’d been hit pretty hard and we knew the enemy was
there and was still there, was still pretty bad. Well, this one guy, he was point man and
we had held up, told him to move on ahead and check, there was some like rock
outcropping of tall rocks and we told him to move on up and check around those rocks to
make sure to keep from getting us ambushed as a unit. Well, as he looked around one
rock, this monkey jumped up on the rock and screamed, made a noise. Well, the poor
point man collapsed, his knees bent and he went to the ground because it scared the crap
out of him so bad. And of course, we saw, I could see the monkey, big, black furry
animal and of course, he yelled on and then he went up in the trees and he disappeared,
but our poor point guy we had on point man, that was about it for him for that day.

LC: Just about scared the life out of him.
FV: Oh, you’re not kidding, yes. We had to give him a chance to recover. We never did evacuate him, but “Whew!” It gave him a scare.

LC: There was another time I think that you mentioned with a water buffalo.

FV: Oh man, those things. They’re something else.

LC: Now, would this be also in the first tour?

FV: Yes, that was also in the first tour.

LC: Well, I wanted to make sure that you have a chance to tell that one because it’s a little bad.

FV: Yes, golly. We were just out on operation just minding our own business, walking along and we come down to a creek. It’s a pretty nice area in there and we run into this water buffalo and this guy is not happy that we’re around and I had the whole platoon and he’s got his nose down and he’s snorting and he’s pawing at the ground and they said, “Okay, what’re we going to do?” I said, “Well, we’re going to shoot the water buffalo.” Well, little did I know when you shoot at them; you got to have a big gun.

LC: And what did you have?

FV: So that M-16 shot at him and all that thing succeeded in doing was making him mad. LC: The bullets bounced off?

FV: The bullets would hit him, but they wouldn’t do nothing and he just got mad, so he started to charge. So, next thing is our machine gunner opened on him, with the machine gun and then one of the guys with the light anti-tank weapon cocked that thing and hit him with that, it killed him.

LC: (Laughing) I bet it did.

FV: It stopped him from charging into our troops.

LC: Did you guys laugh about this or did you after awhile?

FV: Well, after, when nobody got hurt and then we’re going, but there was no more surprises like sneaking around after that. That was it.

LC: Right, everyone then knew where you were.

FV: Everybody knew we were around then.

LC: And they knew you had a big weapon as well.

FV: Yes. We stopped that water buffalo; we used an anti-tank round to stop him.
LC: I wanted to make sure that you got a chance to talk about that. The guys also occasionally kept pets, did they not?

FV: Yes.

LC: Do you remember any incidents with?

FV: Oh yes, I remember this one. Either his last name was George or that was his first name and he had kept a wild pig that he was raising and he took that thing, kept it in his shirt, carried it around. He became real attached to it because every time we tried to tell him, give the pig up, because the thing would squeal sometimes.

LC: Right, and give you away.

FV: We can’t do this, you know, we got to get rid of that pig and he got real emotional over it. I don’t know, I can’t remember, that pig used to live around our base camp, but again, it’s routing in everything and finally it disappeared and I know he was hurt and crying over that pig. I can remember he was crying, somebody killed it or something and I didn’t see it or anything, but he was really hurt over that.

LC: Yes, I think maybe different serviceman found different ways to cope.

FV: Yes, and they had little dogs; they would adopt puppies and dogs all the time.

LC: Did the animals in anyway become a nuisance to you guys are mobile your…?

FV: Yes, they became a nuisance because these guys trying to carry them around with them and take care of them on combat missions and you never know when one of these animals is going to act up.

LC: And compromise things.

FV: Compromises or something like that. I mean, these things, they’re not inoculated health wise. We didn’t know if they bite somebody, it could spread Rabies or something. So, yes, they were a problem and we discouraged them, but these guys would try to sneak these pets around and not let you know about them. But eventually, you find them. (Laughing)

LC: Yes. And as Commander, you had to kind of put your foot down.

FV: Yes, I had to tell them no, it’s with like that pig. I’m trying to be nice and kind, so we let him keep the pig, but said the pig’s going to have to stay back, we can’t
have it our here when we’re conducting operations because it makes noise. Somebody
grabbed it or something and it squeals. I said, we can’t have that.

LC: Right. Sir, I want to ask you about race relations during your second tour.
Did you observe out in the field, any greater anxiety or tension during your second tour
than you had seen earlier on?

FV: Yes I sure did. By then, things were getting pretty bad as far as race
relations go by ’68.

LC: Yes, can you describe sort of the general atmosphere of what you were
seeing?

FV: Yes, there was basically a distrust between people, especially when you
weren’t out on operations. The blacks would segregate and they would get together and
they just didn’t socialize with each other in any friendly way. Out in the field as infantry,
I think they tolerated each other more, but there’s a lot of talk back and forth and it was
racially slanted talk and so hard feelings would build up I guess over time and so fights
would break out every now and then. As a Commander, I had a hard time. I had blacks
saying we as the white majority were unfair to them, mistreating them. Anytime you had
tried to administer discipline, if it involved the black, it was hard. A couple of incidents I
had, once we were in a night defensive position, we had a resupply come in, bring in
food, bring in mail, water, and the helicopter left and when the helicopter left, well, there
was a pile of web gear and a rifle and all this laying there on the ground near the LZ and I
remember seeing it and I said, “Okay, who’s gear is that?” I tried to find out and pass the
word, why would somebody leave their rifle and all their gear here. Somebody left it.
We found out, well, one of the troops just dumped his gear and of course, when the
helicopter rotors were going, we were all looking down, so we didn’t see him, but he had
jumped on the helicopter and left. So, one of the guys had told us what had happened and
this happened to be a black soldier. So, I radioed back to the rear and said, “Intercept that
helicopter. You have soldier on board that did not have permission to leave his post out
here.” They caught him. When the helicopter came in, they caught him and they put him
under restraint and they said, “What do you want to do with him?” I said, “Well, he left
his post, so we’re going to court marshal him.” And I said, “In the mean time, just put
him on the next helicopter back out here. We’ll get him his gear back, he’s going to stay
Well, he came out and they gave him his gear back and a 1st Sergeant was with him and I remember the guy getting in my face and telling me he was going to have me. I mean, he called me white trash basically and that he and his brothers would have me. So, we did court martial him, put him in confinement because then that was disrespect on top of leaving his post.

LC: Did you understand Frank that he meant that…what did he mean by, “that he would have you?”

FV: He said if we ever met other than out there, anywhere back in the States, that I was cooked goose in his book.

LC: Okay.

FV: But I never met him, we went a head and court marshaled him. He went to serve six months or something like that and then I don’t know whatever happened to him after that. But he was a militant type.

LC: And had he been acting out before this incident? Had there been any problems before?

FV: Yes, he was like an instigator. I mean, I heard words, guys would say different things that he was stirring them up. I mean, just talk and his talk was the rough talk and stuff like, “You shouldn’t be here, this is not right” just that. So, that was the first time that he tried to do something, I don’t know why, so he was taking stern action and really bumped heads.

LC: Right.

FV: Another case I had involving race again was, I had a young black soldier. Every time we’d go on an operation, he would come down with something like asthma; he couldn’t breathe, he had difficulty, he’d go into anxiety attack, I don’t know. So, what I’d do is say, “Okay”, tell the medic, you know, “What do you want me to do?” I said, “Well, send him back to the battalion aid station, have them check him out.” If he’s got a medical problem, we need to get him out of the unit. So, he goes to the battalion aid station and they check him out and say there’s nothing wrong with this guy. And he did that two or three times, so finally he did it and I said, “Look, we’ve been through this time and time again.” I said, “Medically, I was told you’re squared away, there’s no
problem and therefore you get back with your squad and you’re going to go into this
operation.” And he pulled his pistol on me believe it or not.

LC: Wow.
FV: And he pulled his pistol and fortunately when he squeezed the trigger, there
was no round in the chamber and the 1st Sergeant was standing there beside me, grabbed
him and took the pistol off of him. He wasn’t a militant black or nothing, but just that
one incident spurred him for that. Well, of course after that happened, we were still in
the rear area and the rest of the blacks thought I was being unfair, treating him and they
rallied up so I had to go out and meet with them; had a big discussion and a pow wow.

LC: Do you remember what kinds of things you said?
FV: To him?
LC: To, well…
FV: Oh, the others thought I was picking on them, said it wasn’t right just
because he’s black, I’m making him go in the operation and I mean, look at all these
other guys. I can’t remember exactly, but it was pretty heated and I was kind of nervous
about the whole thing because I didn’t know what was going to come out.

LC: Well, you just had a gun drawn on you, so…
FV: Yes. The others thought I was being unfair and now that I had him ordered
back, put under arrest because of that and be court marshaled, the rest of them were
protesting. Again, I was picking on blacks and stuff. Anyhow, I told them that’s the way
it’s going to be and we finally I think settled itself down and we went out on the
operation uneventful, but those kinds of things flared up.

LC: Frank, what helped you to manage that situation? What did you draw on?
Did you draw on your training, your background, your common sense?
FV: Just common sense. I just looked at them. I mean, they’re saying I’m
picking on him and I said, “What about the rest of you guys? You’re going on the
operation.” He said he had a medical condition and I just tried to use logic and common
sense and I guess things kind of calmed down. I said, “You guys are going. Any of you
guys could do the same thing.” I said, he hadn’t gone, this kid hadn’t gone on one
operation with us because he always pulled this thing and to the date of the court marshal,
the medics and the battalion doctor and all said, “No, there was nothing that he could
diagnose” and I don’t know, maybe the kid was really truly having an anxiety attack, I
don’t know.

LC: But I don’t think that was really recognized?
FV: We couldn’t identify it, yes and document it. If somebody could’ve just
documented that and said, “Okay, this guy needs to be reassigned”, we could’ve got him
out of there that quick.

LC: Right, and you would have, am I right?
FV: And I would have, yes, but under that circumstances, we didn’t have it, we
can’t let anybody that gets a sniffle run off.

LC: Right. Did you attend the court marshal? I’m sure you did.
FV: Yes, they had called me, my testimony.
LC: Where did that happen?
FV: It happened in our battalion area.
LC: And how long after the incident did it occur, do you remember?
FV: I don’t remember.
LC: What happened to him? Do you have any idea?
FV: He went to, what they had Long Bien, the stockade in Long Bien?
LC: Yes.
FV: Served his time there, then I guess got discharged from there.
LC: Did that rattle you at all, the fact that one of your own men pulled a gun on
you?
FV: Oh yes, that scared me. I was nervous and I just didn’t know how much
worse it could get.
LC: Yes, well, I bet you were wondering.
FV: Yes. So, I had to be careful when I go to lay down at night and everything, I
had to make sure I had…I was alert too, but I just couldn’t walk around at night
unattended and all that. That made it harder because one of those guys could take a pot
shot at me. I mean, they had many opportunities they could shoot you.
LC: Yes sir. Did you ever hear of incidents where a Commanding Officer was
actually hurt, not necessarily by black soldiers, but by anyone in their own unit?
FV: Yes, not first hand, but a lot of the stuff that I read or I think most of that was published, when that kind of stuff, the fraggings, and all that that was on-going and we were aware that that stuff was happening.

LC: Did you get any instruction or information from Command about how to handle situations like this?

FV: No, you were kind of...those were your troops and how you related with them and everything was your prerogative.

LC: Did you talk to your Commanding Officer about the situation?

FV: Oh yes, we had discussions about it.

LC: Now who were you reporting to at this time Frank?

FV: This time it was Colonel Adams, Adams.

LC: Do you remember his first name?

FV: No I don’t.

LC: Okay. How long did you report to him?

FV: For four months.

LC: And were you still the Delta Company Commander when someone else came in over him or?

FV: Yes, over him?

LC: Or I’m sorry, came into replace him.

FV: No, I left before he gave up command of the battalion and they reassigned me to the brigade staff and then back to battalion staff following it.

LC: When did that assignment to brigade staff S-2 to happen?

FV: It took place in December of 1968; it was prior to Christmas.

LC: I don’t know when it occurred, but I gather from your forms that you were wounded at some point?

FV: Yes, that was as Company Commander.

LC: Okay, and did that wounding incident end your time as Company Commander?

FV: No, it was very superficial.

LC: Okay, can you describe what happened that day?
FV: We were conducting an airmobile operation; flying the company into an LZ up in I Corps. We landed the whole company, as I mentioned, booby-traps were really a real problem up there and then the opening was a natural opening that we went into. We went in suspecting first wave in, look for booby-traps, be very cautious and we got on the ground and everybody moved. We received no rifle fire or anything like that, everybody moved very carefully and we spread out all around there and I got my CP group in there and no incident. I remember calling a meeting of the platoon leaders then. It was early in the afternoon and I said, “Okay, we figured our order of movement.” You know, I gave one over to what order of movement, the direction, and everything that we were going to take and as I convened my meeting, the platoon leaders and the RTOs separated to go back to their platoons and one of them tripped the booby-trap.

LC: Now how far away from it?

FV: About ten feet away from where we were meeting.

LC: Wow.

FV: And just out of nowhere and thing went off, of course the frags hit me and severely injured. It didn’t kill anybody, but about nine or ten people in this group because we were still a pretty big cluster of groups there, people and miraculously, the guy who tripped it, all he ended up was getting injured in his ankle, you know, frags into his ankle. Now of course, he couldn’t walk, it had damaged his ankle bad enough that we had to evacuate him. The platoon leader was right in front of him and he didn’t get hurt at all and all the guys that got hurt were those standing back in the same area I was in. Of course, I felt the blast; it hit me in the chest. I mean, it knocked me down, knocked the wind out of me, scattered the other guys, casualties just every which way. You know, the shrapnel and the hot blast and I knew I’d been hit and as soon as I could, I ripped my shirt open because I knew something had hit me in the chest and there were frag wounds. I had frag wounds there, frag wounds in my face, my arms, but none of them were critical.

LC: Okay. And were you hit in the eyes or mouth?

FV: Below the eye. Yes, I still have to carry a piece of fragment there, it’s still hard.

LC: Do you really?
FV: Yes, because what happened is those things are hot, so when the battalion surgeon examined me, the thing had seared itself shut and he said, “Well, just leave it be because if you cut it out, it’ll make a bigger scar and everything.” He said, “Just leave it be in there.” So, they never removed it.

LC: Do you have shrapnel anywhere else sir?

FV: No, that’s the only place, is right under my right eye.

LC: Now about how many pieces, if you don’t mind my asking, did you take, would you say?

FV: Oh, it was like a shotgun blast. I mean, I was peppered, my jacket was full of tiny holes and I had little flesh wounds and marks and scars. Now, one piece of fragment, I was smoking then and as a smoker, we always kept our cigarettes high and dry, in your helmet or something and my cigarette lighter was in my shirt pocket. Keep it up high in case because of those stream crossing and everything, keep it dry so it would always work and a big chunk of shrapnel hit my cigarette lighter and just bent it in. It was one of the old Zippo.

LC: Really?

FV: And I mean, left a big imprint in that Zippo right in my chest, so that’s the part, I guess, that really went up, said I felt something hit me, like knocked the wind out of me, that’s what did it. The cigarette lighter stopped that shrapnel. Of course, I didn’t know that until later and I opened it up to light a cigarette and then there’s this big indentation in my cigarette lighter. Of course, I lost that cigarette lighter since then.

LC: Oh you have?

FV: Oh yes.

LC: It saved your life though didn’t it in a way?

FV: It did, yes. I wish I had it, but I continued to use it, carry it with me and I ended up losing it down in Panama, the jungles down there.

LC: Okay. Sir, how many men were wounded either slightly or more seriously by that device?

FV: Well, probably more seriously. I think we had nine, number nine comes to mind, casualties that were evacuated and then I, of course, I didn’t need to be evacuated.

LC: But later on you went to the battalion?
FV: The battalion, saw the surgeon to see, just to get a checkup.

LC: How long was it until you were, you know, saw a doctor?

FV: That was that afternoon, about an hour later because he came out there on a helicopter and examined me onsite and said he did not see anything, he could not detect anything that was any serious major. All the wounds were kind of seared; they were just small stuff. Even that was all seared, so I didn’t have any open wounds or anything.

LC: Now, I assume that medics came quickly over to where this meeting was happening.

FV: Oh definitely, medics.

LC: Can you talk about the medics for a minute and the role they played?

FV: There were like, from what I can say, they’re like angels on earth because these guys are your lifesavers. They save lives, they risk their lives, they even gave their lives many times to help a wounded comrade, to ease anybody’s pain, they played mother, they played whatever, and calming people who are hurt, afraid and thinking their dying and these guys would hold them in their arms and be the last person in the world to be cradling their head in their laps or something like that.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: They were unselfish from best I can tell. I just have complete respect for the combat medics and they would put their rifle down. They never got involved; they would take their aid kits and run to the aid of a soldier and just do anything they could to try to save lives.

LC: Sir, I want to ask you about the device by which you were wounded. Do you actually know what the configuration of that device was?

FV: I think it was a booby-trapped or a rocket propelled grenade. The frags and stuff that we saw later indicated that it was one of those shoulder fire rocket propelled grenades.

LC: Yes, that’s a serious…

FV: B-7 I guess, yes and it was a shape charge and the shape, the thing was pointed in our direction is why we got all the blasts, but the guy who actually tripped it and the platoon leader in front of him didn’t get anything because all the blasts came in one direction and they had already…
LC: They were passed it.
FV: Passed that point when they tripped it, yes.
LC: Were any men who were wounded that day actually remove from active service because of it, do you know?
FV: That were what?
LC: Were any of the men who were wounded actually out of active service as a consequence?
FV: I think there were a couple. There were a couple of pretty bad guys. I mean, they had some pretty…one person’s neck was really ripped open and we were all laying there together and I remember this one guy and they were trying to save him, they were getting bandages on him, trying to get the bleeding to stop. He was in pretty bad shape so I know he didn’t come back.
LC: Now, I assume you stayed in the field then?
FV: I stayed in the field with the troops, yes. I didn’t get evacuated; I stayed out there.
LC: Did that shake you as well sir?
FV: Oh yes, everyone has close calls.
LC: Oh yes.
FV: They make you sit back and reflect, you know, that’s another one. How many of these things can you do?
LC: Yes sir, and you had quite a few by the sound of it.
FV: Yes.
LC: Pretty soon there after then, I gather it was Christmas.
FV: Yes, Christmas came while I gave up command of the company, went to the brigade staff and I was working back in the base camp there in Tay Ninh.
LC: In Tay Ninh?
FV: Yes, we had moved while I was Company Commander, the division had made its move from I Corps in Quang Tri down into the IV Corps area, Tay Ninh in response to an expected Tet Offensive for 1969. We had moved down there to try and cut off the infiltration coming through from Cambodia.
LC: So, the whole division in effect?
FV: The whole division moved, moved south out of Quang Tri and moved south. It was early in November I think.

LC: Go head Frank.

FV: I was going to say again, so we operated up there in I Corps in those mountains and then came south into the Tay Ninh province which is near the border of Cambodia and that area of Cambodia was called the Angels Wing area and Parrot’s Peak area because of the shape of the border of Cambodia in that particular area of south Vietnam.

LC: Now, can you describe the terrain differences between where you had been up in Quang Tri and now down in Tay Ninh?

FV: Quang Tri was mountains, steep, mostly rainy. It always seemed like it was raining all the time up there, cloudy. Ridge, you know, these razorback ridgelines and these mountains just narrow just only wide enough to walk on, one person. You could hardly pass each other; you’d fall over the edge almost some of them, they’re so steep. That was difficult terrain up there. Then back down to IV Corps, you were talking swampy, marshy, lowland, very much flatter, heavier jungle and real big jungle.

LC: Now, how did you actually learn that you were going to go from the Command of Delta Company to the brigade staff?

FV: Well, my Company was called in from out in the field and told to take over the battalion defense, you know, around the battalion firebase so when they came in, they said, “Okay, you’ve been in command about four, four in a half months and time to change over” and I said, “Well, you know.” Just about this time, you’re getting to know your troops and said, “Now it’s time for you to go and they said, “Now, we have to get somebody else, their turn.” And it was just done that way.

LC: How did you feel about that? Did you think it was a good decision?

FV: No, I mean, in this four months that I had served with this unit, I was just getting to know the people, know my leaders, establishing my rules with them and how I expected things to work, you draw an affiliation with them, you know what I mean? You get connected with them and they become, there was a bonding there and then you got to break all that and it felt like, here I go, I’m a career officer and let these guys beat the bush out here, but I’m going back to a nice soft job in the staff somewhere.
LC: Go head.

FV: I just didn’t feel good, I just felt like I was abandoning.

LC: Would you say that you felt a little bit guilty?

FV: Yes, there was some guilt I guess.

LC: But also from a Command point of view, would you say that maybe it wasn’t the best decision in terms of efficiency and operating cohesion of the unit?

FV: To what, change it?

LC: Yes, to be changing people.

FV: No, I think it’s more efficient and cohesive if you keep the people together as a unit and they share and endure those experiences and they work for one another to build that union between them where they know each other, they begin to rely on each other and you understand each other’s moves. You know what the other guy’s going to do, you know who he is and you know what to expect from him.

LC: Right.

FV: When something happens, basically, you know, a nod of the head; use signals between each other, you get established and that non-verbal kind of communication.

LC: Right.

FV: (Coughs) Excuse me, so…

LC: And when you bring in a new commander, then all that has to…

FV: All that goes because his new personality coming in, new ideas, and so all that that’s been working over this short time gets cast aside and it all starts over again.

LC: From the point of view of the high up’s, can you say again what you thought they were trying to accomplish by moving you from Company Commander to brigade? Were they making space for someone else who should have “a field command” or something?

FV: Yes, it was all of that part was trying to rotate us through so it’d give everybody their chance to get their command time in, you know, the careerism part of it.

LC: Right.

FV: You’re lucky enough to be alive, did serve your tour, we are rating out of it, so it’s give another guy a chance.
LC: Where did you spend Christmas that year then?

FV: It was in the brigade staff, but the brigade TOC [Tactical Operations Center], kind of like big, big bunker, all your radios for the whole brigade is in there and brigade has about three battalions that it’s looking after so it’s trying to coordinate all the things there at that level.

LC: And what was your assignment actually?

FV: I was assistant S2 as the intelligence of try to read the reports that came in, coordinate with lateral agencies there in the town of Tay Ninh, that city with the ARVN Forces, the provisional governments that were there trying to feed intelligence of expected enemy operations or things into the brigade commander who would make decisions and move his battalions around and try to counter these things.

LC: Were you also seeing reports based on captured documents and interrogations?

FV: Captured documents, yes, interrogations, stuff of that nature.

LC: Okay, and had you had much training besides in OCS about managing this kind of information?

FV: No, no.

LC: So you had to kind of learn it on the fly?

FV: This is what we call the OJT; you learn it on the fly. Again, I was only a captain so they had to work for a major so there were other officers there who were intelligence like specialists in that field and my job was mainly just understudy them and learn as you go.

LC: What ARVN units did you coordinate with; do you remember?

FV: I can’t remember their designations. I know there was some generals, we’d brief them, they’d brief us from the South Vietnamese Army and they were generals, commanders of the ARVN units. I know in one briefing we were giving what we thought was the enemy order of battle that we were against and I remember that general corrected me saying, “No, no, no. It’s not that regiment, it was some other regiment.” And in this formal briefing, I said, “Well, okay, you must know. You live here.” (Laughing) But I didn’t say that, that was a thought going through my mind.

LC: Yes. (Laughing)
FV: But he did you know and he would say, “No, it’s not that regiment, it’s this regiment or that regiment.” Those regiments didn’t mean nothing to me anyway. (Laughing)

LC: Right, it was the enemy generally.

FV: For the enemy, yes. We were trying to portray what we’re up against out there, what we think we had and I remember him saying, “No, it’s a little different than what you think it is.”

LC: What was your impression of the ARVN generals that you saw and other staff members that you saw who were there?

FV: They seemed to be pretty dedicated. They came in, they had all their staff around them and everything was pretty stiff when they come in because they were high ranking.

LC: Right.

FV: And they commanded respect like anybody else.

LC: Okay, you mentioned that you worked with the provincial officials also.

FV: Right.

LC: Exchanging intelligence or perhaps gathering…

FV: Yes, these were civilian authorities in that province, the province chief, our US civilian counterparts who advised them and everything and we would share our information as we were gathering it with them and they would also share anything that they knew suspected with us. So it was like just a cross exchange and also, we would portray where our units were, operating in their province, what our operations were doing.

LC: Right. Was the relationship with the provincial officials and with the ARVN, generally, would you describe it as a good working relationship or was there tension there?

FV: Well, only delved in the formal briefing environment, so you were pretty…when you brief something, you wanted to make sure it was right, number one and accurate as you could possibly be because we were the American unit there, so we were just coordinating with them. We didn’t live with them day to day, so I don’t know throughout the day. So, anytime we ever met with them, everybody was polite and
cordial. Nobody ever got angry at anybody that I know of. It was a very formal setting and we strictly just briefed situation, what our units did, where they were located, their CP’s were located, not necessarily where everybody was.

LC: Right.

FV: It was just that exchange of information in a very cordial manner.

LC: The idea of relocating the brigade to the Cambodian border area was in anticipation of a repeat or some repeat of the Tet Offensive.

FV: The Tet Offensive, yes, and there was plenty of evidence at being in that position that that is what in fact was happening.

LC: Well, can you describe the general contours of that evidence and what it pointed to?

FV: Well, the evidence was the activity, the movement, the troop movements in there, the enemy troop movements, infiltration of all the supplies, capturing documents from units through engaging that it worked a way back up to us, an attempt by them to launch an armored attack one night with actual tanks while I was in the brigade TOC.

LC: What happened that night?

FV: Oh, well, the tanks…got word that there were tanks and the Air Force got involved and they were moving in South Vietnam away from Cambodia down toward Saigon, then Saigon. We had our firebases in the way, in the direction those tanks were coming and the Air Force is what lit them up. It was an Air Force FAC that discovered these tanks. Of course, he radioed in and we’re tied in with him on the ALO Net, and so they come over to us to verify if we have any friendly armor. Of course, none of our intelligence, negative, so any tanks running around out there is not ours.

LC: Right.

FV: So, we got permission to put them engage and the Air Force is really is the only ones that engaged, tanks never made it. They were channelized in this area because, like I said, it was real marshy.

LC: Right, the terrain.

FV: They were channelized to the road coming from Cambodia into South Vietnam and they caught them quick enough before they could bust across through that marshy area to get any kind of seize, any kind of foothold in the high ground where they
could disperse and spread out. So, the Air Force got on them and busted it up right away, right from the get go. It lasted a couple of hours; it was like a turkey shoot for the planes though.

LC: Yes, right.
FV: And stopped that thing before it ever really got started.
LC: Was it your impression as an intelligence officer that the Communist Forces in the Tay Ninh area or around, in that province were primarily local VC or were they NVA fillers at this point?
FV: We knew that they were NVA and we knew they were staging out of Cambodia.
LC: Okay.
FV: I mean, the armor proved it. You just don’t send thirty or forty tanks down there by themselves. There were hundreds of tanks in there.
LC: Holding up inside the Cambodian border?
FV: And we knew that from Intel. We knew there was an armored unit in there, but we couldn’t do nothing. That was across the border then, this is before they invaded Cambodia, but our Intel, we knew there was large enemy force sitting there in Cambodia.
LC: As a commanding officer with field experience and now as an intelligence officer, did it bother you that those troops were sitting over on the Cambodian soil?
FV: Yes, it was kind of heartbreaking. Personal questions was why don’t we go in there and do something. But diplomatically, I guess our hands were tied.
LC: And did you understand that position?
FV: Yes, I kind of understood that, so we were watching that border like a hawk. We had recon; I mean our scouts, brigade scouts and everything. We were watching that border like a hawk.
LC: Do you know if there were any listening devices deployed along the border such that you would get information that might not come from observers or from even photographic evidence? Did we have that kind of stuff there?
FV: Yes, we had electronic surveillance of that borderline also, yes.
LC: And did you have access to the product of electronic devices?
FV: Yes, we had those things set up. The sensing devices, magnetic acoustic
type of devices. Monitoring them, we’d have guys monitoring those things away, when
they’d pick up noise; they were making reports right away.

LC: Okay, and was that a particular unit or were there particular units that were
responsible for monitoring?

FV: Yes, these were I guess intelligence units and guys that made these kind of
things and they would listen and if they’d pick up any kind of sensing and whatever,
they’d transfer that immediately to like, me as a staff officer, then it would be my job to
get it to my boss based on how urgent I would interpret input like that into us. It would
come right in from radio; “Okay, we got something moving right now” and I would get a
hold of my boss. If I had to wake him up out of his rack or whatever and let him know if
I was on duty and that came and then he would evaluate it and decide whether to tell the
brigade commander or not, get the whole staff activated, wake them up if we had to.

LC: And potentially deployed a counter?

FV: We would alert units out there that we detected movement. Basically send
out Air Reconnaissance, we would light up the night with flares from artillery or even Air
Force dropping flares to get a look at the ground all around there and see if we can
identify and pinpoint exactly what it was.

LC: But on the day that the tanks were spotted by the Forward Air Controller,
that you didn’t have any other warning besides his visual I.D.?

FV: No, we had not picked nothing up. The Air Controller was flying around in
his little aircraft, little single engine Forward Air Controller aircraft and he was in our
brigade net, we had an Air Force team in there with their radios and it came from them,
said, “There’s tanks out here, who’s tanks are they? Are these friendly tanks?” Of
course, you wanted to double check because maybe I missed something. I remember I
was on duty and I wanted to double check if there were any armored units to confirm
that, “Hey, those are not.”

LC: They’re not ours.

FV: U.S. Tanks.

LC: Right, they’re not ours.
FV: He picked them up because through illuminations and stuff and he could actually see the tanks moving, so we determined they weren’t ours, so basically the war was handed over to the Air Force at that point.

LC: Right.

FV: The FAC was in charge. He knew where the tanks were, so he got Aircraft to go in and engage them right off the bat. I remember, they destroyed thirty to forty tanks that night.

LC: That’s a pretty substantial tank force.

FV: That’s a lot of tanks.

LC: Yes. What was your average day like? How many hours were you on duty while you were in S-2?

FV: Usually twelve hours and then you’d be in the TOC, always monitoring those radios, messages that come in from the field. They show them off as a staff officer after reviewing them and if something critical came in then you could respond very rapidly. Generally, there were enlisted what we called radiotelephone operators. They were the ones that took the messages and did all the talking on the radios and stuff. And as an officer, you would just review the reports, you compiled because you’re reading all the other stuff too, all the other Intel coming in by paper or whatever and stuff, so that was generally your shift. When something broke lose, an element got in contact, then you just went into high gear and you’d get on the radios and start talking direct, you would immediately alert your superior officers.

LC: And at that point shift on kind of…

FV: And they would start coming in and then they could take command and control and issue orders. Most of this stuff was verbal and you’d try to keep a record of what’s happening for historical purposes.

LC: Right. Have you ever gone back and found any on the Internet or elsewhere, reports that you had actually written or contributed to?

FV: Yes, well no, I don’t think so. We have our battalion staff journals.

LC: Yes.

FV: And I’ve had some input into those. Now, see after brigade staff, I worked there a couple of weeks and then the S-2 job at 1st of the 8th battalion came open, so I
again went back to battalion after a couple of months and I worked as the battalion intelligence officer.

LC: Now, when exactly did you make that move, do you remember?
FV: Probably about February.
LC: Okay.
FV: Can we take a break right now?
LC: Oh sure, absolutely.
FV: Yes, after working on the brigade staff as the assistant S-2, for a couple of months. It was January, February, probably about March, I went back to 1st Battalion 8th Cav as the S2.

LC: And where were you located then?
FV: And then we were down in III Corps. I’m trying to think…I can’t think of the name of the place where we were. It was South of Tay Ninh and the battalion was involved with these riverine operations.

LC: Okay, can you describe what that was?
FV: Yes, it was along the rivers. It was in conjunction with the Navy; the Navy riverboats and we would provide combat troops and the Navy provided the boats and they would just run up and down. They’re called riverine operations; run up and down the rivers and drop troops off. Of course, as a battalion staff officer, I never got out on any of the boats participating in that, I always sat around the battalion headquarter monitoring most of the activity.

LC: But men from the battalion’s operational units?
FV: Our combat troops would load on these riverboats with the Navy operating the boats and they would run up and down the rivers and waterways right there close to the Cambodian border.

LC: And you were still an Intel officer?
FV: I was the Intel officer, yes. Now, at the lower level back down at the battalion level so most of my Intel at that point is what I could find on the ground feedback up, but most of the Intel was coming back down to me from the brigade level.

LC: Okay. What kinds of things did operational forces find that you as an Intel officer had to pass on up the chain?
FV: When they would make contact with enemy units, if they had any KIA’s in covered in your bunker complexes, if they captured any kind of documents, maps, anything of that nature, they would pass that back, collect it, pass it back, send it back to us and then we’d collect it and pass it back up to brigade to get interpreted where the interpreters were.

LC: Okay.

FV: We had an interpreter at our battalion, but there was just one. So, he could decide for some things for us. Look at it; give us immediate…

LC: Feedback.

FV: Feedback right there, but the in depth analysis and all took place at higher levels than we did.

LC: Frank, were you enjoying this work or did you not love it as much as you might?

FV: The staff work, no. You were kind of stuck there sitting in this bunker mostly all day and there’s very little places to go, you’re kind of limited. All this action’s going on and other troops are involved and it’s more paperwork, yes.

LC: Yes. Did you sort of wish that you could be out in the field again?

FV: Yes I did, and I would get on the helicopter and just ride out there once in a while, just talk to the ground commanders just to be out there with them.

LC: At some point Frank, did you go on an R&R?

FV: Yes, I went R&R during the year, I can’t remember exactly when though, but I did go on R&R at that time. Of course, I was married, so I met my wife in Hawaii this time.

LC: For a week or?

FV: For a week. We spent that there, the time there and enjoyed the dining and just touring the island.

LC: Was it a good idea to go on R&R?

FV: No, this was harder.

LC: It was harder, yes.

FV: When I went back, I mean, I cried.

LC: Yes.
FV: It was like tearing me apart to have to go back over there and leave her. Of course, she was hurting too.

LC: Yes, I’m sure she was. In general, do you think it was just not a good idea to…?

FV: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think it was all that good of an idea, yes because it put you through some turmoil. It would’ve been better just to have stayed there or just gone somewhere by myself maybe.

LC: Yes. Frank; let’s take a break for a minute. Frank, you mentioned that you were asked to perform riverine operations by the 1st of the 8th, was that an area where Agent Orange was being used? Do you know?

FV: I don’t know. I know Agent Orange was used in the central highlands. On my first tour, it was used in the northern part. When you moved down there in the IV Corps, there was a lot of the rice paddies, small villages here and there, there was still pretty heavy jungle, but I don’t recall Agent Orange being used in that jungle. That was pretty big stuff.

LC: Did you yourself ever have exposure to Agent Orange that you know of?

FV: Oh yes. I remember seeing C-130s flying over just spraying the stuff right over the top of us and also operating in there usually was brown that had been sprayed.

LC: How fast did that stuff work?

FV: I think it took a couple of days if we could see any effects; maybe a day, 24 hours or something like that.

LC: But you actually remember seeing underneath the spraying?

FV: Yes, but the ironic thing was you could fly over from the helicopters and look down and you could see the big brown patches down there and then you would get on the ground and I mean, everything was green and lush underneath it, so it didn’t leave the landscape bare. Maybe in the farming areas where they grew rice, if you sprayed it there, it would wipe out the crops and stuff, but between that jungle, it didn’t.

LC: Didn’t penetrate all the way through the canopy.

FV: No, it wouldn’t come all the way through.

LC: Okay. How long were you actually with the 1st of the 8th as an S-2?
FV: S2, let’s see, I got there in probably during March, April, May, June, about June I think is when I left the battalion.

LC: Okay and where did you go? Is that the point at which you went home?

FV: That’s the point I returned home, yes.

LC: How did it happen that you went home at that time?

FV: Okay, the battalion was in operations and my wife, I had only spent about six months with, well, she got pregnant when I came to Vietnam, and she had delivered a baby, but she was having health problems with our son. He wasn’t responding neurologically or physically to nourishment or anything like that. There were several things and she was worried and I know we had exchanged letters for a couple of times because he was born in March and I remember getting a letter from her or not a letter, it was actually just a message that came through. Somehow she got a message through that come over our radios that I had a son born. That was kind of neat.

LC: I bet.

FV: It was really neat, yes.

LC: Yes.

FV: But anyhow, then the following letters indicating there was something wrong without knowing what exactly and she became more and more worried and everything until I guess she finally, the doctor said it’s time to get your husband home because this is a pretty serious condition.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: It’s failing to thrive basically and so I got a message through the Red Cross. They processed that and decided to pull me back early about a month, about two months early and I returned home under those kind of conditions and our son died at about two years old, a little over two years. Before that period of time, he was in and out of the hospital. He was undiagnosed, whatever condition he had was undiagnosed, he just died of heart failure was what caused the final death.

LC: And were you living in Florida at this time?

FV: Let’s see, yes, she was in Florida, but no, I was at Fort Benning.

LC: Okay.
FV: So my orders though when I came back to the stateside was sent me to Fort Benning, put me in the Infantry officer advanced course and I remained at Fort Benning as OCS Company Commander and during this whole time, we had our son in the hospital; Field Hospital and everything was right there, I mean the Army Hospital, Base Hospital. We had to evacuate him or he had to go to Walter Reed, they checked him there to see if they could analyze or determine what might be happening and they wasn’t able to do anything either and he finally died there at Fort Benning and we buried him there.

LC: Sir, did you ever think that some service related exposure might have been an agent in his death?

FV: Yes, I said maybe Agent Orange because I had been to Vietnam the first tour. I had been exposed and I thought maybe Agent Orange, but when I put in a claim, it was denied.

LC: When did you put in that claim?

FV: When I got out of the Army. When they evaluated me for Agent Orange related conditions and stuff.

LC: Which would’ve been roughly when?

FV: In 1983.

LC: Okay.

FV: Up and to that point, I hadn’t done anything, but I brought that up at that point, you know, the undiagnosed, maybe it was Agent Orange related, but I got turned down so I never pushed it.

LC: Do you still think that might have been a factor?

FV: In the back of my mind, I’m thinking it could’ve been.

LC: Yes, you just don’t have enough evidence or anything.

FV: Because of some things happened to me medically, my condition. I remember having rashes, just breaking out in rashes in stateside and getting high fevers and I’d go in and I wouldn’t be diagnosed and I’d have these hives all over me and I’d get feverish and sick and go to the hospital and they’d give me bynadrine treatment and everything and pretty soon it would go away and then it would reoccur at time and again. But that was early and I’d have these high fevers and things.
LC: Just unexplained?

FV: Unexplained and they would say, “Well, obviously, you must’ve come, you’re allergic to something.” So, I kind of think maybe it was a reaction to that, I’m not sure. Because I mean, we sat there and I know we ate food that would’ve been contaminated by Agent Orange because we’d open our rations and be in those area, so we may have ingested it and I remember happening to me one time over there, getting rashes, hives and again, not being able to explain what caused it.

LC: How do you feel about the Veterans Administration and how it’s handled servicemen who have advanced claims around Agent Orange, not specifically your own, but in general?

FV: I think they’re doing okay. They’re doing what they can. Their hands are tied too by a budget and everything. I think they’ve been pretty fair.

LC: If more resources were devoted to the Veterans Administration, do you think you could have better outcomes for service?

FV: Maybe, yes. But how much again, it’s an expense involved and they’re pretty good. I mean, now, just service in Vietnam assumes exposure to Agent Orange. At first, you had to say where you were, what day you were there and everything. Now, you just served; they automatically and if you have a medical condition that’s related that they’ve identified, so I think all in all that they’ve done what they could.

LC: Have you been and asked to participate in any studies around Agent Orange exposure?

FV: No.

LC: Okay. Sir, you said that when you came back to the States, although you had this family crisis going on, you were also a Company Commander for the OCS at Fort Benning.

FV: Fort Benning, yes.

LC: How long did you actually stay there?

FV: Two years.

LC: Okay.

FV: Two years.

LC: And again, you were an instructor role or what were your intentions?
FV: Well no, it was commanding two companies; so then the OCS Company is kind of different. These are young people aspiring to be officers. They’re ex-NCOs, a lot of them were college graduates who came in under what’s called the college option program. When I was there, we were just at the end of the Vietnam War buildup in 1970, 1971. So, they were phasing down because they had like two battalions of OCS or three battalions of them. Maybe something like fifteen companies of students and when I got there, we had narrowed back down to one battalion and five companies. And they had given most of the candidates to whittle them down in this sudden draw down, they offered the candidates an honorable discharge out of the Army. If you want to quit OCS and take this discharge, it’s yours.

LC: With no service?
FV: No service obligation. So, a lot of people just took off; they took that option.
LC: Go head Frank.
FV: Then those that remained were the ones that wanted to continue to pursue a career in the Army.
LC: With less of a thought to their service in Vietnam, then more of a thought to a career.
FV: More thought to career. They were more dedicated to serving in.
LC: How did you feel during that draw down period? Were you glad that the United States involvement in Southeast Asia was appearing to come to an end or?
FV: Yes, that it was getting over with at that point, yes; it was really wearing us down. And the justification of the war, everything was a question.
LC: Right. Did you give much thought to the national debate about whether the United States should be involved in Southeast Asia?
FV: Yes, we were watching that more and more I think as time went on.
LC: How did you feel about the job that President Nixon was doing with managing the war?
FV: That's hard to say.
LC: Okay. It's a very complicated time period.
FV: It's complicated, yes. I just can't really.
LC: Okay. Your service to the Army though continued after you left Fort
Benning I presume.
FV: Yes.
LC: Where did you go next?
FV: From Fort Benning, I moved to Fort Monroe on the training in doctrine or
wait, no, I went from there to complete my college degree.
LC: So where’d you go to school then?
FV: In University of Nebraska in Omaha.
LC: And why there?
FV: They participated in this Bootstrap Program; they were one of the schools.
So what I had been doing is getting my college credits by night school up to where I had
enough credits for three years and so I submitted those transcripts to University of
Nebraska in Omaha who’d participate in the Bootstrap Program.
LC: Can you describe that program generally?
FV: It’s one year, you get to go to school in residence to obtain a degree, and so
they accepted all the hit and miss from the different colleges and universities of all the
undergraduate courses to make sure I had pre-requisites three years worth and I could
complete my degree in one year. And when they accepted me, then uphold with that
letter of acceptance, I applied to the Army to release me on an administrative leave for
that year and went to school fulltime.
LC: So you were there in what, 1970?
LC: To ’72?
FV: And graduated in January 1972, yes.
LC: Okay. What was the climate like on campus there?
FV: Well, it was pretty anti-military.
LC: Was it?
FV: Oh yes and I knew, there would be some classes we’d go to, sociology
classes and stuff like that and the younger students in college would look around, you
know, the hippie type generation. And of course, there were a lot of us there in military,
ex-military. You know, we got straight haircuts. I mean, we’re easy to identify as I don’t
know what they called us boot strappers. But these kids would come into a class, we’d
get assigned and they’d look around and get up and just walk out.

LC: Really?

FV: Because they knew number one, that we would set the curve, set a high
curve.

LC: Because you were there to…

FV: We were there to study. (Laughing) We weren’t there to play around and
have fun. We were strictly there to learn what we could, get our degree and we competed
with each other there, you know, best grades and all that kind of stuff like we have in all
the Service Schools. It’s a competitive type environment.

LC: Right. Did you ever see any anti-war protests on the campus or around
there?

FV: No, I never saw, no. Just that kind of thing, they just didn’t…the younger
students kind of stayed away from us, didn’t mingle with us.

LC: Well, and you weren’t all that old at this point?

FV: Then we weren’t really that old, what, it’s about thirty something years old I
guess.

LC: Yes, not even.

FV: Yes, and these kids were nineteen, twenty years old.

LC: Right.

FV: We still had that military air about us.

LC: And did you guy’s kind of club around together?

FV: Yes, we did. We’d go out to dinner. We had our social events and stuff like
that and it was just for us.

LC: Did you enjoy that year?

FV: Yes, that was really a unique year and it was very relaxed because no
uniform, just go to school for four hours a day, six hours a day and…

LC: And manage your own time kind of.

FV: Manage your own time.

LC: What did you actually take your degree in?

FV: It was in Business Administration.
LC: And why that?
FV: I’d begun building the court at in my other courses, so I just continued with
that and minored in Economics and Business Administration was just broad general
degree. It wasn’t specific in any particular field; it’s widely applicable.
LC: Now, once you finished the degree, did that open up to new opportunities for
you?
FV: Well yes, for retention because college degree is becoming a requirement to
retain a commission in the United States Army. It was important to keep your
commission in the service.
LC: Absolutely.
FV: And the Army was having all these rifts and I mean they were rifting West
Point graduates even.
LC: Yes.
FV: And going through those era. There were two, three of those rifts.
LC: So it was essential really for you.
FV: And if you didn’t get your college degree, surely you were going to be out.
LC: What did the Army decide to do with you after you finished your degree?
FV: When I finished my degree, they sent me to Panama. I worked in Panama
193rd Infantry Brigade.
LC: And what was your job?
FV: There I was a brigade assistant S-3 for maybe a year, then I was assigned to
3rd Battalion, 5th Infantry. I was the Operations Officer, Primary Staff Officer responsible
for the Battalion Commander for deploying troops and all that, maintaining plans for
operations there. Then after about two years with the Infantry Brigade there and the
Infantry Battalion, then I went over as an Operations Officer with the Jungle Warfare
Center, which is another training command down there.
LC: Is it its own command?
FV: What?
LC: Is the center its own command?
FV: Oh no, it belonged to the Southern Command, but it trained units in
operating in jungles. It would bring units in from the States, give them jungle training.
Of course, Vietnam was over by then, but we were still continuing and it had been there before that. It's just giving units jungle operation training experience in an actual jungle environment.

LC: And as Operations Officer, what did you do?
FV: Operations Officer maintained the curriculum for field operations, write the scenarios or coordinate the movement of units in and out of there for school, that kind of stuff.

LC: So this pulled out some of the things you had done earlier as the instructor?
FV: Yes. I didn’t actually get on and do any real teaching, but coordinate the schedule, set up the class schedules and stuff like that.

LC: Did this appeal to you?
FV: Yes, I enjoyed it and I enjoyed the environment around Panama; the tropical waters, the history of Panama, we traveled a lot. We did a lot of travel inland, outside the borders of the zone to learn more about it, see the country and mingle with the citizens and do things.

LC: And actually like build a life, enjoying living there and the opportunity to live there.
FV: Yes, and you know with the family, raise a family. I spent four years there; the family was growing.

LC: Did you have other kids by then this time?
FV: Yes, well, I adopted three children also, yes.

LC: Oh really, super, great.
FV: And we had one more besides the one child we’d lost earlier, then in Panama, we had another baby.

LC: Oh, so the family got pretty big then.
FV: So, we had four children.

LC: That’s super. And how did they do down in Panama?
FV: They all loved it. They still remember the experience, even the youngest one, he had three years there and he can remember some things down there.

LC: What an incredible opportunity for them.
FV: And they picked up the Spanish language and everything.
LC: That’s really amazing, that’s great.
FV: So they did real well and we didn’t confine ourselves. You know, a lot of people just confined themselves inside the zone, but we went out into the interior and visited nice places on the beach, nice places in the mountains. We spent nights out there, did all kinds of stuff, so it was really pleasant.
LC: How long did you actually stay down there, then three years?
FV: It was actually four years.
LC: Okay.
FV: Because what had happened then too and they [The Army] ran into budgetary constraint, so that everybody’s assignment, we were extended one year; it cut on PCS cost, you know, there’s a budget move, so I ended up putting four years in which it didn’t disappoint me at all.
LC: I bet, it sounds like it.
FV: That was a real assignment there and it was a small activity unit. Again, everybody was pretty familiar with each other.
LC: You were there until 1976 then?
FV: Till 1976, I came home, came back to the states, back to Fort Benning.
(Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
FV: Good ole home, Fort Benning.
LC: What did they have you do then sir?
FV: Then I was assigned to the Leadership Department as an instructor. I got to stand on the stage and teach the elements of leadership and command management, those kinds of subjects, strictly academic kind of subjects.
LC: And was that fun for you as well?
FV: Yes, in a way. It was challenging because it was a mental challenge because everybody has a different idea of what leadership and management actually is and how it’s applied and that. There’s no one style, there’s all kinds of different styles.
LC: Did you stay at Fort Benning for another two years or?
FV: Yes, let me see, two or three years from 1976, I left there in 1979, so three years.
LC: And where did you go then?
FV: Then I went to Fort Monroe, Virginia.
LC: Okay, and what happened there?
FV: And Fort Monroe’s on the TRADOC staff, again, just as an assistant staff officer in the training department. Now, at this level, we were responsible for just… I mean, I didn’t write the curriculum for the various Army schools, but I was over Infantry, so there was Infantry School, OCS, Ranger School, and we kind of oversee that from a high level.

LC: Putting it all together from a central…
FV: Yes, from that high level what you have, how many people you’re putting through so it’s mostly statistics, mostly paperwork, subject matter if it’s driven by higher generals or whatever. I want this subject taught in this course and we have to push that down, make sure that went down to the school, got incorporated into the course.

LC: Right, so a lot of meeting and a lot of…
FV: A lot of meetings, a lot of talk. Most of it is just briefing talk; it wasn’t actually leading a training or doing anything like that.

LC: Now at this point, you were nearing the end of twenty years.
FV: Yes, I was reaching near the end of my twenty years, yes.
LC: Okay, and I take it that you did actually leave the US Army in 1983.
FV: Yes.
LC: And what have you done subsequently sir?
FV: Since then, well, I left the Army and I was looking for civilian employment, but because I left I left on their disability, I had a heart attack and so medically, I was medically retired which was a shock because I wasn’t ready for that. It wasn’t like something I was planning, it just happened.

LC: I see.
FV: And again, I wasn’t ready to get out of the Army or anything. I asked for reassignment and maybe another branch and I was told as being a Lieutenant Colonel at that point in time and having been trained Infantry that you know, I was too high level to change branches to try to retrain in the new field and all that, so it really wasn’t cost effective.
LC: You were too high up.

FV: I was too high ranking, so best thing is just medically retire me.

LC: Okay. Was that disappointing to you sir?

FV: Yes, it was very disappointing. It really was. So, I came here and I tried to get some civilian employment, but because of my medical health and all that, that was impossible. But a job opening occurred here at the Navy Base under Civil Service and I applied for it and was hired.

LC: There in Jacksonville?

FV: There in Jacksonville to Navy Base and my wife had family down here and everything and we had decided that we’d like to live here too because we’re coming down to visit them and all and that this was a pretty nice area, so that kind of led us here.

LC: And have you stayed in civilian employment?

FV: And I’ve been in Civil Service since then.

LC: Oh, civil service, okay.

FV: Yes, for the Navy, working for the Department of Navy, which that was as culture shock because you’re transferring from Army culture, now I’m in the Navy culture.

LC: Can you talk about the differences, just in general?

FV: Oh, you know, just differences in terminology and philosophy because the Navy, they work on these ships, they’re highly technical. Everything is technical in the Navy where in the Army, being Infantry, we kind of beat the bush and all that.

LC: Figured it out yourself.

FV: We get up close and personal with the enemy. These guys shoot from miles and miles away. Equipment and weaponry is very high tech. I mean I’m involved with the laser target designating system for the FA-18 Aircraft. There’s a lot of science involved in this.

LC: Yes sir and how have you kind of updated your skills such that you’re playing a part in?

FV: Through schooling the Navy had to offer, go to classes, learn about it through just on the job training and just work myself, get myself qualified in the position which is really acquisition. I’m an acquisition specialist.
LC: For the…?
FV: For the FA-18 targeting system.
LC: Targeting system, okay.
FV: That means buying parts keep that operational on board the aircraft and in the fleet and actually I like this job because having been retired. It actually brings me closer to a war fighter. Again, we’re looking at a war fighter.
LC: Right.
FV: These pilots of these aircraft or the guys that carry the ordnance out there and dump it on the enemy.
LC: Yes sir.
FV: And I’m involved in that to some degree here. I may buy the fuses or the cable connectors to make the system work, but you know, I get to touch the airplanes, I get to talk to those guys and do a lot of stuff like that.
LC: Do you talk about your experience in Vietnam very much?
FV: Yes, I do, I relate some of those things. There’s times I don’t, but you know, when we’re talking like we are now, bring up some points and then that leads me to other thoughts and stuff I had forgotten.
LC: Yes, well, I want to ask you just a couple of general questions. Have you seen any of the films that have been made about the Vietnam conflict, general release films?
FV: Yes, those commercial movies?
LC: Yes.
FV: Like Apocalypse Now and Platoon. Yes, I’ve enjoyed those, yes; I looked at them.
LC: You’ve enjoyed them?
FV: Yes.
LC: Did they seem more or less realistic to you?
FV: Platoon did. It portrayed scenes you know. Of course, they stack them up so these guys are like in combat everyday for every hour.
LC: Right.
FV: But the experiences in all are something that experienced one time or another, yes. It kind of portrayed all that. They just kind of jam them all together. Some of the situations I think were unrealistic. Some of the brutality where they reflect a lot of this brutality and it didn’t really occur. I mean some did, but not on a scale that these things might lead you to believe it did.

LC: Do you have any time to read any of the enormous number of books that have come out about Vietnam?

FV: Yes, I’ve read several.

LC: Have any of them left an impression on you?

FV: Yes, one way or another. We Were Soldiers Once and Young, I never realized how my buddy Bob Taft, in that book is the first time I realized how he got killed.

LC: Is that right?

FV: I never asked exactly what happened. I knew he had been killed, but it’s one of those things you kind of put behind you and you just don’t look back on and you let it go, you live with it, keep driving on. But when I opened that book and read and I saw there’s one chapter in there that’s about Bob, tells how he got killed, what happened. That’s the first time I realized that and that brought some emotional feelings.

LC: Yes sir.

FV: And I could see him, as I was reading what his people around him said he was doing and all that. I mean, I could picture Bob in Ranger Training and how and his mannerisms and his go get them kind of attitude that I could see him doing that and I realized Bob, if you hadn’t done that, maybe you wouldn’t of got killed.

LC: Did you see the film that was made?

FV: I watched the film, yes. Of course, the movie, We Were Soldiers did not portray any of Bob’s actions that I could tell.

LC: It was sort of a composite.

FV: That was kind of a composite, yes. And I say it’s a good movie because it reflects not just the courage of the 1st of the 7th Cav, but I think it reflects courage of all the soldiers who found themselves in a hard time and fought. Of course, that happened to
be the first real major battle of the war between American forces and the Vietnamese.

But the 7th Cav made a lot of mistakes there too.

LC: Like what?

FV: Well, the movie doesn’t portray it, but tactically, they did some things. They stuck their neck out, they went beyond artillery fire, they went flying in there without artillery preps, you know, got in there. And more or less, like that movie portrayed Custard and if you read about Custard, he really was trying to make a name for himself. He stretched his troops out, took them away from all their support command unit. As he was hunting for the Indians, he had no idea where they were, how many there were, and he was hoping for some kind of major engagement that he could be victorious, come back and say, “See how great I am.”

LC: Right.

FV: As a result, gets his regiment, which is the 7th Cav too, gets them pretty well decimated and there’s parallel, a lot of parallels there. It was early in the war, these were eager Commanders, wanted to engage the enemy and as a result, I think they stretched it about a bit too far.

LC: But in your view, there was some heroic actions then too?

FV: Definitely. I mean, the troops, you can’t blame the troops. All they’re doing is they’re going into battle. The courage that the troops fought with, [not be living?], but it’s the decisions that were made at the division levels or the brigade levels to allow this to happen, to get them in that position.

LC: Right. Sir, did the experience of serving in Vietnam on two very long tours, very dangerous tours affect your religious views at all?

FV: Yes. Well, no. I didn’t find religion until about ten years ago, ten or eleven years ago.

LC: Okay.

FV: When I was deeply depressed. I’d had more heart problems and my health and I came to my knees before God and truly accepted it. I don’t think the war really did that and I look back now though and I realize that there’s something more than just my abilities that got me through that.

LC: Yes sir. Although, I think your abilities did play some part.
FV: Well, like I said, there’s more than that behind it.

LC: Have you visited the Wall in Washington D.C?

FV: Yes.

LC: How was that experience for you?

FV: It’s all striking. To look at all those names and the impact of this whole thing sits in on you and of course, I go to those names of the troops that I know, the Bob Taft’s particular, just touch it. The memory to look at the names of those men in my unit that died.

LC: Sir, would you ever consider or have you in fact already gone back to Vietnam?

FV: No. I would like to do that. I don’t know, it’s expensive, but I would like to do that.

LC: Right. Why?

FV: To stand on the ground where our troops died on. To be there, even to talk to the enemy and reconcile. We could reconcile. That’s the religion coming out, but to reach back and say, “Sorry for what we did. Maybe we shouldn’t have done it.” Because I know we were ruthless.

LC: Yes.

FV: I don’t know if we’re justified doing that or not, but I mean, when we met them, we just dumped the world on them if we could get it.

LC: Sir, is there anything else you’d like to add to this interview?

FV: No, I can’t think of anything else.

LC: Okay, I want to thank you very much for participating.

FV: I appreciate it. Hopefully, you can make good use of that.

LC: Yes sir, I think it will be used and thank you very much.