Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, continuing my oral history interview with Andy DeBona, today is September 12, 2003. It’s 9:00 a.m. Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas again and Mr. DeBona is in Ennis, Montana. Sir, let’s pick up where we left off yesterday, you had come back into the United States, you had taken your 30 days leave and you’re heading off to Quantico, Virginia to Amphibious Warfare School. Could you describe your transition to Quantico and what went on?

Andy DeBona: Basically with the 30 days leave, it left enough time for the family to go on back also. 30 days leave and I believe there was something like seven days travel, so we just started packing up and moving on out. Spent some time in Pennsylvania with the grandparents, both my wife’s parents and my parents and then headed down to Quantico. I reported into Quantico, the school did not start until February, so I was put down in OCS, Officer Candidate School, as the Executive Officer of Company B, the same company that I had graduated from. In the latter part of that [cycle] prior to this, I took through one of the Candidate Company’s at that time. I was then put over in a Candidate [Echo] Company where I was the CO and took another Platoon or Candidate Company Platoon through there and then I reported to school.

RV: Let me ask you about commanding this Candidate Company and this is exactly similar to what you went through and I had asked you earlier if any of your
instructors, your DI’s, everybody who was training who were Vietnam veterans or I think at that time were Korean Veterans, this time around you’re a war veteran, did they ask you about your experiences and if so, did you talk about them?

  AD: There was no asking in a Candidate Company. The Candidate’s per se were the college boys that I had seen before. There was no reason to ask because of what was worn on the shirt the have-been-there, done-that type ribbons, particularly when one had a purple heart and all my staff NCO’s and officers, I would have one Lieutenant or captain with the Platoon and there were four Platoons in the company and all the staff NCO’s. In fact, I ran into one of my staff NCO’s who had served with me in Vietnam.

  RV: How did you enjoy leading the Candidate Company?

  AD: It was fun; I always enjoyed being around Marines, or future Marines, or whatever. It was interesting to see my perception as the Commanding officer or the XO of the company as opposed to going through the company, so I figured I knew most of the tricks, particularly with my devious enlisted service I had before.

  RV: Tell me about transitioning in Amphibious Warfare School, how long was this school supposed to last and what was it like?

  AD: The school was a cut down version and we had just started, supposed to have a mix of aviators and other branches, other branches being infantry and supply and whatever. However at that time, the turn around time for aviators to go back to Vietnam was two years so consequently it was very difficult to get a component of aviators in there, rather they would be helicopter or fast movers so we had few aviators. Generally the people going to that school at that time had either just come back from Vietnam or their next tour of duty was going back to Vietnam, those were the only type of Marines that were there.

  RV: Okay. How long was the school supposed to last?

  AD: School was five months.

  RV: Okay. And we’re into 1968.

  AD: That’s correct.

  RV: Let me ask you a question about what is going on here in the United States, the home front, in ’68 and then into ’69. Tell me about your impressions of the anti-war
movement and the growing discord with what the government was doing in Southeast
Asia? What were your impressions?

AD: I was sort of away from all that because we lived on the military base, we
shopped on the military base, we very rarely got off the military base, so as far as antiwar
movement, there was nothing there at Quantico then in ’68 because the early ’68, the
movement had not really picked up that much steam, it was going pretty well, if my
memory serves me correctly, but it wasn’t until after the Tet period that in my opinion, it
started picking up more. While going to school was just strictly a school type and the
object of the school was to train for the next higher level; either a staff, battalion staff
level, or battalion commander level and also to impart tactics, all be it the tactics that they
were teaching were Korean War and World War II tactics.

RV: Okay. Did you have a sense then when you were these tactics were being
taught to you that these were inadequate for what was happening at the present time?

AD: I voiced my displeasure in any number of times personally to the instructors
and also in class and consequently there were times when during the periods that another
classmate [Marine] and myself or just myself would go up and say, ‘Hey, that’s the
school’s solution, but this is how you really do it.’

RV: What was their response?

AD: Extremely well from the students, I don’t think the instructors liked it all that
well but it was a give and take type thing with the instructors. They were all Marines,
primarily majors; we did have a few captains. In fact, a guy that taught artillery there
was with our BLT, a guy by the name of Tom Brackman. He taught the artillery class
there but they were all receptive to it whether they liked it or not, I can’t say.

RV: Okay. You told me that before you left Vietnam, you wrote a basically a

AD: That’s correct.

RV: And did you take these ideas home with you and was this part of what you
were suggesting to the folks at Quantico and the Warfare School and….

AD: Yes, exactly. This is what I did also at this place, Richard, I went to my
advisor, in what we called the School House Advisor or our Den Daddy and gave him a
copy of that list and I said, ‘Hey, you know, I would like to publish this and give it to all
the students, particularly those who were returning to Vietnam’, which I did.
RV: So they were receptive to that?
AD: Very much so.
RV: Okay. Can you relate to me what you had in that paper, what you did learn
in Vietnam that first tour?
AD: Boy! I went through the different areas of Vietnam, the ones that I had
operated in and the further south we had ever been was in Phu Bai so I couldn’t speak to
the Chu Lai area or the Arizona territory, or any of the other places where the 1st Marine
Division was then located but I primarily covered the tactics that were used, how you can
find out where the mortars are, where you put in your mortars, where you plan your H
and I fires, never go out on a patrol unless you have pre-planned artillery along the way,
and then when you get up to the DMZ, dig deep. It was about a, oh, I could probably find
it somewhere, I don’t know if I even have a copy of it, it’s probably about a seven page
document, typed, but it covered any number of things; logistics, water, how much ammo
to carry, and things of that nature.
RV: How long was it?
AD: It was about seven pages, seven or eight.
RV: Can you tell me some specific examples of what they did teach you at
Amphibious Warfare School?
AD: They taught us the Chain of Command, the level at the regiment and how the
regiment would fit into amphibious task grouping. For instance, amphibious warfare, the
doctrine of amphibious warfare, tactics of course, there were discussion groups on
different types and how to make a night attack tactics, the capabilities and limitations of
each of the supporting units so you knew what they could do for you, it was quite an
extensive school.
RV: Okay. Did you feel like you got a lot out of that or was it not what you
expected?
AD: The primary reason, the primary thing I got out of it, I met people there that I
ran into my whole career in the Marine Corps and these, maybe the back door network or
the good boy network or whatever but that was the biggest thing I got out of that school,
the ability to meet other people from other areas of expertise to supply motor transport, you know, like I say, no air wing on the ports. So then later in career, ‘Wow, who’s the guy that’s in charge of this?’ ‘Oh, he’s at headquarters Marine Corps.’ ‘Oh what’s his name?’ And it in most cases, in some cases, I would know, personally know the guy. So that aspect what I always thought was the most redeeming quality of the school. Yes, the knowledge was there but the interaction between the students and instructors was the primary thing that I got out of it.

RV: When you graduated where did you go?

AD: Well, (Laughter) my monitor at the Marine Corps Career Pattern at that time is after school is an independent duty. So independent duty, I was scheduled to go and be the CO of the I&I Staff in Wheeling, West Virginia, which is close to my hometown, this is my independent duty. What happened was that Quantico at that time had picked up a number of things [OCS candidates], so I was sent back down to OCS to take through, I think the quote was, one of the Candidate Companies one time and then I was going to go. And I graduated in June and that was about a ten, eleven-week transition by the time you would pick up a company and then graduate them and then move out. Of course now, this would be not advantageous from the aspect of the children who were enrolled in school, that means I would have to pull them out but I am a Marine and I do what I am told. And I didn’t get out of there until December of that year and the one turned into two, the two turned into three, and eventually I went over and said, ‘Hey, you know, I’m not supposed to be doing this, I was here for one time. I think it’s about time.’ By that time the Wheeling West Virginia I&I Staff job had been filled so then the next thing that came up was the recruiting officer in Cincinnati, Ohio. And that was in the 4th district, it stretched from Lima, Ohio down to Kentucky, which included Columbus and all those small towns in between, but Cincinnati was in fact the headquarters or the headquarters for RS Cincinnati.

RV: When did you go up there, what year?

AD: I got there in December of ’69 and I actually took over because we had a turn over period in January of ’70.

RV: Okay. How long were you there recruiting?

AD: I was there on a three-year tour. I was there two years and eight days.
RV: Okay.
AD: And there was a reason for that.
RV: Tell me about your experiences in Cincinnati, now the anti war movement is now in full swing.
AD: Oh the anti war movement is now in full swing (Laughter).
RV: Right. Tell me about Cincinnati.
AD: Cincinnati was, is, a very patriotic-type town, had never had any trouble there with wearing uniform, in fact wore uniform everyday as did my recruiters in the outlining areas. In the Marine Corps, my experience at least there, Marine Corps was not a target of the anti war movement. The primary target was the Army because of the draft. I had gotten on, in fact, I had even gotten on a couple of radio stations at the Antioch College, which is a hot bed of military or anti war movement and had a little couple of radio debates there.
RV: Oh yeah?
AD: And I felt that I acquitted myself quite well because the kids called in of course with their rhetoric; anti-war rhetoric is complaining and I said oh geez that’s nice except that doesn’t apply to the Marine Corps, tell me something that does.
RV: What kind of things did you see going on in the city itself as far as anti-war demonstrations?
AD: In the city itself, little if any. I never saw a demonstration. We were in the federal building, which is where the recruiting headquarters was located and even when I got out onto the road, I used to go out on the road at least once a month to visit all my sub stations, and I had seven of them spread throughout the state of Ohio and never had any, when I would go there I would ask the recruiters if they were having any troubles, nope, and the main thing then was just getting in bodies and we shipped 117% of quota.
RV: Wow, so you didn’t have any trouble really obtaining Marines?
AD: Oh well, let me back that up.
RV: Ok.
AD: There was a standard that I attempted to put into place in that the guy that I relieved said, ‘Hey, you know, the guys who really make it well are the high school graduates’, so I attempted to have the high school graduates in the category and on the
test they take, it used to be called the AFIS, The Armed Forces Induction Station, I don’t know what they call it now, but that gave them a mental rating, if you will. And it went from 1-4. And in 4, there was category 4a, 4b, and 4c. I attempted to try to get at least category 3 and above. I was given a quota for the 4’s and below primarily because of McNamara’s 100,000 and where he was going to try to use the military as the training ground for the people who weren’t quite as educated or couldn’t pass tests perhaps.

RV: Andy let me interrupt you just for a moment I need to pause and change out this disk.

AD: Ok.

RV: Ok, go ahead.

AD: Getting on, our quota’s at this time during the winter months, so to speak, we’re probably, and this is strictly from memory but it’s close, probably 135, 140 recruits per month during that period of time. During the summer months when the high schools had graduated, our quotas were somewhere around 250 and once again, didn’t have any trouble filling those but what would happen was to, may I have the district and the district had a number of stations including the Philadelphia area or as Philadelphia who would continually [have a] large area, large quota but they would continually fall off. So every month, I would have to ship extra people and how we’d ship them is one of two ways: one, we’d have our Cat 4s [Category 4 ship] and our Cat 4s, we had numerous Cat 4s, more than we needed. So I had asked the district director, ‘Well, you know, I can give you bodies, but there not going to be Cat-1’s, Cat-2’s, and Cat-3’s’, and he said, ‘Well, I need bodies’, and that’s what I would ship. I mean, some of these people I would not have in my Marine Corps, which basically is why I spent two years and ten [eight] days, whatever it was, on a three-year tour. That’s later.

RV: Your standards were too high?

AD: That’s exactly right. We made quota every month, we over shipped every month, and we were the stellar RS in the district every year on dog and pony shows, all the generals would come out to visit, we would take them down to Cincinnati and you know I had a dog and pony show that wouldn’t quit charts, graphs and the whole bit.

RV: What kind of Marine were you looking for to go to Vietnam?
AD: Well that was the point, joining the Marine Corps; they’re not going to Vietnam. However, we have what we would call shipping days when we would ship our recruits or our candidates for being Marines out and every time that we would have one of those, I’d go into the thing, prior to them shipping out, prior to them swearing in officially, and I said, ‘There is a 99.9% chance that you are going to go to Vietnam and you’re going to get shot at and I want you to know right now that that’s where your probably going to go and you’re probably going to get shot at. Now if you don’t want to join the Marine Corps, I would advise you to walk out right now.’ And it never happened.

RV: It never happened?

AD: Never happened.

RV: Wow.

AD: And I don’t know, I attribute that to the job that the recruiters did. I had some outstanding people out there. I had, of course, the typical bell curve, I had a few of them that I had to relieve, but the majority of them were outstanding Marines. I know I got away from the question, what was the question.

RV: Well the question was, no that is perfectly fine what you said, it was very interesting and so when your recruiters were looking at these Marines, what kind of qualities did you tell them to look for and what personally did you feel would make a good Marine in 1969, ‘70, ‘71?

AD: When I initially looked at my recruiters, I would say this is the type of Marine I want, I want them to be a Cat-3 or above, preferably a high school graduate. That was and then it eventually came when I kept getting hit with over shipments and we would have what was called a pool also. The pool being that, well, we have our quotas made for this month so you’re going to be shipped out on whatever date, tell all the people enlisted that the date they’re going to go. When the over ship would hit, I would have to juggle my pool. In other words, I might have 60% of my people ready for next month and then they had to go out and so what it basically came down to when I told my recruiters, when the call comes in for Cat-4’s or the call comes in for an over ship, you better have some bodies ready and I don’t care what kind they are because that was the instructions that I received from District.

RV: Was that frustrating for you?
AD: It was very difficult looking in the mirror, yes, and once again, this why I requested to get out of there to go back to Vietnam.

RV: Okay, so you actually requested an early ending to that tour?

AD: Yes.

RV: To go back into the war?

AD: Well it was, when I called up my monitor I asked him where I was going next, I had made major then, as soon as, in fact, probably a week after I had been selected for major because it is major billet probably about a week after reporting into Cincinnati, I was promoted to major. And I called up my monitor periodically to say, ‘Hey, how are things going, where does it look like I am going?’ And he said, ‘Well, your going to 3rd Mar Div.’ I said, ‘3rd Mar Div, aren’t the Marines getting out of Vietnam?’ (And this was, oh boy, late 70, early, oh no, about mid ’71). And he said, ‘Yeah.’ ‘Is there any place else I can go?’ He said, ‘Well your due for an overseas because your rotation tour date is such that you have to go back over.’ And I said, ‘What else is there?’ He said, ‘Well, there is a Marine Advisor School that you can go to.’ So I did a little checking on the Marine Advisor School and that had started in February of ’71 and so therefore, once again, killing two birds with one stone, I could get out from something that I didn’t really…I enjoyed doing it because my recruiters and the Marines that I met there. I did not enjoy doing by virtue of the fact of the people that I was putting in the Marine Corps.

RV: Yes sir. And where was Marine Advisor School?

AD: Marine Advisor School was back in Quantico.

RV: Ok.

AD: And we were the last Marine Advisor School because that aspect of Vietnamization now was coming in and they envisioned us to be the last class going through.

RV: How long was this school going to last?

AD: School lasted a period of February, March, April, um ten weeks.

RV: Can you tell me a little bit about what they taught you and everything?

AD: Primarily about half of it was Vietnamese language. The other half was current conditions. What they would do is they would have the old advisors who would in Quantico, being the crossroads of the Marine Corps, there were a shortage of them and
they would have them come in and talk to the class about their experiences, advisors, and
we got supporting arms which I knew fairly well. In fact, I knew supporting arms
probably better than anyone else, as far as, you know, artillery and air and naval gunfire
and things of this nature. And so basically it was about 50% language and about 50%
tactics of what to do.

RV: How much did they tell you about Vietnam itself; the culture, how to deal
with Vietnaminzation, how to actually advise?

AD: Their instructions were, yeah there were a couple of no no’s that you would
never do this, you would never do that and just basically it was common sense because as
a Senior Advisor, the majors and above in the class were going to be going to be going
with the battalion commander who in some cases, had been fighting now for 10 or 12
years and the captains or the junior advisors would be going with the battalion executive
officer or with the Bravo Command Group, which is the way the Vietnamese Marines
worked.

RV: Did your family stay in Cincinnati while you went to Quantico?

AD: Cincinnati, yes family stayed in Cincinnati and what I used to do because it
was a TAD thing, I use to fly home every weekend.

RV: Okay, okay. How did your wife feel about and the rest of your family feel
about you going back to Vietnam?

AD: I was going back to Vietnam in a period in time that like the old advisors
coming in. The Vietnamese Marines at that time were in IV Corps, which was down near
Saigon in the Rung Sat area and the word coming back was that it was the best thing in
the world, you get to see a different part of Vietnam, shrimp the size of your big toe, very
rarely if ever you would make a contact, you would be billeted with the Vietnamese
Marines the whole time, with the battalion commander. He’d be staked out in his villa
somewhere, his headquarters.

RV: Was that what happened?

AD: Nooooo! (Laughter) In March prior to our graduation, I’m in the advisory
class; the Vietnamese Marines were assigned to Northern I Corps.

RV: Oh boy, okay, so that changes everything.

AD: Well, yes, it does for me, but I never let my wife and family know that.
RV: Oh really. They thought you were still in IV Corp?
AD: Oh yes. We were going to be in IV Corp, where the only thing you had to worry about was how many shrimp you were going to have for dinner tonight.
RV: So you were really trying to protect them?
AD: Oh, had to.
RV: Okay, okay. Did you keep up with the war, oh I am sure you did, but how much did you keep up with the war while you were home between these two tours?
AD: Of course I read the paper. I read the newspapers articles, which were extremely slanted. I felt that with the anti war bias, the tactical situation over there I, you know, I knew about Tet, I knew that we had just cleaned their clocks during Tet but the way the media was reporting it, it was our world’s worst defeat we ever had. I knew that after Tet, the Vietnamese, particularly the VC ceased to be an effective fighting force because the NVA, you know, they were the ones that got creamed. Of course the NVA got creamed too but they pretty well took care of the Cadre of the Viet Cong and also the Viet Cong fighting forces. I figured this is even a better reason to go down there to IV Corp. I mean hey, you know, if they made one contact a month now, we’re probably going to see one every other month. To answer your question at a strategic level or a tactical level, I was not that well versed. I figured the situation when I got there, the situation and terrain would change and in a sense, I was happy that we were going back to Nothernern I Corps, because I knew that area.
RV: Right.
AD: I had gone just about everywhere there.
RV: Right. What did you think of the Vietnamization policy itself?
AD: The policy itself was probably well thought out but poorly executed. The poor execution came from the fact that the money that came pouring in, the supplies that came pouring in, once they reached the hands of the Vietnamese, there was no more accountability. Now this didn’t happen that much with the Vietnamese Marines but it still did. There was just an endless supply of whatever the Vietnamese, in a sense, would need, boom, they would have in a heartbeat.
RV: Did you think the South Vietnamese were capable themselves of defending their country without any foreign assistance?
AD: Yes, in one sense yes and in one sense no. The biggest thing they had to
develop of course was an air force or air power because this is the Marine concept. The
Marine, if you will, division does have its own air wing and it has its own support there,
the Vietnamese Marines never had that, even though they tried to in a sense [to be a]
mirror image US Marines but without the air, without the other logistical capabilities.
For instance there, they didn’t have tanks. They didn’t have Amphib Tracks until later
on. They eventually did get a Platoon of Amphib Tracks in there but that was later and
they that pretty well fell into disuse because of the maintenance problems with them. So
basically what they were was light infantry. Any time light infantry goes up against a
mechanized attack like the North Vietnamese had, no doubt who is going to win. Did I
think they could do it without US help? Not the way they were structured at that time.
Eventually if in fact they had the time, the money, and the training and I can speak
strictly from the Vietnamese Marine aspect or side, they were tigers. As far as the ARVN
went, I would not call them a fighting force, at least in I Corp.

RV: How much contact did you have with ARVN?
AD: We very rarely had contact with the ARVN since I was with the Vietnamese
Marines the whole time; I ate with them, slept with them, you know, did everything with
them. Walked with them, where they went, I went. The ARVN, on the other hand, we
would very rarely see them because we would be out on fire support bases, however,
when we would make our a motorized march or something like that, it seems like
everybody in the world at the local, in the local towns had on a uniform but weren’t doing
anything and they had no weapon with them.

RV: Did that affect the morale of your Marines?
AD: No, no. The Marines, there’s a caveat here. The Marines were mostly
recruited from around the Saigon area, so this was home to them. The ARVN, for
instance, the 3rd ARVN division which they formed in Northern I Corp that fell apart
during the Easter offensive, they were recruited from the villages and hamlets in that area
in Northern I Corp. So their primary concern when they, when the NVA came rolling
across, was for their family; while the Vietnamese Marines’ families were in Saigon, and
so it was a whole different thing, a whole different aspect.
RV: Let’s go ahead and talk about you coming back into country. Where did you fly into?

AD: I flew into Saigon.

RV: Ok, and this is in June ’71?

AD: Tenth, I came in on 10 June 1971.

RV: How did it feel coming back into Vietnam? What were your first impressions?

AD: Smell and heat.

RV: How long were you in Saigon?

AD: Well the thing was, when I landed in the 10th of June I went over to the Botulin, which was the Marine division, Vietnamese Marine and American advisor headquarters. I reported in there so the next morning they said, ‘Hey, you’re going to relieve Major Sweeny who’s going home with the 4th Battalion. So your going to be the Senior Advisor there, so we will see you tomorrow morning.’ So went out that night, partied, found out, got a hold of Major Sweeny, talk to him all about the 4th Battalion and they were going to be in Saigon for three months because they had just come back from I Corps. And their normal rotation policy was three months up there, three months back because the nine infantry divisions [battalions], there wasn’t that much call for them so they came back to retrain, refit. I said, ‘Jeez, three months in Saigon, now this is definitely a good deal.’ The 11th, I went out and met the battalion commander, said ‘Hello, my name’s DeBona, Thieu Ta DeBona. He spoke very good English as did the XO, I was assigned my radio man who’s also an English speaking enlisted Marine and got back in that evening and I got a call to report over to the Bo Tu Lin, which was the headquarters. I went over to the Bo Tu Lin and said, ‘Well here we go again.’ I report in early out of my class just to make sure that I would get a battalion, and remember I relayed that before about getting a company?

RV: Yes sir.

AD: Well this time it worked; I’m getting a battalion because I don’t want to be in the rear somewhere with the gear doing something else. So I had the 4th Battalion, very happy about that, knew I was going to be there awhile. I got a call the evening of the 11th, this is my second day in country now, and said, ‘Guess what, your going north to be the
Senior Advisor for the 7th Battalion.’ I said, ‘Oh?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, the Senior
Advisory just got killed there and we need a Senior Advisor and you’re the only one
around.’

RV: Wow.

AD: That evening, after getting my gear packed and everything else, I took off
and I joined the 7th Battalion on the 12th of June.

RV: Where were they located exactly?

AD: (Laughing) Well, where they were exactly, I have the grid coordinates but it
was also a place called Don Cha Mountain. The battalion at this time had going into
check out the effects of a B-52 strikes and the effects of the B-52 strikes, it was just like
disturbing an ant hill, in that the battalion at that time was completely surrounded and
taking heavy casualties. In fact, when I landed in the zone, the body of the guy I was
replaced, Captain Mike Dicky was put on the bird. We were taking incoming mortars at
the time and not only did Captain Dicky get on the bird but the Junior Advisor had been
wounded that I knew nothing about and he got on the bird. So they lifted off and there I
am on the 12th of June, my second day in country or third day, looking around and what
is this I thought. It’s sort of a continuation of didn’t I just leave this.

RV: You said you were surrounded.

AD: Oh yes.

RV: So you’re right back into a very bad situation.

AD: Very bad situation. In fact, it was made even worse by the fact that the
battalion commander at that time, Lieutenant Colonel Nah had Medevaced himself for a
snake bite. There was a Lieutenant Colonel Vin in there who had been in command all of
one day and didn’t know any of his people, he was the regimental XO, if you will, and
when Nah evacuated himself, he went out there to take over command of the battalion. In
effect, it was not a good place to be and not a good place to be at.

RV: What did you do first?

AD: Well the first thing I did was find out where my hole was, or a hole was
because they were still hitting us with mortars. I did pick up my radio operator, now that I
had a radio operator I was able to communicate. We got in the Army from the…gun
ships, got in touch with the Army gun ships, we had two of them at a time, sometimes
four, starting having them make runs on the suspected and also enemy positions and it was a busy day.

RV: How many Americans did you have with you?
AD: Me.

RV: That’s what I thought. Okay. How did that feel? Did you feel alone?
AD: (Laughter) That’s probably an understatement, particularly just thrust into that situation at that time, not knowing the battalion commander, not having any time to make an assessment of the fighting capabilities of the individual Vietnamese Marines.

RV: Right.
AD: It was definitely not a happy time in my mind, but the thing was that I knew that we had a…as long as I had close air support I could keep the bad guys somewhat away from us.

RV: How was your supporting arms support in general on both tours?
AD: I never had as many gun ships in my life as I had in my second tour. In fact, later after this was over, the Army guys who we immediately, obviously, established a great rapport with who are flying out of Camp Evans, every time they were air borne they would check into my net because they would say, ‘Hey, you got anything for us’ and inevitably I would have something for them. So it was a great thing as far as the gun ships support went. Fast movers, if we had to have fast movers in really a bad situation; yes. Army artillery located at Camp Carroll. They had 8 inch and 175s. 175s were not that accurate, though you might be able to get two rounds in the same grid squares but the 8 inch, I used them one time for a destruct mission when I moved them ten meters at a time to take care of a recoilless rifle that was shooting at us that I was unhappy about.

RV: How many Marines, Vietnamese Marines, were you commanding when you landed?
AD: I didn’t command any, remember I …
RV: That’s right, you were advising.
AD: I’m advising.
RV: How many then were serving under the Commander?
AD: We had about 450. Now that’s the, that was the TO strength when they went in there. However, and let me check through my notes here and I think I have a casualty
figures in here when we eventually got out and getting out was another story. Just give
me a second.

RV: Sure.

AD: Oh, here we go. Okay, out of that 450, we had 22-K’s, 15 missing, and 216
wounded.

RV: Wow, wow. Can you tell me…Go ahead.

AD: Go on.

RV: Well, can you tell me what happened, the progress of the battle there and
how you did get out?

AD: They decided now since we had figured out, got the strike, figured out the
strike of the B-52, didn’t go where it should have gone, they tried to then, the next word
was, ‘Well you’ve got to get out of there,’ which was a no-brainer. We started trying, any
landing zone or any cleared area that we moved to, the NVA were there already. And so
it came down to a point and by this time I had no secure radio gear with me and we
always talked on the KY-38 Secure Radio, so it came down to the point I said, ‘Well we
are going to have to blow our own LZ.’ And there was a hill called 410, and so I called
up the Advisor net back at the regiment and I said, ‘Hey, we need a small shot gun taken
apart,’ the smallest gauge shotgun. Short story long, Air Force ran about, well, at least
ten sorties into this hill and just blew the whole top of it apart and this then became our
landing zone. The interesting thing was we went up there to Hill 410, which was
completely tree covered before and now we had blown it into a, oh, probably about a two
to three bird LZ, we found 25 bodies of the bad guys.

RV: Oh really.

AD: Yes, that I felt was rather ironic and I don’t know what they were doing there
and I don’t really care what they were doing there and so then we started the helo-lift. It
didn’t take long for the bad guys to get their mortars back into range again. And so I
rolled over this one tree that was up there blown down and I landed smack on an ants
nest. And these were the type of ants that bit so it came down to a personal choice, do I
want to get bitten by ants or am I going to move out of here and take a chance with the
mortars, and I moved.

RV: Ok
AD: Then I talked to the Battalion XO because the battalion commander, the first
bird that landed, the very first bird that landed, the battalion commander got on it and left
before his wounded, before anybody. And so he is gone, and so now it’s me and by this
time they had lifted in another Junior Advisor, Dave Randall, and he hypothetically was
to talk to the XO. So the next birds that came in were going to evacuate the wounded and
that’s the way it’s going to go. However, the next bird that came in, there was a break in
discipline and the able bodied started rushing towards the helicopters, hanging onto skids,
things of that nature. And so I went over there and physically removed them and told the
bird to take off with the wounded that it had aboard but not the able bodied, went to the
XO and said, ‘Hey this lift is going to stop right now unless you can get your Marines
under control.’

RV: And what happened?
AD: He did.
RV: He did?
AD: Oh yes.
RV: Sounds like you had some discipline to deal with.
AD: Yes. Well, it was these kids and, you know, I call them kids, you know,
they’re Vietnamese Marines, you know, 18, 19 years old and when the shit really hit the
fan like that they, I don’t know whether this was the first battle. Most of them, this was
the first big battle they were in. They had come off of Lam Son 719 where the 7th
Battalion was pretty well destroyed as were most Vietnamese Marine battalions in Laos
at that time but they had refitted, retrained, and now they’re going back. So this is for the
most part, the first big battle that they had seen. But anyhow, the XO got the discipline
out and finally we were able to get out almost all of the wounded because it was only a
two or three bird LZ and it was hot, in that they were continually taking mortar fire in it.
But those Army Aviators, they came in there, it was just phenomenal. They would come
in and land not worried about the mortars shells bursting around them and I had gun ships
up there looking for them but harder to find mortars, but at least it wasn’t artillery.
RV: Right.
AD: Make a short story long, we did get out of there on the, let’s see, 19th we
eventually got of out there. That was the day the helo-lift; they moved the battalion, 7th
Battalion back to Camp Carroll and talked about that; what their fighting capabilities were, about zilch with all the causalities they had. So then it was decided, we went down to My Loc for a couple of days. Then we moved down to refit and retrain, down eventually on the 28th of July, no correction, the 16th of July. We moved south down to Van Kep, which was the Vietnamese Army Training Camp in close proximity to the Aussies who were there.

RV: I wanted to ask you about that, how much did you work with or see Australian, New Zealanders, or ROK troops?

AB: When we were down in Van Kep from the period of 20, let’s see, 28 July to 29 August, I was invited over to their mess because you probably don’t remember, but I have an article saying, ‘Last US Marine Leaves Country’ and shows a picture of him on 20 July of 1971. And so I was sort of a novelty in that by this time, I had gotten back Captain Rice too, he had recovered from his wound, the shrapnel wound. So we were sort of an oddity and you know, they would take me on down there; give me their briefings of what was happening. We were not in a tactical sense per se but if they needed us, we could have probably gone out and you know, done something. So they gave me a run down of their AO, the contacts they had made and so on and so forth.

RV: What did you think of the Aussies?

AD: Great people, great people. I mean, they had some of the equipment, in particularly their packs, I wish we would have had and I did pick up one of their packs.

RV: What did they have that you wanted that you didn’t have?

AD: It was a larger pack than the standard issue; it had more pockets in it, you could carry more. And one of the lessons I learned from this too, was water, particularly in that initial thing and I normally carried two canteens, thinking that was enough. When I was in charge of the company, that was enough because I would always plan my movement and we would go ahead and cross the stream. When I was with the battalion, however, trying to evade the NVA, we’d very rarely cross the stream, you know, we wanted to keep to the low ground. So one of the things I learned, I then had a quart bottle plus the two canteens.

RV: And that was adequate?

AD: Yes, that was adequate.
RV: Tell me about the…
AD: Because it rained and I would collect rainwater also in my canteens.
RV: Tell me about the training that you put your battalion through or you advised the commander to put the battalion through at Van Kep?
AD: It was primarily the organic weapons, the organic weapons; by that I mean, mortars. The infantry battalion, Vietnamese Infantry Battalion also had a recoilless rifle section which were 57’s. They would never carry them and so consequently, they would not do that much training in that. This training aspect was mostly for the platoon commanders, the reconstituted battalion, if you will, to get together to discuss tactics. It was modeled after a US Army type training thing, which was adequate, which was good, but the main thing was just to keep them out there getting to know each other and for the Vietnamese Marines to feel comfortable with each other again.
RV: How did you find the Vietnamese fighters in the Marines that you were advising? Were they stereotypical or were they a cut above? And I know you’ve mentioned that they were tigers, but…
AD: Defensively, very few offensive operations did we go on; we were mostly in a defensive type position. And if would’ve attacked them in a defensive type of position, they would not run, they would stay there, they would literally fight until the last man. In an offensive situation, we were never during my whole tour there, never did we conduct a sweep operation with the battalion, never did we go anywhere outside of our fire support bases except maybe, you know, 2 to 300 meters outside to set up ambushes outside of those. But offensively, it just didn’t happen and that was sort of a, after this, the big battle up there in June, it was rarely that we see the bad guys.
RV: Why do you think that was?
AD: They were probably getting ready, stock piling things. They had moved the [US] Marines out of Northern I Corps, they had put in a force probably about 50% of what was there before, so the bad guys were probably stacking up their supplies, getting ready for this Easter offensive; what they had planned I am sure a long time in advance so they would have as they rolled south, they would just be able to pick up these supplies along the way and just keep rolling.
RV: Right, right. Tell me about the relationship you had with the gentlemen you were advising.

AD: Lieutenant Colonel Nah got relieved and a major by the name of Hue came in, an interesting individual in that he had been thrown out of the country since they supported, he supported the old dictator back when. He was allowed back in the country. At that time, I was, let's see, 36, 35 and he was probably in his 40's, he was a major, just got command of the battalion and he spoke fluent French, which I didn't speak. His English was not that good but always had an interpreter with us and my Vietnamese was not that good. We could communicate; I would say a mutual respect type thing.

RV: How about the other Marines in general, how did they treat you, how did they act around you?

AD: The enlisted Marines, I had few, if any contacts with them at the platoon level. My contacts were primarily with the S-3, the operations officer, the battalion commander, my radio operator, and my bodyguard. I had one radio operator who spoke fluent English and my bodyguard or my cowboy, if you will, made sure that no harm would come to me or that was his primary mission was to protect the Co Van and that's what we were called, Co Van: trusted friends.

RV: Right, right. Tell me about the bodyguard: what did he do? Would he just shadow you everywhere you went?

AD: Yes he shadowed me, he kept his weapons at the ready, made sure that I wouldn't do anything stupid or if I did something stupid he would be right there beside me.

RV: What kind of weapon did he have?

AD: He had an M-16. And by that time, the M-16, the troubles with the ammunition for the M-16 or the chamber had been fixed so the M-16 then was a reliable weapon as opposed to my first tour when the M-16 jammed on me all the time.

RV: Right. Tell me about what your uniform was like. What did you carry with you?

AD: This time I did not carry a rifle simply because I figured if I am with the battalion commander and if we get overrun there are going to be enough rifle's around to go pick up. I did not wear a Flak Jacket. I had a helmet. Now what I had tried to do is
since I was advising the battalion commander, I couldn’t go riding around with a Flak
Jacket if he didn’t have one. We had our own distinctive uniforms, the tiger stripes with
the nametags, the Vietnamese and Americans ranks sewed on them. My equipment, as I
said, it consisted of about the same thing I had, I had of course my maps, I’d have my
radio codes with me for the KY-38 so that we could talk secure. The radio themselves
and the gear themselves were carried by my radio operator, the keying devices. I’d have
my air mattress because I’d never go anywhere without my air mattress, thinking my
thought was that I better have an air mattress which came in handy any number of times,
particularly fording streams, in one specific instance when we got pushed out of Mai Loc
later on. My uniform was basic, the same as first tour. The rations were completely
different. What the Vietnamese ate, I ate. I would, however, we were fortunate at one
time to capture a number of NVA flags and I’d get off of the hill where we were probably
about once a week and when I’d hit the… I’d go off in the morning and come back in the
evening and I would go around to the different Army installations or Air Force that were
still around, trading NVA flags for eggs and steak. It’s amazing how many you can get
for that, so that supplemented our income. I lost quite a bit, or diet rather, I lost quite a
bit of weight as I did the first tour, but the equipment was basically the same; flashlight,
you know, and compass, and oh, I had some flares with me, any number of small little
toys but basically the same equipment.

RV: Okay, okay. Did you feel comfortable?

AD: Initially no. (Laughter) After I sort of, it was sort of like when the battalion
reformed back in Van Kep, yeah, because I was the tested guy then because you always,
you know, you don’t really know how a guy is going to react until he gets into that
position. I was in that position more than probably half the people in the battalion were
after we reformed down there. And so I had in a sense, proven myself and yeah, after
that I did feel comfortable. I felt that if anybody, well first of all, my own ability, I felt
that even if we did get overrun or something like that, I could make it out there because I
would have my maps, I had my compass, I had my flares, I had a radio; the whole bit. I
could do it on my own if I had to but it wasn’t the same as having a Marine Rifle
Company around you in that you knew the individuals and knew their fighting prowess,
that you had a battalion of Vietnamese around you, knowing that there were tigers in the
defense but don’t know how they would react in the offense.

RV: How much contact with home on the second tour?
AD: Say again?
RV: How much contact with home on the second tour?
AD: Letters. I had, as far as the R&R, I waited, I wanted to wait until later in my
tour in the R&R because to take R&R…in fact, my R&R was scheduled for the 10th
month I was there as opposed to the 6th month, which is the normal rotation type thing
because of the operational tempo of the battalion and where they were and when they
were due back or whatever. With contact with home, never had a phone call. Of course,
letters. Letters kept coming in and then I had a lot of time on the fire support bases to
read and to write letters. So that was the primary thing.

RV: Did you still kind of keep what you were doing in the dark?
AD: Oh yes, oh yes.
RV: Did your kids write you?
AD: Yeah they did. Of course it was, you know, at that time, they were growing
up so to speak. Let’s see, 16, 17, so they would write, you know, what their high school
things that they were going with them and the whole thing.

RV: How much did that boost your spirits; help you?
AD: It helped. Obviously, you know at this time, the only other American during
this whole tour while we were in the field was of course Ron Rice but he primarily kept
with the Bravo Command Group or the XO. So in a sense I was by myself with the
battalion commander but I learned to play Vietnamese poker, and I am quite good at
because I am quite good at cards and established a rapport with the Vietnamese,
particularly my radio operator and the battalion commander. But yeah, it helped to get the
letters in. We would not get them in all that often, probably we’d maybe once to twice a
week, we’d have a helicopter land that had the mail. It came up from Saigon and would
goto the regimental, or the brigade, as they call them, headquarters, and then
eventually filter itself out to me.

RV: How man letters or how much mail did the Vietnamese Marines get?
AD: Little if any.
RV: Really?

AD: The primary thing that came in on the helicopters when they would come in would be the supply officer who was probably to me, it appeared to be the most ancient 1st Lieutenant in the Vietnamese Marine Corps. He was the supply guy, he’d bring in his two loads of [live] chickens and they all tied together and then their supply system was sort of nothing like I’d ever experienced before. The troops would go outside the wire on the fire support bases and get the greens. Their normal rations that they were supplied was rice and a can of fish, like can tuna, and that was their normal rations. They would supplement that with the greens outside the wire. The chickens or sometimes a platoon would bring in some meat and the meat was very rare with the exception of what the advisor got with the steak and egg runs.

RV: Where did you go after your training at Van Kep?

AD: After Van Kep, we went back to Saigon for all of from 30 August to 6 September, then we moved north again. We landed in Mai Loc on the 6th to the 9th and then we went out to Fire Support Base Cates, which is one of the fire support bases out there overlooking one of the primary avenues of approach into Northern I Corps there.

RV: And what was your battalion’s main duty?

AD: The main duty was there to report, to stop, to do anything they could to hamper the enemies ability to move through there in strength, to attack not only us, but the other areas to our south. And once again, this area, this period of time was extremely quiet. We did not make a contact, in contact, a ground contact. We never received any mortars, we never received any artilleries, artillery, we never received any incoming of any type including small arms fire and it was a lull, a definite lull, I mean, it was amazing.

RV: How long were you there?

AD: We were at Cates from the 10th to the 26th and then on the 27th through the 30th, 10th and 26th of September, then we moved over to Fire Support Base Holcomb on the 27th of September to the 30th of October. And once again, little if anything. There was nothing coming in there except this was the, this was the time, no that wasn’t the time, Sarge happens later. This was the time that, correction, this was the time. Okay, this was the time that we had the one recoilless rifle who had to be the worst shot in the
NVA Army to crank off about one or two rounds and we would have an artillery battery up there in position. He’d crank off one or two rounds, they never hit, it was a distracter, and this is when I eventually called in the 8-inch destruct mission on him and he quit firing.

RV: Okay. So this was the defensive position in the defensive posture of the…
AD: Defensive position.
RV: Yeah, that you had discussed.
AD: Yes, exactly.
RV: And so they weren’t seeking you, the enemy, and you guys weren’t out running offensive operations seeking them.
AD: Seeking them, exactly. It was almost like, ‘Hey, you know, if you don’t step on my turf, I’m not going to step in your turf, let’s just be friends.’
RV: And you said earlier you thought this was because they were simply just building force for the eventual take-over of South Vietnam.
AD: That was my estimation, yes.
RV: Okay, okay. So after Fire Support Base Holcomb, where did you all go?
AD: From Holcomb we went back again to Mai Loc. We were in Mai Loc from 31 October to 10 December and we celebrated the Marine Corps birthday there. In fact, another advisor and myself as a…we painted big Marine Corps emblems on the landing pad at Mai Loc because there weren’t anymore Marines in country. And that was the primary reason we did that and celebrated the Marine Corps birthday and then, 10 December, from 10 December then until, let’s see, oh yeah, then we moved back to Saigon from 11 December to 4 January.
RV: What were your duties in Saigon?
AD: Saigon, it was a totally different area. I mean it was just like a US city. My duties in Saigon, a typical day would be get up, our driver would meet Rice and myself out. We would go out to the battalion case camp. We did not live, now, with the Vietnamese Marines while they were in Garrison, only when they were in the field. We would go out there, talk to the battalion advisor [staff], find out what if anything they needed, go observe their training with the S-3, discuss what was going to be happening
next, and the Vietnamese Marines then would be planning their parties because they had successfully come home so it was more or less a party, peace-time garrison duty.

RV: What was Saigon like?

AD: Boy! No one had weapons. They had the curfew in effect and it was just a big party town. You know, ‘Who’s having the party tonight type thing,’ and of course, the Marines who were there in the rear knew all the, ‘The CORDS is having a party tonight, or Aid’s is having a party tonight’, or ‘Let’s go here or let’s go there.’ And it was always the Botulin where we walked into another place down there and they would always play the Marine Hymn at 1900 in the evening and low and behold, the individual who did not stand at attention for the Marine Corps Hymn, or Marines hymn. It was like peacetime.

RV: Do you want to give me any examples of some of the stuff you all did or do you want to not do that?

AD: Yeah, there were lessons; much we did there except the only thing in the military aspect that we did at that time was once again was observing training. Battalion advisors were pretty much on their own in that they were with their advisors [their counterparts]. We would go down to the headquarters periodically to pick up our mail there or anything of that nature, but we were normally just a weird source. Each of the field advisors would have an advisor stationed in Saigon as his bunkmate; we had two people to a room. And so when we came back from the field it was like, first of all, getting the stink and the stench off of us, getting all of our laundry done and things of that nature; making sure our gear was clean, it was, boom, we were out. My advisor [bunkmate] at that time was a guy called Jim Braben, who was the captain of the engineer advisor, a.k.a. Frog Legs. Frog Legs eventually became a Three Star general and matter of fact; he called two days ago.

RV: Oh really?

AD: Yes, small corps but that was, there wasn’t much to do in Saigon. Now one thing I did not do, just something about me that I, and I don’t know whether I can say this, you might have to get this out, but I didn’t like the women.

RV: Ok.

AD: Over there.
RV: You did not like the Vietnamese women?
AD: I did not, not only Vietnamese but Okinawa and all, and it was sort of a
standing joke that the Covan Thieu Ta DeBona would, you know, not go with the
Vietnamese girls. But in a sense, I felt that particularly the battalion commander
respected that.
RV: Did that ever become a problem as far as relationships between the senior
officers?
AD: No, not a bit, not a bit. In fact my junior advisor, Rice, Ron Rice, had a
Vietnamese girlfriend or a number, very fluent Vietnamese, very nice guy. And the
whole thing, it never became an issue.
RV: So in January, where did you go from Saigon?
AD: We moved back to Charlie-1 which is a bunker complex. We were there
from 5 to the 15th of January and then we moved over to…the 16th of January we
moved over until the 4th of February into the ‘Hill of Angels’, also called Con Thien.
And this is when things started to become a little bit more like, ‘Whoops, guess what,
your back in the war zone.’
RV: Right. What happened?
AD: Well the first round, they had the place zeroed in, obviously.
RV: Right.
AD: The first round of artillery that we had land there and we were there, oh,
probably about two or three days, landed about three feet away from the benchmark.
RV: Wow.
AD: And the benchmark is where the, you know, that is the highest part of the
hill, that’s where the hill actually peaks. And the bad thing about Con Thien is they had a
super secret Army radio relay station there, a radio intercept and they had generators
going the whole time, so you could not hear the artillery come in. So you wouldn’t know
where it was and I spent most of my time there in a…not with the battalion commander,
but it was in a tower there. It was about 60 feet high. I was up there with my glasses and
normally my uniform at that time was a pair of shorts, a soft cover, and my boots of
course, and a book, and binoculars. So I would just go up there and look around
periodically and just sit up there and read and get a suntan. One time I was up there and
they did a fire mission, it must have been a training exercise but the local joke was among
the advisors. Before they would move a unit south, the NVA would move a unit south,
they had to go ahead and conduct their live fire exercise on one of the fire support bases
and it was either Sarge Nui Ba Ho or Con Thien. And one time there must have been at
least 150 mortar rounds come in, no registration round, no nothing, just a blum, the only
thing is they hit the wrong hill.

RV: Oh really?

AD: Thank goodness for that. Yes, they landed about 150 meters outside of our
line. Another time they started shooting rockets at Charlie 1 and at Camp Carroll and I
had a very good observation of the positions and I had six batteries of artillery that I was
controlling at that time, putting fires on them. The radio intercept guys, they were not
allowed to tell me anything. My first job or the first thing that I did when I got there,
went down and said, ‘Hey, you know, if in fact any thing ever happens, I will come for
you, you will follow me, and we will get out of here if anything ever happens.’ That sort
of went over really nicely with them. So periodically, when I was sitting up there in the
tower, one of them would stick his head out of the underground bunker and said, ‘Major,
you might want to look over there to the northeast and watch out.’ So he would be able to
pick up the fire commands then, and I would be alerted to the fact that the enemy was
ready to launch their weapons and consequently call in fire on them then.

RV: Okay. So this incoming, this was the kind of combat that you experienced
there at Con Thien mainly or solely?

AD: Yeah, just no ground assaults, primarily recoilless rifle. Then they changed,
the first couple of days when they were firing the rockets at Carroll and everybody else
and I guess I am sure they picked up my radio signals there from Con Thien, so the third
day they decided that wasn’t a nice thing to do so they sort of hit us a little bit.

RV: How did you react with the incoming? You’d been in some intense combat
your first tour, you’d been home, you’ve come back, and the contact you’ve had has been
rather limited. How did you react personally, and was it different from the first time you
were there?
AD: How did I, yes. One thing, I think earlier in this when I was talking about what was the most feared psychologically was incoming because you couldn’t shoot back.

RV: Yes, sir.

AD: When I first landed over there in the June timeframe with the battalion over there, we had mortars set up there and I would like to hearken back to that a second.

RV: Sure.

AD: And the battalion commander, who was a new battalion commander, we had our mortars, they weren’t firing or anything else, so I was armed with a 45 then. So I would take my 45 and I would point it up in the air and I would fire off three or four rounds and then I would do that again and eventually the battalion commander saw me doing this and said, ‘What are you doing?’ And I said, ‘Well, since you are not firing your mortars, I am now giving them some indirect fire back.’ So it sort of made the point to him and at that point in time then he… my subtleties, if you want to call that subtle. The second time up there at Con Thien we, in that period of time when they were shooting at me there, I could see them. So I would call in the fire on them because my, being 50 [60] meters up in the air, and it got to the point even the Vietnamese Marine artillery guy would come up there with me, but he got hit when he was up there and I had to carry him down.

RV: Did you sense a difference in your personality in your second tour?

AD: Yes, in that I was more closed, so to speak. Closed in that and perhaps even more confident than before. I kept my emotions…seeing an American Marine get hit, it was different than seeing a Vietnamese Marine get hit for me. And my personality per se, I had always been somewhat facetious and a joker and I continued that all through the thing.

RV: Can you expand on what you just said about why it was different seeing an American Marine versus a Vietnamese Marine killed?

AD: I did not know the Vietnamese Marines personally or by name or you know, anything like that. They were, as crass as it sounds; they were like, you know, a non-entity. And it was different than seeing a Marine who I knew his name, I knew a little bit
about his family background, knew, you know, mother and father, what the effect that
would be on them, but it wasn’t the same in that respect for me.

RV: And you were at Con Thien into February?

AD: Yes, we were the last; I was the last US Marine to leave Con Thien. We left
there on the 4th of February and then we went back down to…we were assigned the
mission of strategic reserve for Northern I Corps and we moved down to Da Nang. And
we got down to Da Nang on the 5th of February and Da Nang was another totally
different spot. I had never been that far south in my first tour with the exception of when
we landed but [not] operationally. The battalion at this point in time was assigned a, what
I refer to as a postage size AO, in that one battalion was running around and it was about
three square meters of area. And the only good thing to come about that; they ran into a
couple of booby traps, but they did find a cave full of NVA flags and before they went in
there, they threw a hand grenade in, which exploded and obviously holed the NVA flags.
The Army people were still there, they were getting ready to pull out, I forget what
division or what part of it there is still there, but anyhow the Air Force was still there in
abundance, so it was just like gravy train. I would send [Captain] Rice out or we would
both go out during the day while the battalion was there with our holed NVA battle flags
and we would come back with all sorts of things. Never ate so good, I never ate so good.
And my buddy liked Hennessey and so I would periodically bring him back the
Hennessey, he liked Cognac and so we would get that down there and it was just like a,
once again, a rear area R&R.

RV: What were your quarters like?

AD: Well, they weren’t really quarters; they were bunker. And you had a cot in
there, which was, always had the cot in the fire support bases. Of course, I had my air
mattress with me. Snoopy, which was the little blanket that everyone had, the camouflage
type blanket. The quarters were like I say, just like a bunker right next to the battalion
commander. In fact, we would sleep in the same area, he would be in one end of it and I
would be on the other.

RV: How long were you at Da Nang?

AD: We were at Da Nang until the 29th of March. And what happened on the
morning of the 29th of March, we were in there playing a game of Vietnamese poker,
which I was winning. Rice, Ron Rice, had gone out into town with the trailer and our
jeep, at about, oh I guess, 1000, and to go with the normals: eggs and type thing to see
how much we could beg, borrow, or steal. Poor Marines, you know, there aren’t any
Marines there, what are you guys doing here, oh well, you know. ‘We need this, we need
that and oh, by the way, we have an NVA flag.’ And at about 10:01, the battalion
received an order that we were moving north. ‘Okay, we’re moving north, where are we
going?’ ‘Dong Ha.’ ‘Oh good, so we’re going to go to Dong Ha, when are we flying
up?’ ‘We’re not flying up, we are going to go ahead and drive up.’ ‘Okay, where is the
security along the way?’ ‘We’re not going to have any security along the way.’ ‘What
about ambushes on the way?’ ‘Nope, we were ordered to get up there.’ By 2:00, four
hours later, the battalion was packed and ready to go which is a monumental feat, except
Rice was not back yet, so the advisor was not back yet. (Laugher)

RV: And you need him.
AD: Yes he’s still not knowing, I mean, things like this just don’t happen. ‘Why
are we going up there?’ ‘The NVA are attacking.’ ‘Oh, okay.’ To make a short story
long, Rice came back about 3:30, the battalion had moved out at 2:00 in a ARVN truck
convoy and I told my buddy, I said, ‘That means we’re going to be driving at night. How
are we going to get through all these road blocks that the local Ruff Puffs set up?’ He
said, ‘You don’t worry about that Thieu Ta, we will do it.’ I caught back up…I drove
then, eventually caught up with the battalion, and got in to our place in the motor
[convoy] march right around the Hai Van Pass. We moved all night and we came to the
roadblocks. The point lieutenant would get out, talk to the Ruff Puff’s in there and of
course, we had a whole column of truck’s lights blazing and I can tell you I was not too
happy about that. Moving at night, no security, anything of this nature.

RV: Right.
AD: We eventually got into Dong Ha; we got in, not Dong Ha, just outside of
Dong Ha at about 2:00 in the morning and we moved into this place and I went up to him
and I said, ‘Well, where are we going?’ ‘Well, we’re going there.’ I said, ‘Well, listen,
why don’t we turn off the truck lights, that would probably be a good idea.’ ‘No, the
drivers need to see.’ So we moved on in and no sooner did we disembark off of the trucks
and the trucks took off did we started receiving incoming artillery, and I said to myself,
‘This is not a good place to be’. And I still don’t know what is going on; all I know is that we’re up there. I’m not in contact with any Americans because I don’t have the radio freq., I have no idea, and all I know is that the battalion is there. So we walked back out of this area where the incoming artillery was, not all that accurate, it was more or less they saw the trucks but their spotters weren’t that good. But we received no causalities, there were a few close rounds, walked back out, walked over to the other side of Highway 1 and set into a village over there. And the orders were the next day at noon, we were going to go and reinforce Mai Loc. So the 30th of March came and went with no vehicles picking us up and I am still not in contact with any Americans, I have no idea what is happening. Eventually, my buddy tells me through the Vietnamese Marine net [Channel] wherever he has contact that this is what is happening, the NVA have started an offensive and they are coming across the lines. On the 1st of April, Apropos, April Fools Day, we started a motor march into Mai Loc and the initial word was we were going to ride all the way into Mai Loc, disembark there and reinforce Mai Loc because there was a Marine… the brigade [47 brigade] headquarters was there, they had the 4th and the 8th battalion’s there but a brigade is normally 3 battalions. We started our motor march; it started out very badly. The vehicle directly in front of me with an ARVN driver tipped over going over, making the turn at Dong Ha from Highway 1 to Highway 9. I had bodies all over the place, I crawled under the truck under the 6 X 6, and try to remove as many as I could. We lost basically a platoon right there.

RV: Wow.

AD: From K’s and W’s out of that one truck. We continued on down the road and all of a sudden everybody stops and we were getting out and the reason why we are getting out is because we can’t go through Cam Lo because NVA tanks were reported at Cam Lo.

RV: Oh, okay.

AD: Things are now starting to get a little bit serious, obviously.

RV: Yes.

AD: The report incidentally later was erroneous but that was the report at the time, NVA tanks at Cam Lo. So then we started a foot march, probably roughly, I would say, five, six miles from the turn off of 9 into Mai Loc. And as we are going over there,
we can see Camp Carroll to the east of us and there are all kinds of artillery rounds
bursting around Camp Carroll and I said, ‘Jeez, look at that, you know, there must be
something happening up there because they are getting a bunch of air bursts.’ Well, the
airbursts were the bad guys’ airbursts, not the good guys’ air bursts. We eventually got
over to Mai Loc, set in on the other side of the airstrip, not next to the base. I went over
and got the radio codes, came on back, and the Bravo Command group was generally
south of the Bravo [airstrip] with two companies. They were generally south of the
airfield while the Alpha Command group with the battalion commander, we were
generally to the west of the airstrip, not separated by more than 3-400 meters. So we’re
there now in Mai Loc and there are artillery rounds landing everywhere in Mai Loc, I had
never seen that intense of a concentration of artillery anytime. And it looked like an old
World War I movie is how I’d like to describe it. When I went over there, all the
American advisors were from the brigade were in the bunker and I remember seeing
these old World War I movies where the rounds would land and the sand would come
shuffling on down. And one of the people in there was a guy by the name of Tom
Ganebus who was from Homer City, Pennsylvania, which is not too far from where I was
born. He was the artillery advisor and one of the artillery’s claim to fame is artillery leads
dignity to what otherwise would be a vulgar brawl. So I asked Tom, I said, ‘Tom, what
do you think about the vulgar brawls now?’ (Laughter) To me, you know, I mean, it was
just a surreal type of experience that this was actually happening. At the same time
around the 2nd of April now, the people who, the ARVN Regiment, the 57th I believe it
was, at Camp Carroll surrendered in mass. The American advisor who was at that time,
an Army major, through a fluke of fate came up on the net on our advisors’ net, and said,
‘The ARVN are surrendering and I’m getting out of here.’ At that same exact moment,
fortune would have it, there was an Army helicopter bringing in a re-supply of artillery
because we had our artillery battery there at Mai Loc with us, a Vietnamese Marine
artillery battery, and they heard his call, went over there and picked him up from sure
death or being a prisoner and took him back. We’re still over in Mai Loc now with us and
we’re getting periodic [artillery] and there are mortars firing 300 meters away from us,
firing on Mai Loc. And it’s almost like they had a plan and they did not adapt to the plan
about the 7th battalion coming in there.
AD: And we, the only rounds we would ever get, and they were very very few, would be the overs shooting at Mai Loc. We eventually got some ground contact; we wiped out the mortars that were over there. In fact, on the way out, the battalion commander and I, and battalion command group, we stumbled right on them and so shot them up, got out of there and eventually the orders were given over the advisor’s secure net that we, the Vietnamese Marines were going to abandon Mai Loc because it couldn’t be held.

RV: Did you realize at the time that your smack dab in the middle of this Easter Offensive?

AD: Say again.

RV: Did you realize you were right in the middle of this major offensive, the Easter Offensive?

AD: No, not at all but I did know, for instance, here I am, I am getting short again because now, you know, this was an 11 month tour the second time, I had now spent a little bit over 10 months in tour.

RV: It seems like when you’re ready to leave that’s when everything starts to heat up.

AD: Exactly. That’s my point. Sarge had two companies of the 4th battalion up there with Walt Boomer, who was later the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, they were overrun, and they got off. Ray Davis [Smith] who was his junior advisor was on Nui Ba Ho, which was a sort of an adjunct of Sarge; he got overrun. He later made major general in the Marine Corps. The 8th battalion over at Holcomb, one of our old bases where we were the 7th battalion, they had two companies up there, they got overrun. And so all the stragglers then became, started to come through our position or back to Mai Loc and eventually where they ended up was Mai Loc Village.

RV: Right. Then you were ordered to pull back from Mai Loc?

AD: We were, over the advisory net, I got the word that Mai Loc was going to be abandoned at the beginning of the evening Nautical Twilight Bent. So I go over to my buddy and I said, ‘What are our plans to go out of here because Mai Loc is going to be evacuated?’ He said, ‘Oh no, no, they would never do that, they would never evacuate
Mai Loc.’ I said, ‘Thieu Ta [Vietnamese for major], they’re going to go over and evacuate Mai Loc this evening.’ He didn’t believe me even though the rapport that we had established all this time. So eventually I sat down there and talked to him and he eventually now he started to believe it. He saw the smoke all rising where they were destroying everything that they could destroy in Mai Loc itself, the combat base. The Bravo Command group in this period of time was also undergoing small probes with enemy infantry, nothing major but small, but still, one of the most difficult things to do is to disengage or start a retrograde movement when part of your unit is engaged. So eventually the brigade and what was left of the 4th and 8th battalions, started streaming out of Mai Loc. And so 7th battalion mission was to cover the rear of the departing people, make sure nobody caught up with them as they went through and got out of there. This initially started out fairly good in that the two companies with the command group, the Alpha Command group, moved on out smartly to Mai Loc Village. The other two companies with Rice and the XO were still a little bit engaged but they eventually were able to disengage. We meet over at Mai Loc Village; the only trouble was the column had already departed with one of our [four] companies. So now we are a battalion minus. We picked up, I’ll never forget, we picked up a French priest, we picked up a Red Cross or a Vietnamese Red Cross worker and a couple civilians. And so I figured hey, you know, I’m home free now. We have a priest with us; there’s no way [I won’t make it].

RV: Right.

AD: To make a short story long on this one, it took us 29 hours to move from Mai Loc with no radio contact with anyone due to terrain and also due to the changing frequencies, to go from Mai Loc straight across country to hit Highway One. During this period of time we crossed and re-crossed the same river five times.

RV: Oh boy.

AD: And the only way we were able to get our wounded in when we go along there, we would find other wounded from the other battalions and the 7th battalion Marines would pick them up. Nobody was left behind. In this terrain, it was brutal. It was so steep in some cases that you actually had to grab onto trees to pull yourself up. How they got the causalities up there I will never know. Then, going back down the other side, you slid down on the seat of your trousers. When you came to the stream and my
buddy, instead of finding a fordable spot, what we did, we blew up air mattresses and
those who could swim, swam across, those who couldn’t and the causalities we would
ferry them across on our air mattresses. Eventually, it came to the point where I went to
my buddy and what he was doing was following a compass azimuth, not the terrain and
we were ready to cross the river again. And by that time, I was a little bit irate about the
crossing the rivers all the time and I said, ‘Hey, you know, we are,’ basically what I said,
‘Hey, we are on the south side of the river, why don’t we just follow the high ground
down there until we get out to the highway instead of crossing and re-crossing this river?’
My buddy was not a very big man, he was small even for Vietnamese standards, and he
was a little bit older, and I knew he was tired, and so he followed this advice. We found a
trail and made it out almost in no time and that’s when we got back out on Highway 1.
We then went down to Ai Tu where I saw the advisors down there; the Army advisors
had all left. The only person down there running things was a lieutenant colonel by the
name of Jerry Turley. He has a book out called *The Easter Offensive* and it details what
happened during this period of time when the world was falling to an end and the only
people up there were Vietnamese Marines and American Marines.

RV: Right. Andy, let’s take a break for a moment.

AD: Ok.

RV: Ok, Andy. Let me ask you real quick before we continue with this Easter
Offensive fallback that you are describing, did you take an R&R?

AD: Well, we were just about to get into that.

RV: Ok, then why don’t you continue?

AD: Ok, my R&R date was scheduled when the 4th, correction, 7th battalion was
going to be back in Saigon. As I mentioned earlier, normally it is a three month policy in
the north and pull back to Saigon for the Vietnamese Marine battalions where they would
go back to their base camps, see their wives, children, whatever and just sort of slack
time for them during that period of time. Looking at my schedule, the 7th battalion was
due to rotate back to Saigon the 30th of March and I had my R&R set up for the 10th of
April, which was getting close to the end of my tour so I figured, gone to Bangkok, the
whole thing. When I came walking out of this thing, knowing that my wife was getting
ready to go to Bangkok, the first thing I told, well, one of the first things, after getting a
new pair of trousers because mine were completely ripped off, told Lieutenant Colonel Turley that R&R was scheduled but I had to get a hold of my wife to cancel the R&R and he said, ‘No you can’t do that.’ (Laughter) I said, ‘Colonel, look what’s happening here, yeah, I can do that.’ Said, ‘No, you might upset her.’ I said, ‘Might upset her! You don’t think this stuff is making the papers back in the States about this thing coming across?’ ‘Yeah, but then she would tell the other wives because of the wives’ network,’ They were fairly close, the people that were over here, ‘So we can’t have that happen.’ To make a short story long, I was ordered to go in R&R, which I did on the 10th of April and returned on the 17th of April.

RV: Okay, so you met your wife in Bangkok?
AD: That’s correct.
RV: How did it go?
AD: It went great. Of course, I didn’t mention anything what was happening or what was I going to go back to, in fact I didn’t know what I was going to go back to. I didn’t know whether in fact the offensive would be brunted or not by that time. My way of thinking, I might have gone back and it’s sort of upsetting and it wasn’t not enjoyable in that aspect, it was nice to see her again and to get out of that type of environment since I had put it off for so long, but my mind never really left, not necessarily, well, yeah, the battalion and Ron Rice because I knew that things were not, that was not a happy time back there.

RV: Right.
AD: Right before I left though, we had set up into strong defensive positions along the My Chanh River, so the enemy would have to cross that river to get to us and it was not fordable and the bridges that we had there, we had them ready to blow so in case they did try it with an armor attack, and the only way they could come across was human wave type tactics and I felt confident we would be able to if not, at least hold, to repulse their attacks. The bad feature about that is when we set in prior to going to R&R, we were north of the My Chanh when we’d have ARVN on our left and the Rangers on our right and when we would wake up in the morning we had NVA on our left, and NVA on our right, until we got down to the My Chanh and that’s when the Vietnamese Marines took
over the defense of that sector where they were coming down. So there was no question
about them deserting their post or deserting that area under fire.

RV: Right.

AD: So we knew then when we went to sleep at night with the Vietnamese
Marines on our left and Vietnamese Marines on our right, when we woke up they were
still there.

RV Right. When you returned form Bangkok, you were obviously almost ready to
depart country and go home

AD: Yes, that’s a true story. My rotation tour date had been established for the
10th of May and you know, it almost seems like, my God here we are, repetition of the
first tour, why now. So I went back out into the field with the battalion again and a rather
unflukey thing happened. At this point in time, Ron and I were sitting in a bomb crater
and all of a sudden he said ouch and I looked and he had an AK-47 round sticking in him
like a dart.

RV: Really?

AD: Really.

RV: Wow.

AD: What had happened was that we had a poncho strung up and as we later
reconstructed this thing, as it was coming downward trajectory, hit the poncho, which
deflected it up into his shoulder. And I pulled the thing out and it was still warm and I
gave it to him as a souvenir. Of course, hopefully he got his Purple Heart out of that; at
least I put him in for the Purple Heart at that time. (Laughter) So that was basically, on
the twenty…we were there in the defensive positions in along the My Chanh until the
27th, my records show the 27th, the official book came out and said the 28th of April.
When the 7th battalion was ordered to go north to attempt to relieve a unit, [Viet] Marine
Unit, which is still up there to break through up to Dong Ha again, which is sort of a
stupid thing to do with the bad guys all around. So I started to get into the vehicle, we got
our gear packed when I received an order that Rice and I were to be pulled back. And the
reason for this at that time, there was a whole concept of the advisory unit was being
changed. Instead of having advisors at battalion level, the advisors were going to be kept
at the brigade or at the comparable Marine, US Marine unit would be the regimental level
and then get parceled out as need. And my point was, ‘Hey, you know, if we don’t need them on a road march, where do we need them?’ And the comment came back, ‘Don’t be such a wise ass DeBona, you will get aboard that jeep and head south.’ They sent a jeep up for Rice and myself, some of the battalion took off and I think I thought at that point I would never see them again.

RV: Right.

AD: However, on the march up there, the battalion commander got hit, they got ambushed and the battalion commander got a round through his lungs. The S-3 who was riding in the advisor jeep got hit in the legs, back, and head; wounded seriously but not dead, so there but for a fluke would have been myself and Rice. They pulled us back down to the [Hue rear] area then, I was there until such time. As I said, my rotation tour date was 10th May established, so I returned then to Saigon on the 2nd of May and it seems to be, I got a hop down on an Army’s general Plane where the pilot even let me fly it for about three heartbeats, the general wasn’t aboard. And I left. And of course, before leaving, we got the word that the battalion commander and the S-3 were hit so we went over to the local hospital and paid our condolences and Captain Kim at that time, the XO, was the guy that took over the battalion.

RV: How did you feel leaving this time? Was it different from the previous tour?

AD: This time it was, thank God I am out of here. Last time is that I didn’t want to leave my people.

RV: Right, right.

AD: That was the difference between the two tours and kept thinking, ‘My god, is this history repeating itself when we go from 1 April, April’s Fool Day in ’72 to 10 September of ’67; you know, why always at the end of the tours?’ And that was more or less my thought at that time. I was happy to be going out; that is a definite true story.

RV: What was it like when you flew out and knew you were leaving the war for good and you would not be going back?

AD: Didn’t know if I would be going back. That was the thing, I am thinking, you know, normal rotation; you know, three years in the States and I would be back over here or whatever.

RV: So you got no sense that the South Vietnamese were on the road to defeat?
AD: No, no. In fact, just the opposite because at that time, that’s when the Vietnamese Marines started their Counter Offensive and just rolled back the bad guys and they even had plans to invade North Vietnam at Vien, which was because they always wanted a Thien Bac to march north to go make the amphibious assault up there. My thought was ‘Hey, you know, they are going to definitely hold them this time, the NVA are not going to come rolling on down and taking over everything, the resistance has stiffened. American air power is back in full swing.’ And you know, we had B-52 strikes coming in for us, we were directing B-52 strikes where we wanted them, which was unheard of before but this was just a full out and out, ‘You want to mess with us, watch out’ type thing. And also the TOWs came in then to take care of the NVA tanks. In fact, the first TOW was employed then; ground mounted at the time but then they later got him into the helicopters. So I mean, the NVA and naval gunfire, offshore, just broke up columns of NVA tanks, just decimated them. So, as long as they had the heavy fire support there, which I thought would continue on forever or how long forever can be, there was no way that the South Vietnamese were going to lose then.

RV: What happened then, what do you think happened?
AD: Well, what happened was is the unpopular war. Congress eventually pulled the funds, the Peace Agreement, if you want to call it that, was violated in numerous occasions by the NVA; they rolled again and took over the whole country.

RV: So the key to that was American air power and air support?
AD: Well, the key to that was the American Congress at that time with the anti war movement in full swing then acceding to the desires of that group, politically, while pulling the support and the money away from the South Vietnamese.

RV: Right. How was that flight back for you? Do you remember how you felt?
AD: Yeah I do. There were a couple of other advisors on the same flight as myself because once again, this was the, even though I had been, of all the advisors there, I had been in country longer but due to the cutback of personnel, they wanted to get new people in there. And as we were going out, other American Marines were coming in to be advisors at the brigade level, which I didn’t understand because I had the experience, but I wasn’t about to argue about that one.

RV: Right.
AD: When we lifted off from Tan Son Nhut, it was a, for me, a big relief thing. We managed to stow a few bottles of Old Loud Mouth aboard. The captain at that point in time said, ‘Well, you know, you could have to have something to drink’ and we had a whole row of us partying; the Marine advisors. It was a totally different flight than the first time because the first time, I had just come out of a battle with American Marines, second time just out of a battle with Vietnamese Marines, but both times a sense of, ‘My God, I made it again. How did that happen?’

RV: Go ahead.

AD: That was just the difference between the first and second tour. You know, the first tour was I made it; the second tour was I made it again.

RV: Before we leave Vietnam completely, let me ask you some general questions and this refers to both of your tours.

AD: Sure. Okay.

RV: You underwent some very intense times there, obviously, and in a dangerous position in both tours. Did your religious beliefs change at all because of your experiences in Vietnam or could you tell that they had changed during the time you were there or after?

AD: I was brought up a Roman Catholic, as I said earlier in this interview. I had gone to Catholic School for the first eight grades, so to me, a Priest had always been, you know, a marvelous man. And we had a Chaplin with us in 326, who was just amazing. We would be out up at Khe Sanh, not the south but up at Khe Sanh when we were more or less typical Marine type units. He would fly in on a re-supply mission, say Mass, and fly back out and the re-supply and give Communion and Absolution and the whole thing and it would be out in ten minutes. And now that’s my kind of Mass. (Laughter) Another thing that he did was and I don’t know whether it was a sixth sense on his sense or on his part or what, prior to the time we went up to Con Thien, he flew out one time and he gave everybody in the company absolute absolution, which is you know, all your sins are forgiven, I don’t care what religion you are or anything like that.

RV: Right.

AD: And of course, during the time that happened and I lost all of my Marines in first tour, there was no way that they could commit any sins because we were, except
maybe a thought, because we were never around anything else of doing anything else
except moving in the field. So that meant a lot.

RV: Right.

AD: Later between tours when the Catholic Church started supporting the anti-
war movement, I was extremely disappointed and I fell away from the faith completely,
completely. I would not go to church. Then there is the old cliché about there is a God,
particularly in the foxhole. I can remember a couple of times saying, you know, ‘If you
ever let me out of this, I will be a good boy, I will never do that again, I will never do that
again.’ My religious beliefs as far as the Catholic Church or Catholicism changed, my
belief in God never changed; that there is one. That sort of answer the question?

RV: Absolutely sir.

AD: Okay.

RV: What role did entertainment play for you all? How did you kind of blow off
steam?

AD: Well first of all…. 

RV: You’ve described some of this.

AD: We never had a USO show. The blowing off steam were a series of small
things. For instance, on the first tour when we moved back into the field, we’re setting up
at Khe Sanh, this is strictly at Khe Sanh, I heard singing coming from one of my platoons
and there were a group of Marines down there who were quite good who I named my
‘Song Birds.’ And of course, the company commander next door, whose name I won’t
mention, to me was on full tactical alert, ready for the NVA to come storming across and
he reported back to battalion that he hears singing coming from Mike Companies lines.
So I would then have them every evening, when we were back in from the field, which
wasn’t all too often, have them report up to my CP tent where we would go ahead and
have a little sing fest by our Song Birds.

RV: What kind of songs would they sing?

AD: Popular songs of the day, you know, very well harmonized, a mixed group of
black and white Americans that just liked to sing. Another way we blew off steam, we
had a ‘Mess Night’ at Mike and this is sort of a formal affair. When we came back in
from the field one time, Lieutenant Manzi, my third platoon commander who got killed
on the 7th of September, got a whole [care] package from home with salamis, spaghetti, and even managed to smuggle in a few bottles of wine, even though you’re not supposed to do that. And so we invited the battalion commander and the battalion staff out to our place where we had a Mess Night, place cards in front of everybody, served spaghetti and wine. The small things like the troops, like I said, did not drink much alcohol, it was mostly soda pop. And back, once again, back from the field the way, the best thing was like taking a shower; they had a shower eventually established up at Khe Sanh. We would go down in company formation, go right through and drop our clothes at one end, go through the shower and pick up clean clothes at the other end. And also, the second time, which was totally different than first, in that we were back in Saigon, the pearl of the Orient or whatever, the blowing off steam there was partying and of course, an occasional fist-a-cuffs with members of the other armed forces who did not think, or in particularly civilians who, particularly Foreign Nationals, who do not think it appropriate to stand for the Marines’ Hymn in the Covan [Wa Bin] Bar so to speak. Little episodes like that or going down with the flags to scrounge gear. In fact, when the Army division was pulling up out of…when we were in Da Nang, I loaded up, oh gee whiz, it had to be 40 Con X boxes full of wall lockers, foot lockers, tables, chairs, things like that they shipped back to Saigon for the Vietnamese Marine base camps back there. So that was a way to blow off steam.

RV: Okay. Were drugs or alcohol ever an issue with Mike Company or any of the other units, which you served?

AD: Drugs, definitely not; alcohol, yeah and not on first tour. Second tour, yeah, we would go back and we would get smashed upon occasion back in Saigon. And that was like I say, a big party town but as far over indulgence or alcoholic type, no. There is no way because you knew you were going to go back out into the field again. When you went back out into the field, you would not have your alcoholic ability or ability to take alcohol with you. While the first tour we got two beers a day, if lucky. Second tour, there was no drinking at all per se except in the rear areas, back in Saigon.

RV: Andy, are there any songs that you hear on the radio today that take you back to Vietnam?
AD: The only one is that I don’t know, yeah, ‘We got to get out of this place.’ I mean that’s….

RV: That’s almost the universal. (Laughter)

AD: I don’t even know the name of it, but I can sing it.

RV: That’s the name of it.

AD: Okay. That to me was the whole anthem on the second tour. First tour, no songs that I remembered or anything particularly about that, but the second tour, yeah, that was definitely the song. In fact, after the Marines’ Hymn at the watering hole called the Wa Bin, incidentally, it was the watering hole in Saigon, they had a piano player down there and of course, the rear area or the Marines stationed in Saigon, they made this the official home of the Covans and they knew the piano player in there and he’d play the Marines’ hymn and then ‘We Got to Get Out of This Place’.

RV: Back to back.

AD: Yes that is exactly right.

RV: Did you keep up with news from back in the United States through your letters or where you able to obtain *Stars and Stripes* or anything like that?

AD: First tour, very rarely ever saw it; second tour, same way. We were in a cocoon type as far as outside media went, although, I did run into US media on the second tour. For instance, one time the battalion was moving north along this road and there was a cameraman out there, and I don’t even know what network or whatever and all the refugees were fleeing south and he was taking pictures of refugees fleeing and I asked him, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ He said, ‘Well, you know, I’m filming this for my news…’ whatever. But anyhow, I’m all, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Well, I am taping all the fleeing refugees and how bad things are.’ I said, ‘Hey, look on both sides of the road here; look right up there and look behind me. You see this? These are Vietnamese Marines going forward.’ ‘Well my news organization doesn’t want that.’ I took his camera and threw it in a rice paddy.

RV: Did you really?

AD: Oh yes. The media differs between first tour and second tour media. The media on the second tour were just anything bad, that was news, and anything good was
not. First tour, anything good and bad but mostly new, slanted towards the good was what got reported.

RV: Why do you think there was a discrepancy, that big difference between the two tours?

AD: Because of the situation. The perceived anti-war movement in the States, we got rid of Lyndon. What’s selling? This is selling. Let’s go film this rally over here against the war, no rallies for the war, which are totally different than today, for instance. Even in my small town of Ennis, Montana, they had an anti-war rally that attracted five people. Across the street were 250 supporting the war. I mean, it’s just the current war now that…to know what was going on back there, then no.

RV: Did it affect moral at all?

AD: Never affected mine. I’ve heard stories about people getting spit upon and things like this, never happened to me. I’m not saying it didn’t happen to them but it never happened to me. I probably would have reacted very adversely had it happened to me. The baby killer things of this, no, I never had anything like that. And the second tour, now you have to remember too, these were…we had 35 officers and I think 14 enlisted as a TO strength of the advisory unit. And all the advisors, every single one of them had at least one combat tour in Vietnam prior to going over for their second tour. And the reason why they were there is because they wanted to be there. They had also the same option that I initially had where I could go to division on Okinawa or go in country to an advisory unit if they were good and they were more or less hand picked type people. As a matter of fact, out of the people, the 35 people that I had with me in country, six of them later made general officer and that is an unheard of statistic. When you take a random group, if you will, of 35 officers to have that many make general officer. But no, as far as the effect on my moral or the effect on the moral of the people that I saw either tour, I saw no adverse effects. More of an adverse effect would be, of course, when they got in first tour, when they got a Dear John letter. That was the bad news.

RV: Right, right. In your units did you all ever have any pets?

AD: No.

RV: Okay.
AD: Well, first tour, the first platoon adopted a dog one time but the dog moved out and I don’t know what ever happened to the dog but it just went by the wayside. But as far as pets go for any period of time, no, no pets.

RV: How about any experience with the wild life there in Vietnam from scorpions, snakes, ants to tigers, elephants?

AD: We one time called in a fire mission on three deer. (Laughter) When we were up near the DMZ with my mortars and went out to check the effect and we didn’t get any. Another time, my LP heard people farting in front of him so he threw three hand grenades out and we had a roast pig the next day. All of the snakes, we saw snakes, any number of snakes there and the word was every snake you saw is a poisonous snake but I never had anyone with the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Nah in the second tour who got a snake bite and I am sort of suspicious of that. I never had any of my troops bit by a snake. We saw a tiger, we saw prints up at Khe Sanh but we never actually physically ran into any of the wild life per se.

RV: Okay, okay. In your units, especially in your first tour and then on your second tour as well interacting with the Vietnamese, were there any race issues that you witnessed?

AD: No, particularly in the first tour. I mean the race…the only time I witnessed any race issues were not with Marines, they were with another branch of the service, specifically the Army who were in the rear areas, not the combat troops out on the line. I could not talk to them because on neither tour did I go out there. But for instance when I would go with the firing batteries who were supporting us from Camp Carroll, I went up there and personally thanked them, you know, for their great work with artillery and the whole thing like that, but the black community, if you will, in the rear areas seemed to, particularly in the Saigon area, when you would see one, you would see 15 of them. They were not integrated at all in the Saigon area. But once again these were enlisted, and me being an officer then, never had any problem with them as a group or them as individuals.

RV: Were you ever exposed to, to your knowledge, Agent Orange or any of the other defoliants?
AD: There is little doubt that I was on both tours because if you look at the areas where they defoliated, I operated through there. I drank that water sometimes without halazone pills because we were so thirsty. Yeah I was, probably on both tours, exposed.

RV: Any effects?

AD: Not discernible, not according to the VA. I got cancer at a rather unusual type, being Testicular, which is the young’s man disease, which is why I retired from the Marine Corps. But nothing that the VA recognizes as far as effects, nor do I think any effects that I could see on myself.

RV: Andy, looking back at both tours are there any particularly brave incidents that come to mind that you witnessed?

AD: Boy, boy, where do you want me to start? Jeez! My gunnery sergeant, with 16 holes in him, we were getting overrun on the first tour, and he is out there just shooting and moving around and everything like that. My squad leaders, after their lieutenants and platoon commanders get killed, they’re in there kicking ass, taking names of their troops, making sure they are laying down the base of fire, their Marines are still going, and they are just so gung ho and just…My gunnery sergeant, a guy by the name of Gleason, incidentally, due to my rapid leaving from Vietnam my first tour and that I got back there, I eventually got him a Silver Star which was awarded in 2001 and I was there. I got one of my squad leaders another Silver Star who was pinned down in this bomb crater and they carried another wounded Marine in there by the name of Frank Taggert. They had 23 bodies stacked in front of them. The second tour there was a…not that I witnessed personally, but I heard of a Vietnamese sergeant who got up with the LAW as the NVA tanks were starting to roll across the bridge of Dong Ha, who fired the first LAW missed, the second one hit the tank, did not disable it, but the tank backed up and giving a guy by the name of John Ripley, captain at the time, time to blow up the bridge at Dong Ha. Like I say, you know, I could go on and on. The ambushes that we would set up along the side, the kid who got the butt stroke to the back of the head while his buddy then killed the other guy along there, running down NVA prisoners. I mean, NVA and VC troops were crawling through the bush and jumping on top of them, you know, to capture them instead of killing them because I would give an R&R for that. In a line unit, it was just so damn numerous. My lieutenant got killed, well both lieutenants got killed,
when their lines came under, they were the first guy over there stemming the thing. On

7th of September, Manzi got killed, on the 10th of September, Gaul, 2nd Lieutenant Gaul
and 2nd Lieutenant [Sergeant] Gayton. And I remember Gayton running by me saying,
‘Hey, I have to go find my lieutenant,’ and the lieutenant’s already dead and Gayton got
killed also. I mean just so many, just so so many. As far as the bad guys you know,
making that frontal assault in daylight, I don’t know how they would ever do that. It was
just indescribable going into that; perhaps they thought they only had one company out
there dealing with, I don’t know. It’s just I could go on and on and on. It’s just amazing
what the American fighting man can do.

RV: Conversely, on another topic, any particular humorous incidents that come to
mind when you think of your two tours?

AD: Those are the ones that you tend to concentrate on, the humorous ones. For
instance, I think I related one before about the pig incident where the listening post
reported somebody farting in front of their lines. And so I, you know, the radio operator
woke me up and I talked to him and I said, ‘What is it?’ ‘Don’t know sir, they’re farting
in front of Mike lines.’ (Whispering) And I had an SOP; you do not shoot your weapon.
What you would do is you would throw a hand grenade. So I told him, ‘Hey, the next
time you hear them farting, throw the hand grenades at them, alert the lines then come on
back in.’ Short story long, they threw the hand grenades maybe about ten minutes later,
came running on back in, went out the next day and found a pig. The Mess Night incident
that I related about, we also used to have, when we were outside the lines, I did not like
unannounced visitors coming into my lines. So the gunny, same Gunny Norris, my other
gunny had gotten killed on the 17th of July in Khe Sanh. We sent out a little radio watch
out there and that was our rear security and they would not allow anyone into Mike
company’s position and even the battalion commander got stopped upon occasion when
he tried to come out and see us. Oh boy, radio, there is always these reports that you had
to give like enemy equipment and we would always try to make a joke out of it. For
instance, one time we found the NVA pay master and he had a couple of bottles of, I
guess it was a Vietnamese’s Whiskey with him, and so we report that we got the pay
master with x number of dong and two bottles of booze which are currently leaking, so
therefore they have to be consumed on the spot. Anytime that I could, I attempted to
inject a little bit of humor into the situation or when I would be talking to my Marines, you know, particularly after a brutal fire fight or something of that nature, you know, and you can still see them with that look in their eyes and I’d attempt to kid them out of it. Humorous, once again, that’s the things that I tend to look at, not the other part.

RV: What did you think of Vietnam itself, the country?

AD: A gorgeous country, inland, along the coastal area where the majority of the population was. It was a very industrious type country; the people themselves were very industrious. The political leadership or it was a definite has and has not in that, but I enjoyed the country. In fact, like in Khe Sanh with the waterfalls and the gorgeous mountains, I mean it was a beautiful country.

RV: What about Vietnamese civilians?

AD: The civilians, and once again, we had very few interactions with on first tour because we very rarely saw civilians except when we were on motor marches. And the second tour, with the Vietnamese Marines, of course, I would see their family. I would see the people in Saigon, see the cowboys down there and of course in any society there’s that element of no gooders and those were the ones that primarily exposed to as far as getting out into the villages and things like that. The only time we would get out there is to move them out because that’s when the resettling thing came again, and that was not a happy occasion. I can imagine moving away from my ancestral land and moving into a base where I’m crammed together with a bunch of other people. Now they were very stoic in a sense and very able to survive, very survivable people I would say.

RV: What did you think of the American body count policy?

AD: The American what policy again?

RV: Body count.

AD: I’m sorry.

RV: The body count policy.

AD: Oh, body count. Body count was a bunch of b.s. It was an attempt to quantify a war where there was no quantification available. In other words, if ten of them got killed and you lost one, that was a great battle. And to me, that was a bunch of b.s. because if I lost one Marine it was one too many and I didn’t really give a hoot about body count but I particularly on first tour, I was continually harassed. Do you want a
body count, I’ll give you a body count, you know, one arm, two legs, and a whatever. And my personal way of thinking about it, once again, it was attempting to quantify something that was not quantifiable because even with the body count, if it was a war of attrition, if that was our concept and that was the big military concept, I guess, we will eventually get them with firepower but we left the people alone then and there were two different ideas. There was the Army idea, and the Marine Corps idea. The Marine Corps idea was to go ahead and pacify the villages of the Indiqinents, move them out. The Army idea was to go out with the massive formations, have them attack you and destroy them. But yet, for instance, on the 10th of September, we found two regiments of NVA. There is little doubt that we found two regiments of NVA. We didn’t go after them. In fact, the unit that relieved us, 2/4, 2nd battalion, 4th Marines got up there and two weeks later, they were overrun, including their CP. I mean, the bad guys were there, what happened to this preponderance of force, what happened to this, we’re going to find them and fix them. You know, they were there and we never went after them and I guess that is strange from the body count theory but to answer your question about body count, it was a bunch of b.s.

RV: When you came home from your second tour, did you have the same experiences as you did the first tour, that people weren’t really asking questions about what you had done?

AD: Yes, it was the same basic thing, because once again, after coming home from the second tour, I was assigned as the S-3 of the 3rd, initially the 1st battalion 7th Marines then the battalion changed its designation to 3rd battalion 1st Marines. The wife and family were in California and I wanted to stay there because of the school situation so then my monitor assigned me to division at that time, as a major.

RV: Did you have any difficulty the second time around transitioning to stateside life?

AD: No, none whatsoever. Reason being, immediately picked up a more intense environment and that was the time that the, the way I like to, the fruits of the people that I put into the Marine Corps were coming to full term in the Marine Corps and that the UA rated in a unit would be something like 25-30% of them would be gone over the hill. In fact, one of the things that happened with the 3rd battalion 1st Marines, we were assigned
a troop test by headquarters Marine Corps and we eventually got down to zero UA’s in
the battalion, which was unheard of. But the tempo that it was picked up immediately, I
had to no time really to think of anything else.

RV: Did you keep up with what was happening over in Vietnam?
AD: Yes, somewhat because I always thought since we, by virtue of this troop
test, if in fact, there ever was, even though with the 3rd Marine division in Okinawa, we
would be one of the first units to mount out of Camp Pendleton because we were in fact
an exception of strength, missing our 4th rifle company. We were the go unit.

RV: How did you feel when the United States finally pulled out in ’73?
AD: I’m sorry; I didn’t hear you.

RV: How did you feel in ’73 when the United States finally officially withdrew
from South Vietnam?
AD: At the time I thought, okay, it’s a political decision. Those with more
knowledge then myself, particularly with the Peace Accords that were signed at the time,
the promises made by politician to politician, the Pact’s signed, I thought, well, that’s the
resolution of that conflict. The country did not necessarily go back to the status quo in
that the NVA had a portion of Northern I Corp because that is where their advance ended
and the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese that is as far as they pushed them back. The
imperial capital of Hue, where the Vietnamese took that, what was left of it, was a big
rallying point for the Vietnamese Marines and my thought at that time, okay, we left but
we left at least leaving the country intact.

RV: Was peace with honor achieved?
AD: Was it achieved, obviously not. Was that a good term? Yeah, at that time it
was a good term because of all the concessions that had been made by both sides.
Although, the South Vietnamese did not like the Peace Treaty that was signed, at least it
was a peace treaty and at least there was a promise of no further aggression by the North.

RV: How did you feel in April 1975 when Saigon fell and South Vietnam fell?
AD: Unbelievable. During this period of time, I was then going to college getting
my college degree, and it was sort of a liberal college and there was a little doubt that I
was a Marine there. But I did not I was sort of glued to the TV set, watching this and
reading the news on it and seeing what happened with that and the Miagues Incident
around about the same period of time, it was just unbelievable. My thing is that I felt that
my country had left the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, in the lurch, did not back up the
Peace Treaty that was signed and to me, this was inconceivable.

RV: Could you make any comments about US policy overall in the Vietnam War?
What are your thoughts and feeling about that today?

AD: I wonder if there was any policy and as far as that goes: what was the end
game, what was the actual, what was actually expected to be accomplished? As I
mentioned earlier, there were two schools of thought, the Army and the Marine Corps
School of thought and how to conduct warfare over there. By virtue of the commander in
the area being an Army guy, the Army view prevailed and the Marines who he
continually chastised by not getting enough units out in the field or not making enough
contacts or whatever, not enough big battles so to speak of a battalion in size, the policy
the Marines had about the CAP groups, the squad of Marines actually living in a unit or
living in a village training the Vietnamese local forces there, South Vietnamese, which
was a great policy that never adhered to by the Army. As far as the, and it is the same
thing time after time that we should have learned form Vietnam historically, that there
has to be an exit strategy and yet there appears to be no exit strategy. There appears to
be, in my mind, no clear goal, no clear defining thing in Vietnam. Just like the tactics, the
NVA would fight a unit near the DMZ, Demilitarized Zone, right; they would go back
across. I would see boat traffic; I would see NVA formations on the other side of the
river from Con Thien. I could not shoot at them because they were in North Vietnam and
we could not, I could not fire my artillery, my naval gunfire into North Vietnam. We
could bomb them, but I couldn’t do that as a guy on the ground. Into Laos, when Lamson
719, I mean they found all sorts of stuff over there but yet, and then in the incursion into
Cambodia, which the US is going to go ahead and invade another country and all that did
was fuel the anti war media. There was no policy in my estimation; it went in with good
intentions like saving the government. How do you do that? There was no answer.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from its experience in
Southeast Asia?

AD: I know militarily that we learned a number of lessons. For instance, during
the Gulf War, I personally knew, in the Marine side, there was Walt Boomer who was a
Three Star general, who was an advisor there. There’s Larry Livingston, who later made Two Star, he was one of the regimental commanders Marines. There was Bill Keys, who commanded one of the divisions over there, a Two Star general at the time. He was an advisor there. There was Adams [Ray Smith] who at that time, was a captain there and had a regiment and later retired as a Two Star general. The military learned a lot from Vietnam, particularly the effects of artillery and that was one of the primary things they learned during the Gulf War. Politically, did we learn anything? I hesitate to say so. If you look at today’s quagmire and it’s being compared to Vietnam but there is no comparison. Vietnam was a one time, one situational type thing that went array; while the exit strategy is the biggest thing. While we had the people, for instance, World War II in Germany and Japan, we were able to, if you will, turn those countries around into a democracy, into our image. We are fighting a totally different type of people today who are religiously bent fanatics as opposed to nationally or nationalist bent fanatics. So did we learn anything militarily? Yes, I don’t see what we learned from the Vietnam per se politically, except you need the support of the media at all times, which is a great idea with the embedding of reporters that came up. So therefore the media got to see what really happened instead of what was reported to have happened.

RV: Right, right. Let’s talk about your personal experience in Vietnam during your two tours. How do you feel about it today?

AD: Oh, I am proud. Would I do it again? Yeah. Would I do it the same exact way? Most of the time. Some things I would change if I knew what I knew now what I knew then, or whatever. But I am extremely proud of my Vietnam service. Hey, you know, I was put to the test as a Marine and I acquitted myself in my opinion and in the opinion of my peers and my seniors and juniors, I acquitted myself quite well. Not only virtue of the combat decorations, but also the innovations that I did during the time that were later carried out, in some cases, Marine Corps wide.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned while you were there?

AD: Probably more about myself, who am I really. And that was the biggest important thing to me, who is Andy DeBona.

RV: What did you learn?
AD: I learned that I am extremely capable. I learned that I am adaptable. I learned that my instincts are extremely good. I learned that when I, my awareness, my physical and mental awareness were exceptional and that I would be able to almost sense when something was about to happen or I would be able to have a plan already formulated as soon as the first cap got busted, ‘boom.’ We’d immediately do things in what later proved to be the right way. The right way in that I would take minimum causalities while the bad guys, we would make sure that they never shot at us again.

RV: How do you think the war has most affected your life?

AD: Probably that I am a lot more capable. My capabilities, I felt, had increased substantially. I was not afraid to try new things or do new things even though the stereotype of a Marine is ‘Yes sir’, ‘No sir’, ‘Nine bags full sir.’ To me, it was never that way. I tried new things, even today. For instance, we have a Veterans Memorial here in town that I have raised 140,000 for and it’s one of the nicest memorials that you have in four states around here. My abilities, there is no limit to my capabilities or abilities but I can do just about anything that I set my mind to. And there was a lot of self-confidence involved, I believe would be the good word for it.

RV: Do you read books about Vietnam, go see movies about Vietnam?

AD: Oh I continually read, well not only about Vietnam, that’s one of my past times. I am an avid reader, I’ll normally, when we are south in the desert, I will probably read a book every other day down there. But do I specifically pick Vietnam topics? If there is a book who I consider to be a good author, I will read that, historical type, yeah I continue to read books about Vietnam. There are some things of course, you know, particularly what I didn’t know, the high-level type stuff. To find out the actual why, why did we do this and you know, sometimes there is no answer. Most of the time there is no answer except some politician saying because I said so.

RV: How about movies?

AD: Movies, I see the movies on Vietnam and I think I’ve seen *Full Metal Jacket* and *Acropolis Now*. Just a total, unbelievable distortion of what Vietnam was. I mean, it was a, yeah…the movie that I did see, two movies as a matter fact, that I considered to be probably the most realistic and the most heart rendering to me were *Patton* and *Saving Private Ryan*, none about Vietnam. I don’t think there has been a true movie, while
Green Beret with John Wayne, I saw that one, but once again, totally unequivocally, the worst bit of portrayal of Vietnam. In fact, there hasn’t been one that has portrayed Vietnam, as I knew it.

RV: That first half of Full Metal Jacket, do you remember that? That was all about Parris Island?

AD: Do I? Oh yes.

RV: Was it accurate at all to you?

AD: No. Having been through recruit training, having commanded a recruit training battalion at the time, that was plain and unadulterated horse shit.

RV: Was it harsher than that, was it more difficult or what was so different?

AD: The difference was things like that would have never happened. Never happened that a guy would have a round from the range, would never happen to the drill instructors. After the McQuen incident had happened in 1958 when I worked in the brig at Parris Island, we had him and this is the guy that marched the Marines through the swamp and had four of them killed in training and almost the demise the Marine Corps. Since that period of time, you are not allowed to swear; you cannot swear at the recruits, there is no physical contact with the recruits. I mean, it’s a total concept of, and that might be a stereotype of what recruit training was perhaps, but even in the ’55 when I went through, it was nothing like that. So it was just a complete distortion of the Marine Corps recruit training.

RV: Do you suffer any disabilities from your service including PTSD, anything like that?

AD: No, I don’t have that. I have a gun shot wound to the leg and my cancer was associated with a disability but not necessarily Vietnam.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today and what’s going on between the countries and would you want to go back to visit?

AD: I have thought upon occasions about going back to visit. I would like to take my wife there perhaps you know, to see the…I’ve talked to any number of people that have been there. What’s going on today is that they a vast market, if you will, or business. An American business is starting to get into the act because the French and the others have already been there and there is a vast market there, it is a communist country.
Still very authoritative from the people that I’ve talked to that have been there; they have brought back film which I have seen. I’ve seen Khe Sanh. I would like to, if I could, without going through a formal tour, I would like to go back there and take a tour of my own. However, I don’t want to go up and see Ho Chi Minh’s Memorial nor do I want to go see the people’s collection of the American bandits, or American pirates type things where they shot down the airplanes and things of that nature.

RV: Right. Andy, what do you think are the biggest myths and/or misconceptions about the Vietnam Veteran?

AD: That he is a bum. He’s the guy that has, he has the sign out on the road ‘Vietnam War Vet will work for food.’ That he is the guy with the long hair and the peace symbol around his neck, running around in a parts of a uniform who is either high on drugs or drunk, and that is so prevalent in our society. You know, in some, particularly the wannabes, the phonies, some of them aren’t even veterans. We had a, I hosted my 3rd battalion 26th Marine reunion here in Ennis. We had 268 people show up; of those 115 of them were Marines. The one thing they had in common, probably 70% of them had a Purple Heart. The one thing they did not have in common, we had maybe two of them in that mold of the ‘I’m the Vietnam Veteran with the long hair and I still this and I’m still that’, in these one of them was a…happened to be a captain at the time, who I don’t think ever had a shot fired in anger but he is now a war veteran. And another one was one of the enlisted Marines. He wasn’t in my company; he was in another company. But those were about the only typical, if you will, type perception of the Vietnam Vet. The other ones were presidents of their company, firemen, insurance executives. I mean, successful businessmen and that’s the story that doesn’t get told.

RV: Do you think the US government has taken care of the Vietnam Veterans?

AD: In a sense to a fault, particularly on this PTSD. There’s a book out called Stolen Valor. I don’t know whether you’re familiar with it or not.

RV: Yes sir I am.

AD: Where they…Becket, I think the guy’s name was.

RV: Berkit.

AD: Yeah. Went through the PTSD syndrome type thing. There actually, they held classes on that and you know, the people that he found in it, the stories they related
did not actually jive with the incidents that happened on the ground. Like one, an
example, one guy is a cook, yet he describes going out there on patrol and killing any
number of bad people and, you know, seeing all that blood and gore. Give me a break.
The PTSD thing, it exists, I am sure but not to the magnitude and the government does
not check into that. Do they take care of the other Vietnam Vets? I don’t think that they
don’t need to take care of the Vietnam Vets per se. They should be self-reliant; they
should be self-sufficient. You had a career type of guy stay in, hey, you know, it was a, if
their case, if they were honorable, if they did their job, they were awarded to promotion.
For instance I told you the story about all the general officers and the Mau, they were in
there. The others made it on up through. There were some who weren’t honorable, who
didn’t make it nor should of they have made it. But I don’t think the government owes
the Vietnam Veteran anything more than it owes any other veteran from Korea, from
World War II or from anywhere else. The ‘Owes’ thing is a…I don’t like that word, or is
the government taking care of them. The government should not have to take care of
anyone; everyone should be self-sufficient.
RV: Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington?
AD: Once.
RV: Can you describe your experience there?
AD: It was very humbling. I went with a friend of mine, it’s the only way I would
go, but I will never go back; too many names.
RV: Were you all there during the night or during the day?
AD: We went during the day; I don’t think I could handle the night. I had enough
during the day. I’ve never seen the moving walls that came around.
RV: Did you purposely not go to see them?
AD: Probably yeah, purposely not. No one likes to go back. I think, you know,
my philosophy is to look forward or today or to look forward, don’t go back, but it’s
difficult not to go back. Some of the memories are, you know, extremely good; others are
extremely bad.
RV: Yes sir. Were you able to find some of the names of the soldiers who served
under you?
AD: Oh yeah. Yeah.
RV: Do you think the Memorial is an appropriate memorial?
AD: Appropriate. It’s a recognition of those who have given their life in a war that was not supported in the end by too many people, but I don’t think any memorial could be appropriate to what they gave and what was expected of them. So as far as appropriate, no Memorial would ever be appropriate.
RV: Would you ever want to go back to the wall?
AD: No.
RV: Andy, what would you tell the younger generations today about Vietnam, if you had a chance to address a high school classroom or a college classroom?
AD: As a matter of fact, I do. We have our local high school. When they study that aspect of American history, there is a retired Marine gunny sergeant out of the Reserves from recon. And what I tell them is, you know, I first read over their book of what the book says about Vietnam and the book was written, in my opinion, by liberal historians who put their own slant or their own bent on that and the unjusticeness or whatever. And I just explained to them what I saw with the people, the people voted with their feet initially, by not wanting to stay in North Vietnam. It was an issue of North Vietnam never giving up their desire to conquer the south. The stories, for instance, My Lai, which made the news and nothing was ever mentioned about the 3,000 civilians killed during TET of ’68 [‘69]. Yeah, the political leaders of that time, micromanaged something that was not in their, should of not of been in their hands, it should have been in the hands of the military. The different slants, if you will, like the Vietnam Veteran, you know who he is and look at me. And then I answer questions. And the questions go all, ‘What was it like to be shot at?’ ‘Not nice!’ I’m being facetious about that, you know, but I try to tell that you learned a lot about yourself. ‘Did you ever kill anyone?’ ‘Yes’ and I’d…‘Let’s drop that.’ From any range of questions from my perspective, from the perspective of someone who’s been there, done that as opposed to a book.
RV: Yes sir. Andy, is there anything else that you would like to discuss that we have not discussed during our interview?
AD: Oh no not really, except, you know, there was an after Vietnam where I went…the Marine Corps said I get a college education because I had never, I had been going when I could to off duty education and I went to a university where I got a BA and
a MA at the same time. I eventually had another opportunity when I was assigned to a sort of a staff type job where I got an MBA, sent to Army Commanding General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where I picked up an MMS. So education became very important to me during this period of time, primarily, because I think of the maturity. And that’s one thing I tell the kids too about education. I say, ‘You don’t realize the opportunities you have to further your education. Some of you are just marking time here, ready to go out and conquer the world but your not going to conquer the world unless you have an education.’ That was it. The after Vietnam, of course, you always continue to run into the camaraderie. Even today, as I said, I just heard from Frog-legs Brabhum the day before yesterday. Old [Walt] Boomer calls periodically, Billy Keys calls and you know. And we do have our reunions which, you know, and it’s not a time to sit down and reflect war stories, it’s a time to go say, ‘Hey, how you doing, what’s happening with you now, where are you going in the future?’

RV: And you served honorably with the Marine Corps until 1981.

AD: That’s correct. That’s when I had cancer with six months and two years to live. (Laughter)

RV: You’re alive and cooking for sure now.

AD: Well, I’d like to say I am on my eighth one.

RV: Is there anything else you would like to add sir?

AD: That’s all except thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to discuss this with you Richard, and I look forward to seeing the typed version when it comes in.

RV: Yes sir, well it has been our pleasure and honor to talk with you. This will end the oral history interview with Andrew DeBona. Thank you very much sir.

AD: Thank you Richard.