Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing an oral history interview with Susan Kramer O’Neill of the Army Nurse Corps. Today’s date is the 16th of March 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building interview room and Sue is in Andover, Mass. Good morning Sue.

Sue O’Neill: Good morning and you’re probably where it’s warm too.

LC: Yes, it’s going to be 75 today.

SO: That’s disgusting. (Laughing)

LC: I know. (Laughing) I thought I’d just kind of throw that in there.

SO: Truly disgusting.

LC: Are you guys going to get hit with snow?

SO: We’re freezing. They’re talking snow.

LC: Yes, okay, that’s just ugly.

SO: I’m not ready.

LC: Okay, well, let’s talk about a warmer place.

SO: (Laughing)

LC: Much warmer, Phu Bai.

SO: Okay.
LC: There were a couple of things that you mentioned in the material that you provided to us I’d just like to follow up on. First of all, I gather that you took some Tae Kwon Do lessons?

SO: Yes, I did for a while. It was kind of interesting. I guess it was on the, I can’t remember which helo-pad it was…somebody’s little piece of concrete and I can’t remember what company it was, but I figured we had a day off from the war every week as long as there were not mass cals or anything truly horrific to keep us there, so I ambled over one day because I had taken a little bit of Tae Kwon Do in the past and I thought, ‘This would be a great place to do it.’ And there was a fellow named Mr. Kim who was offering Tae Kwon Do lessons to all men but me. It was good except that because they were men and I was the only women, people kept pulling their punches when we’d do the stuff where you’re supposed to be kind of punching, counter punching, arranging it so that you could block a punch, that sort of thing. So, that was kind of tough, but I thought I was okay in it. He was very serious, Mr. Kim was, he was a Philco Ford guy I believe which was one of the adjunct companies that took care of a lot of the infrastructure things that we had put in place and he was very severe about, you know, you don’t break the silence when you do this, you don’t talk, you don’t laugh, etc, etc. That was okay with me, it worked pretty well. One day I came home from the hospital actually and walked into the Officers Club which is I had said before was right near my hooch and there was this big bouquet of flowers and I thought, ‘What the hell?’ Somebody, a friend, Frenchie guy was behind the bar said, ‘Oh, that’s for you. A big Korean guy brought that in.’ (Laughing) I looked at it and I said, ‘Oh my god. This could be very bad.’ So, that was my last Tae Kwon Do lesson.

LC: How did you actually cut that off, just by doing nothing?

SO: Yes, I just didn’t go to the lessons anymore. I thought, ‘This is just beyond weird. There’s no way I wanted to have a relationship with this gentlemen. On the other hand, does this mean I’m married?’ (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: You never know.

LC: That’s true.

SO: I mean, their cultural thing, I couldn’t figure it out.
LC: That’s true. Now, you said he was a Philco-Ford employee, but was he
directly from Korea or was he a U.S. citizen or do you know?
SO: As far as I know, he was directly from Korea. If he were a U.S. citizen, I
would’ve assumed he’d spoken better English. He really did not speak English well at
all. A lot of those folks were actually from Korea from what I could gather.
LC: Okay, and what were they doing at Phu Bai or near to Phu Bai? What was
Philco-Ford up to? What contract did they have, do you know?
SO: I know that they worked on things that involved electricity; mechanical
things that went wrong, they would be there to put the stuff back together.
LC: Okay, so auxiliary, but apparently civilian personnel?
SO: Yes, as far as I could tell, they were civilians. I’m pretty sure they were
actually.
LC: Now, also while you were at Phu Bai, you mentioned in the material that you
gave us that you spent some time at an orphanage near Hue. Can you talk a little bit
about that Sue? How did you first come to know that it was there and come to spend
some time up there?
SO: I was looking for something to do once again on my day off and just kind of
hanging out at the ward was not a good option, I wanted to get away and one of the
corpsman, (I can’t remember exactly where he was a corpsman. He wasn’t an operating
room guy; he was on one of the wards.), had visited this place and went kind on a fairly
often, he went fairly often to the thing and said that it was there and that it existed and
maybe the nuns could use a little bit of help. So, I took off with him one day in the little
jeep into Hue in the Kim Long section of Hue which is still kind of slum area, pretty
down trodden, but very handy by foot to the big tower that the seven, I think it’s the
seven layer tower and the ruins of Hue that came from the earlier dynasties. There
tucked away was this little compound of houses, buildings, they weren’t actually houses,
and when they opened the door and we walked in the big gate, there was no grass on the
compound whatsoever, but there were just kids everywhere. It was just amazing of the
number of them of all shapes and sizes. Mostly what we saw were the smaller ones
because the older ones were very often in the…as I found out later, were working in the
little factories. I can’t remember what the boys made, I know that the girls made ao dai
and worked with cloth. This was kind of one of the things that helped keep the place
afloat. I also, as I got to know the place a little bit more, found that there were various
companies, platoons, whatever of soldiers who were supporting them in one way or
another. It looked like the kids for the most part were half-caste Vietnamese and
American-Vietnamese. A couple of Vietnamese and Korean which was an interesting
contrast because they really are quite different and most of the kids were not pure blood
Vietnamese. It was pretty obvious on their faces. Just beautiful kids. It was kind of sad
because they did not have a chance to deal with anything other than the basic needs there.
The nuns were absolutely straight out. It was a French missionary order and they were
very much running around and trying to help kids survive and making up rice with what
looked like scraps of fish in it to feed them and feed the youngest whatever they could in
the way of milk which I believed was gotten somehow from U.S. Personnel. There was a
division of the CAP, I don’t know what that stands for, but these guys were trained in
Vietnamese. They were supposed to actually go into the towns and be Liaisons with the
people there as I understand it from what the one man told me, but this guy whom I met
there who was a member of the CAP said that his little group of interveners as it were,
were actually instrumental in bringing whatever they could through the orphanage as far
as soliciting clothing from abroad from the U.S. and bringing supplies whenever they had
a chance to. So, the kids were provided with the basics, but they were just bereft of
anything, human interaction with anybody older than they were because there were just
too many of them and too few adults.

LC: How many nuns were there, do you have any clue?
SO: No idea. It seemed like a handful. I’d say, just looking at it seemed like
maybe five or six.

LC: Do you know what order it was?
SO: No, you know, to this day, I really should. I know that it’s in French in
Missionary. I should because I sent them a contribution every year, but I sent it in cash.

LC: Okay. Now, is that something you still do?
SO: Yes, I re-met them again when I went back to Vietnam. It was kind of an
oddball thing. We were biking in this biking trip…

LC: And this is was what year Sue?
SO: This is ’99.
LC: Okay.
SO: And I happened to mention too, Paul and I were, my husband and I were out in the Hue Marketplace and decided that we were going to see if we could take a trip out there to find the place and wound up with a couple of cyclo drivers. Cyclos are those things that are like a bicycle with a seat attached on front, not very refined you know, not like what you see if you go say to Berlin.
LC: Right.
SO: And one of the guys pedaling, his particular cyclo was...spoke very good English. He had been a Vietnamese, an ARVN attached to a company of Americans was back when and this is kind of sad. He was waiting around the hotel, Saigon Morin I think it’s called. It wasn’t in Saigon, but that was the name of it in Hue hoping that his former commander, American commander might on the off chance decide to come back to the country and find him there because he lost all his...when he went into reeducation, he lost all his correspondence with the guy, lost his address, he lost even his full name I think. He had it written down and they took his notebooks away. But anyway, the guy, he and the other cyclo driver was assigned one of us to each, said that they knew where to find this place and that yes, it was still an orphanage. I was kind of amazed by that. So, we drove out to Kim Long and sure enough, it was there. It’s just changed drastically, for the better.
LC: Really?
SO: Yes.
LC: Okay. Can you describe the changes?
SO: Yes, now there’s grass where there was kind of a muddy courtyard or a beaten down dust courtyard in the time of year I was there. It was now all green. They had pets that didn’t look like they were planning on eating them.
LC: Right.
SO: They were not those straggly little...they were a couple of very healthy looking pups and a monkey in a cage. The kids just seemed very happy. The nuns had a little bit of leisure time. They could kind of court...court us looking for a bit of a donation I think and also just kind of interested in us and they brought us sherry at like
ten o’clock in the morning that looked like they had homemade it. It was very good, and
told us a bit about, showed us the pins on the chart where the order was. They’re all over
the world.

LC: Okay.

SO: And just generally entertained us and showed us the place. It’s now largely
a hospital for what they call paralytic children. I’m assuming that these are kids, a lot of
them who have cerebral palsy and others who probably have birth defects due to what
debilitating birth defects due to the chemicals still left in the soil I’d say. I would not be
surprised. And they take what appears to be excellent care of them. They are very
loving; they’re very resourceful about the things that they use. They adapt the
equipment. I saw a wheelchair that was rigged with a series of baffles that would keep
somebody’s head up straight without confining them cruelly or anything, also with kind
of a desk welded on the front so that the person would have…and this was not something
that was on the market anywhere. This was something that obviously had been done at
home and done quite well. Anyways, so it was very much a changed place in that it
looked like it wasn’t a situation where these people were foisted upon them by fate. It
was by because they do what they do well.

LC: The contrast between the two times, was it powerful for you to be standing
in the same place again?

SO: It was pretty amazing. I for one thing, would not have recognized. They had
a lot of new, I think there was only…the place where the nuns lived which was another
long building fairly recently painted was the only remaining building from my time
except for the hospital itself which had been vastly redone by the time I had gotten there
and everything was white washed. You know, when I first walked in, I thought it was [a
school with] play equipment and everything. They couldn’t keep play equipment there
before. People tried and they just couldn’t do it.

LC: Because…?

SO: Kids had no idea how to play. It just wasn’t in their vernacular. They were
basically there and they were there to be cared for and they were there because wars
create orphans and you got to put them somewhere and then stuck them in. I had a
feeling at the time, the first time around that a lot of these kids probably were not orphans
in the street sense of the word. If a woman had a child by an American soldier and she
did not somehow get out of her community, get away, get with this person for instance, it
really didn’t bode well for her in a lot of cases I think. I mean, I don’t know first hand,
but I got the impression that a lot of these kids were just kind of left there because their
life depended on it as did the mothers. And, you didn’t see people visiting. I don’t think
they came to visit.

LC: What did you do up there Sue? What did you to do help out?

SO: Well, initially, the object was for me to help feed babies and I was doing that
as much as I could and the first time around, the nuns invited me and another nurse who
had come to lunch and laid out a meal that was interestingly sumptuous and I just felt like
a real creep taking it.

LC: I see, yes.

SO: But of course, it was hospitality, so I didn’t after that when I went there, I
made myself scarce doing lunch hour, kind of walk the environment. I went out and
walked through the Citadel and that sort of thing, but anyway, I started out just doing
anything the nuns would like me to do and usually they just had this enormous number of
babies in cribs and they would give me bottles to feed them and the kids would or
wouldn’t eat. Some of them I think kind of died of failure to thrive eventually. It was a
tough world for them. They had, almost from birth, to decide whether they wanted to
stick around and after that, I would go into the courtyard and I’d just by chance, hug the
kid and the next thing I know, there are kids all over the place just dying to be hugged
and that’s all they wanted to do, is they just came up and they just hugged in one’s and
two’s and three’s and bunches. We just sat with them and talked to them and they
couldn’t speak English and I couldn’t speak Vietnamese god knows. But, they just
needed somebody around and I think I did too. I mean I really did. So, it was kind of
mutually beneficial, but it was a strange sort of thing. It kind of became…you know, in
the morning I’d be the kid feeder and the afternoon; I’d be the kid hugger.

LC: (Laughing) Did you feel like you were making a bit of a difference?

SO: Not really, no. I felt like I was a drop in the bucket. These kids needed love
desperately, but it was something that you couldn’t just do on a one day a week basis.
They needed to be taken in; they needed to be parented. Interestingly, there is...have you read the book, *Ri*?

LC: No.

SO: Oh, you should get that.

LC: Okay.

SO: I’m not sure where you get it. I know you can get it from the author, George Allen, but it was actually set in Cu Chi, the last place I was. It’s all about a corpsman who adopts a child and what he has to go through in order to do it and it’s real. I mean, it’s a nonfiction. It should’ve been reprinted ages ago, but for some reason or another, it’s just lapsed and it’s somewhat out of print.

LC: I’ll make sure that we get a copy of it here.

SO: Yes, you definitely need to.

LC: Yes, it sounds interesting. It sounds like an incredibly experience that you had there, a humbling one.

SO: Yes, very much so. War doesn’t just disrupt the people that are fighting it obviously. I mean, in Vietnam, you walk through and just the stuff in the Black Market and the prices of things, it came home to me just wandering through Saigon one day off that we had really, really screwed up the economy. I mean, that sounds like a no brainer, but really, the economy on the ground, I mean, people in order to eat had to fork out a lot more money than they did before, do big time barter with each other, but it’s all the simplicity of existing in the outback was gone. Everything was just completely subrogated by this weird Black Market economy and this weirdness of all these people with money wandering around and the populous having none and that’s before you can get to the down home human toll of seeing all these orphans and the broken families that that represents and the craziness of hurting people. Another thing on my way to the orphanage, we passed a resettlement camp and that place was awful. It was just so depressing. It was this piece of open dusty land with not a blade of grass on it and there were these shacks that had been slapped up and I remember thinking it was really weird, the choice of material for them in part was kind of uncut sheet metal that had like Coca-Cola on it that somebody had evidently lifted from a coke factory or something or from
the scrap heap behind it which is entirely possible because everything seemed to be reutilized in that country.

LC: Sure.

SO: People knew what they were doing, including weaponry. So, there was this corrugated metal and part commercial metal and what have you, a bunch of shacks standing together and these people just kind of squatted in the dust watching the convoys and watching everybody that comes by on the road and when I asked the driver, (the kid who had kind of gotten me interested in the whole thing), what that was and he said, ‘Well, it’s a resettlement camp and what they do is they’ll bring people in from the countryside where it’s not safe and set them up there.’ And you’d also get some chance to kind of watch them and there’s barbed wire on the top of hurricane fence around the thing. It was just, oh my god, to have gone from presumably, I don’t know, I didn’t witness it myself, but to have gone from living on your own small hard scrabble farm or rice paddy to sitting around in this empty, awful looking desperate place near right at the edge of a big city. It just had to be horrid. I can’t imagine that that won hearts and minds, as they were so commonly thrilled to say.

LC: I was going to ask you if viewing that camp driving by there made you think about the bigger questions that had been of concern to you before you ever enlisted. You know, the questions about U.S. strategy and what are we doing there.

SO: Yes, well, it became pretty obvious from the small things and that was in the great scheme of thing as it was a small thing, but to them, I’m sure it was not. But, that and the orphanage, the fact that when I wandered through the…we were there about a year and a half after the TET Offensive and that had really torn things up in Hue and it had ruined their marketplace, so it was a very provisional marketplace that they working with which is kind of sad because these places, these towns, the marketplace is the heartbeat, so the town itself had a lot of big old beautiful French structures and that, but it also had places that had been ruined that were pretty significant and the Citadel which in Hue is kind of the old city and surprisingly, if you look into the history, it’s not that old. It was maybe a hundred and a half years old if that because it was built by kind of this megalomaniac guy as a monument to himself more than anything. It does include some very old structures, but the thing for the main is not, but it was built magnificently. The
throne room, I remember standing in the throne room and there was literally this
gorgeous throne made of wood, but gilded and all these kind of Chinese style, they’re
kind of a cross between a dog and a dragon. You’ve probably seen the things, if you go
into an antique shop, you’ll see them there. But, enormous in scale, and all these gilded
pillars that the gilt is growing kind of thin on and because of TET, a lot of the stuff, like if
you look at a dragon dog, and it was half split by a shell. The throne itself was pretty
much shattered on its pedestal and once again, it’s not something that you normally think
of that much in war, but the cultural underpinnings of a place, none of that stuff meant to
withstand bombing and mines and that and I don’t care whether it’s the Vietnamese who
did it or us, but the very fact of our being there was the reason that it was there. So, all
this stuff, I cringe when I hear people talk about the damage of war as being, we took out
a building, we had a little collateral damage, that sort of thing. When you’re on the
ground, it’s a lot more than taking out a building and little collateral damages. It’s lives
that are just thrown into total upheaval, if not ended, and its culture shattered and its
economy bereft and its kids left to roam, it’s all very sad. But anyways, the interesting
thing too is in walking around, the first time I went to the orphanage, I went dressed as a
soldier because that’s kind of how we got around and I felt really paranoid because there
were a lot of civilians, supposedly civilian guards, how would I know the difference,
walking around in the black pajamas with weapons over their shoulders really giving me
the hairy eyeball, ‘What are you and why are you here?’ Of course, the fact that I was a
woman in uniform was an oddity in itself, but I think being in the uniform made me very
paranoid, so after that, I just dressed as a civilian whenever I went to the orphanage.

LC: What kind of civilian clothes did you have?
SO: I had a couple of dresses. I had some shorts, primarily that sort of thing.
LC: And you had brought those over or did you get them while you were there?
SO: No, I brought them over. You didn’t bring over much, but we each had a
little something there and that would be the sort of thing I’d wear. I had like a pair of
slacks I’d put on and a shirt and go in that.
LC: And you felt a lot safer?
SO: I did. I felt that I was still a curiosity because I would be. There just weren’t
American women around there, but the hostility and it might just have been me, it really
might’ve because my own attitude had deteriorated in a matter of weeks. It wasn’t great to begin with, but…

LC: Your attitude generally toward the war being over there or…?

SO: Yes, toward the concept of being part of the war, it had really gone to hell, so I’m sure that I supplied a lot of that, my own fear. I just felt better not being associated directly with the Army when I walked around and went to the various tourist places on my lunch hour.

LC: Sue, let me ask you about moving down to Chu Lai. That happened after you had been in country about four months or so and yesterday we talked about the consolidation and close down of the hospital at Phu Bai. You went to Chu Lai more or less on your own, is that right?

SO: Yes, there were other people I’m sure who went and I don’t remember who they were, but I don’t remember any of the nurses who went going there. They might have for all I know.

LC: What was the set up down there? Did it look familiar to you now that you had seen what was going on at Phu Bai? Was it essentially a parallel operation?

SO: No, it was a lot bigger. I don’t know, once again, I have no idea to tell you and Chris Banigan could, but I have no idea how many people were involved in it or anything, but it was a large place. The Officers Quarters alone were actually double-decker. It was a two-story building and I believe I was on one of the top hooches. They were small once again, but there was a balcony. It was kind of weird and the hospital itself was old World War II Quonset huts.

LC: Right.

SO: Which I came to find out they used an awful lot over there.

LC: Right. And as you say, they got recycled later on.

SO: Yes, they went on to other things. (Laughing)

LC: Right. (Laughing)

SO: But they were in abundance and it was several wards large and it was once again, one of two hospitals and I don’t recall ever being at the other one, but the other was busier and at this point in time, I think I came there, well, let’s see, it has the dates, I came in late May to Phu Bai and I came in according to this thing which I would believe
in late August. So, it was three months in the other place. Late August, I ended up in
Chu Lai and there were fairly large compound in general that it served, but there were
two hospitals and one of them had been, the second one was the one that Sharon Ann
Lane had died at; the woman who was actually killed in action as it were. So, of course,
when I found out I was going, everyone was saying, ‘Oh, you’re not going to like that.’
It turns out; it was the other hospital.

LC: Was her death then that was something that people knew about and talked
about at that time?
SO: Oh yes, everybody knew.
LC: Really?
SO: You’d be amazed at how people think in terms of you’re only told selective
things, but that’s not really true. Over there, I got *Time Magazine* over there.

LC: Really?
SO: Every week I got *Time*. I also for a while subscribed to the *New York Times*
because I had at Ft. Sam Houston and there was an overseas edition that they’d send in
and it was not censored none of it was.

LC: Wow.
SO: You could read about, at one point, and it’s funny, I forgotten a lot of that
stuff, but when I was researching some of the story that never appeared in my collection
actually, it was about, it was a riff on ‘Awaiting for Godot.’ It was set in Chu Lai
because you did sit around a lot there just kind of waiting for action and it was deadly to
do that because everybody ended up insisting that you starch your fatigues and stuff like
this that just got very Mickey Mouse, which was poison in a war zone. But any rate, the
‘Waiting for Godot,’ I had people reading things and so I prevailed on my local library,
bless their hearts, and they found me some microfiche of the old *Stars and Stripes*, which
was all distributed over there.

LC: Right.
SO: And you’d be amazed. I mean, the whole Calley thing was in it and I knew
that we knew about that, but I didn’t remember that that actually was in the local
unofficial (supposedly) military organ, the *Stars and the Strips*, but yes, all that stuff was
out there and if it wasn’t officially reported, it was actually unofficially reported or it
came in through Time and Newsweek at that sort of thing.

LC: I just want to clarify; you were getting the New York Times more or less
everyday?

SO: Yes, some days would be like three days late.

LC: You’d get a couple, sure, right. Wow, that’s really…I’d never heard that,
that’s amazing.

SO: Well, it got kind of overwhelming after a while, so I just stopped doing it
because I couldn’t keep up with it, I couldn’t read it, didn’t have the time.

LC: But yet, on the other hand, at some point while you were in Chu Lai, you
were bored out of your mind, is that right?

SO: Oh yes, at Chu Lai, yes. The thing with it was and if I could’ve worked
nights and just spent the day on the beach, I would’ve probably stayed there and there
were night and day shifts at the twelve hour shift thing and one was as active as the other,
which was intermittent, entirely intermittent. There were an awful lot of ARVN,
Vietnamese, South Vietnamese troops that we worked on, there were civilians, relatively
few and I say relatively meaning maybe, it seemed like about half in half, but probably
there was more than that, but U.S. troops were not the main concentration because at that
point in time, we were Vietnamizing the war and I love that term, but that was the official
line that was coming down. They were trying to consolidate, they were trying to
Vietnamize, they were trying to turn everything over at least in theory to the South
Vietnamese. It turns out that was not successful and I think a lot of it was that there was
very little follow through because the U.S. troops that I met for the most part were not
enamored of Vietnamese troops. They didn’t seem to feel that they were that good or
that ambitious or really committed as opposed to say the Montagnards and they dearly
loved. The Montagnards were hated by the standard Vietnamese and still to this day are
looked upon as another race entirely, which they are and not a particularly good one by
the South Vietnamese, but the U.S. had great interest in them and was very pro
Montagnard, but not pro ARVN, not pro South Vietnamese, so for any number of
reasons, it just didn’t work out very well. But, we were right in the middle of it, so we
ended up with a lot of wounded Vietnamese. When we had stuff at all.
LC: Right, and as you said, that was intermittent. When you did have incoming
wounded, were there a lot or was it sporadic?

SO: It was sporadic. There were a couple of times when we actually had quite a
few, but it was just a couple of times. I must’ve stayed there, I think I stayed there about
three months and during that time, I just managed to get into trouble. I was not a good
soldier. I would take off my combat boots to dance in the Officers Club to some of the
tapes that they had, stuff like that. Somehow ran afoul of the head nurse of the whole
operation who really just didn’t like me or something. It was kind of a weird thing. I
never did anything to really directly bug her, but there was the out of uniform thing and
there was also the fact that for a while I was dating an enlisted man who happened to be
working on one of the wards and that was supposedly taboo, but nobody said anything
about it in Vietnam except in Chu Lai. This woman was hung up with stateside things
because she had the time to do that.

LC: What was her rank at that time?

SO: I don’t know. I think she was either a Major or a Lieutenant Colonel.

LC: And did she sort of single you out or was this kind of endemic with her
administrative style? She was just on people’s heads.

SO: Well, I thought it was just me, but you know, years, and years, and years
later, when I mentioned to someone, a guy who had run the 12th Evac, yes, the 12th Evac,
the last one I was at. He said that he had met and dealt with her and that everyone found
her just thoroughly difficult, but I can thank her, I got a couple of stories from her.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Right, it’s when things go wrong that you get a good story
usually.

SO: Yes, I mean, she was the one who did literally put something on my records
saying I should not get a bronze star which everybody in the world got.

LC: Yes, tell me about that. How did you find out that something had been put in
your personnel file?

SO: Oh, I didn’t care one way or the other because I was going to hang in there,
but my husband who worked with papers for the most part because as the registrar, one of
his jobs was to make sure that everyone was evacuated to the correct place, that the
paperwork flowed freely to do that. He was really upset when he found out that I wasn’t getting one because everybody in the world gets one, so he looked into my personnel records somehow. I don’t know if he bribed somebody or what he did because it is supposed to be your own.

LC: Right.

SO: And found out that there was a note on it that I was not to be decorated under any circumstances and it was from this woman. (Laughing)

LC: So, how quickly could you get away from her? Did she leave Chu Lai first or did you?

SO: No, I did. In fact, I asked…it’s almost verbatim, that whole thing. I had a story called Three Minor Love Stories, and one was about the Lieutenant who while not being me, subscribed, but a little too much more intensely than I would to a lot of the same feelings I had. She parallels what happened with me. I was called on the carpet for some dumb thing. I think it was dating an EM, which at that point I wasn’t anymore and the woman kind of stared me down and defied me to defend myself and instead I said, ‘Yes, I want to be transferred. Send me out of here.’ She said, ‘Well, that won’t be necessary.’ I said, ‘Yes, I want it. I want to be transferred to someplace where I would be more useful.’ And she literally said, ‘I’ll send you to the worst hell hole in Vietnam,’ and that’s when she sent me there to Cu Chi.

LC: And she literally said that to you?

SO: Oh yes. Oh yes, she was not one to pull her punches. She’s really a bitch.

She was amazing. (Laughing)

LC: Yes, I’m thinking. (Laughing)

SO: She was amazing. She was the only person, well, besides the guy who ran the 12th Evac whom I had a run in with because my little attempt to go out and do U.S.O on my day off, and then reading the book about the orphan, reading Ri, I had to laugh because the guy who was trying to adopt the orphan ran into basically the same type stuff that’s kind of obstructionist, weird behavior from this guy. It appears that I was not the only one who noticed that he was not comfortable in his command and took it out in strange ways. He was an oddball guy, but any rate, it was kind of a ‘whoa.’ This woman is either out to get me or she is just nuts.
LC: At the time, did it shake you up a little bit?
SO: Oh yes. I grew up with the nuns and I had a real problem with authority. Authority turned around and said I wasn’t doing well, immediately I wasn’t doing well.
LC: Right.
SO: Because the nuns would do the same type thing, so talk about between self-doubt and just general, you know, having your ego crushed.
LC: Yes, that’s exactly right, yes.
SO: Because we were kids. I mean, there were very few of us over twenty-five.
LC: Yes, it took a bit of grit for you to stand there and say, ‘No, I actually mean I want to be transferred.’ I mean, instead of just letting her kind of lash at you for however long.
SO: Well, I’m sure knowing me that I was probably in tears at that point. You know, you put me in a confrontation with an authority figure and immediately I’m there. Once I’m to that stage, once at least in those days, I mean, it doesn’t happen anymore, I should hope at fifty-six I gotten at ease with myself. (Laughing)
LC: Right, right.
SO: But, in those days, once I was in tears, I was virtually empowered to do whatever. Not lash out; I was never that kind of person who would, but to say what it was that I had on my mind.
LC: Because you’d already gone through a certain barrier for yourself.
SO: Yes, I was humiliated enough, so it was irrelevant…
LC: Survival kicked in at some point.
SO: Yes.
LC: Yes. Let me ask you a little bit about your actual OR work and duties there. First of all, tell me a little bit about the sort of non-technical stuff that you had to do. Were you and others like you, the other women who were there and the nursing capacities, were you guys responsible for things like cleaning the instruments, getting everything organized?
SO: Oh sure.
LC: Okay, can you talk a little bit about that?
SO: Yes, and that’s not so far a field in many ways from what you seen as
civilian or at least used to. I haven’t been in one in a while, civilian operating room. The
nurses and the techs were definitely the ones who had to make sure that the instruments
post case were cleaned up and packed for the autoclave where they would be just shoved
through completely intact with the pack round them and everything else, which in those
days, they were getting out of the cloth packs and into the disposable paper. But anyway,
we had to make sure that everything was cleaned up and ready for the next case, but you
couldn’t do that immediately if there were a flood of people coming through. So, what
would happen is you’d take out the pack and you’d set it somewhere and if someone had
time between cases, they would do the tidy up on that. The one thing you absolutely had
to do if you could, would be to clean the table and the room if you could with disinfectant
between cases. If things were very hot and heavy, just essentially it meant cleaning the
table and the light above it so that nothing untoward might fall from it and leaving a lot of
the other stuff for later. That didn’t happen that much and certainly didn’t happen much
in Chu Lai at all. Basically, if you were bored there, it meant that you had done all the
packs that you could do, you had worked with the sterilizing stuff, you had gone through
the instruments to make sure the spare instruments to make sure that the clamps, all their
tips all met and stuff like that, so you didn’t have to throw anything out or have it
realigned and all the rooms were clean and the coffee, god help you in the lounge was
made. It just came down to; there was no more busy work.

LC: Sure.

SO: We were waiting for Godot. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Which is one of my favorites actually. I use that a lot and people
look at me, ‘What in the hell are you talking about?’ Anyway, obscure reference, yes.

What about the blood supply? How was that organized?

SO: I’m not really sure. We were users, but we weren’t the people who instituted
the stuff. I just know that blood that was given was not for the most part typed. It was all
O positive, low titer and the low titer I guess refers to whatever it was that they could do
to keep…you know, if you have a positive in the blood supply, you automatically have a
potential for screwing up with someone, the rare person you get who might be negative.

LC: Yes.
SO: You could literally kill somebody with that, but there was something in the processing that lowered that ability for that to be an irritant and O being the universal donor, ideally, people would be donating O Negative, but O Negative’s a rare blood type because of the negative. O Positive is a vastly known, large, easy to find blood type and it was sent it in just tons over there.

LC: Really?

SO: Yes. Like that first story in my collections as it’s printed was about an incident that had happened in Phu Bai and that is probably as close to being absolutely true with the change of names and kind of an invention of character, the main character who’s actually spoken to. You know, the character is speaking, the character spoken to are invented, but everything that happened there, happened there and you would literally go through, if you had a badly bleeding case, you could go through nearly a cooler of blood bags. I think in that case, I was just amazed to find we gave him I think conservatively over twenty packs of blood. You know, just squeezed them into him. At that point, you’re at serious danger for clotting problems anyway and you might bleed out, so your own ability to clot kind of goes out the window or gets tougher every time you get another bag of blood. But it happened fairly frequently there and they used a blood cuff, which is a situation, it looks like a blood pressure cuff that kind of goes around the blood bag and they hang the thing and you squeeze it and it literally pushes the blood into the veins as fast as it could go. And in most cases unlike the states where you warm it up and you try to get it to the point where it was pretty much body temperature before you put it in to minimize the trauma; in the cases over there, you would never have much of a chance to if somebody was bleeding out badly to even warm the blood. It was just a really slap up operation. The wonder to me is that so many guys survived all that sort of thing because if you did that stateside, you’d have a lawsuit at every turn. What happens once you transfuse somebody with the blood that is not really their type and they get into another accident and have to have another transfusion back stateside, I’m not quite sure. I think probably that would be very tough on them. I think their body would not appreciate that tremendously because of the number of immune cells and what have you and factors that it’s had to put out in order to deal with what it is you gave them to begin with.
LC: But at that time, a lot of this…
SO: Yes, we saved lives with it. I mean, there’s no doubt about that at all.
LC: Right, right. And much of the refinements of hematology hadn’t really been reached yet.
SO: Back stateside, a lot of them had, but in a war zone, you had to kind of disregard a lot of that. You couldn’t go out looking for the right donors, you didn’t have time to type and cross match in some instances and that was another thing that this expedited; you didn’t have a chance to do much about reading the bracelet and making sure that…I mean, you do like three separate checks to make sure that the blood is the compatible blood and it’s exactly what’s ordered for this patient. Well, in that case, you got patients lined up in the operating rooms and some waiting to go in and the object is just to keep them alive, so you don’t have time for all the refinements to use to refine once it exists and that was very much the case where it came to, to transfuse them.
LC: Sue, what was a train wreck pack?
SO: A train wreck pack was a, they said when you wrap things up, you wrap things up in a big cloth or a disposable thing depending on what you happen to have on you and then autoclave it all together. And you often would do that anticipating certain things like if you had an amputation and it was just an amputation, you’d have an amputation pack and that would have curlex roles of gauze and it would have kind of fuzzy gauze that you could put directly on the open wound because you didn’t close them immediately and it would have an ace bandage that you could wrap around the outside. Well, a train wreck pack, you know, the vernacular of the war of course, that kind of black humor thing was basically what you might have used, had somebody come out of a train wreck and you had to staunch blood blow in several directions, you had to do internal wounds, you had to do external wounds, so it had just a huge conglomerate. They were quite large. It had a big variety of things that were a lot of, what they call ABD pads which are big multilayered square pads that you put on top of the abdominal wound once you’ve closed it, hence the ABD and it had a lot of the fuzzier packing, the things that you could fuzz up and stick in an open wounds and then it had curlex to wrap things around and I can’t remember whether it included Ace bandages or not. That
might’ve come separately, but it was just a massive amount of gauze to contend with
almost anything that you could find in the way of multiple, multiple messy wounds.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit about the types of wounds that you encountered and we don’t have to spend a lot of time on this if you don’t like to.

SO: No, not a problem.

LC: But I’d like to ask you about what you observed in the way of the impact of booby traps, land mines, that kind of thing, grenades. Can you talk about the sorts of injuries that you saw inflicted by those weapons?

SO: Yes, okay. Mines were usually what brought us our amputations or potential amputations. Those were really, really nasty things. There was a species of mine, they called a bouncing betty that actually, I guess if you stepped on it, it triggered something that would bring the thing out of the ground and it would hit at kind of a midlevel so that, you know, as I talked about before, the idea of being to debilitate people rather than kill them. What it would do is it would hit you so you’d get abdominal fragments, you’d get leg damage, you might get some major artery damage that someone would have tend to immediately in order to keep you from bleeding out. The genitals were generally part of the target area, so some of these guys that we got in were just a mess and they’d be in a double amputee, they’d have genitals problems where pieces of them would be missing and they’d have abdominal fragments that you had to go in. It really, really tied up the space and tied up the personnel, which once again was the object of it all. These guys I often wondered how they adapted when they got back because they’re in so many cases that was so much missing and it was just so freaking painful. I mean, these guys would be screaming, when they were conscious, they would be screaming for morphine, plus add to that the shock; the pain, the shock of looking and seeing that the bed where the covers are over you are flat beyond your knees or even higher. It just had to be awful.

So, we did get a number of those. We got, as I said before, an awful lot of just fragment wounds which could be grenade, could be mine, could be rocket propel grenade, it could be almost anything and that was the ones that would break up and they’d send the little fragments through and you’d be picking up metal fragments, but you’d also be picking up bone fragments because the object was to shatter the bone and make it its own missile so that you increased the damage in the wound and it was just nasty stuff. That was a lot of
More times than I’ve even cared to think of, someone would come in with a really nasty wound, say in their thigh and it would involve, though things looked like the leg was in tact, it would involve, say the femoral artery and there was no way to save it, so the leg would have to go below that point. And these were the guys who they’d come in with a leg and they’d leave without one. There were a lot of situations. The thing that stands out in my mind and when I went back on bike, what really came home to me was the amount of the red clay that was so prevalent all over Vietnam. It would gum up and it was this very tacitly kind of…it had a grind to it. It was granular, granular but clingy and that would be in the wounds. So, you had to wash them out and then once you got all the crap out of them from just the clay and the junk and the bits of vegetation or whatever they happened to be among that was in it when you got right down to the other pieces of armature that were in it. That was just awful stuff. And then we had some relatively easy things. I remember that we did work on a child in utero once and that was a matter of a fragment. I believe the baby lived and mother obviously lived, but the baby was too young to deliver, so literally I recalled that the fragment was removed, the woman was sewed up again and I don’t know what happened when delivery time came.

LC: Wow.

SO: I remember her particularly because I ended up at her head working on a…you know, trying to do some relatively fine work on her eyelid and we had a plastic surgeon in our group and he kind of looked at my job and he said, ‘You know, that’s not going to work. She’s not going to be able close that completely’, so he went over and made it work a little better while I stuck to debriding which is fine. I was never a plastic surgeon.

LC: Right, but it sounds like you made a brave effort.

SO: Yes. But anyways, so she had multiple frag wounds, nothing that was damaging in itself in a tissue sort of way. Her debridement opportunities were relatively small. She had a few holes in her as it were, but she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was a lot of that. We really did take in a lot of civilians and a lot of them were literally right in the wrong place at the wrong time, but back to the wound styles. The more unpredictable because it looked more innocuous thing was the bullet wound and we’d get those now and then, of course, along with everything else. It seemed like
the others were more predominant, but we would get those. And that once again was a matter of the tiny little entrance wound and the huge deficit in back, so if you got somebody with a belly wound, you know, we actually had guys who sutured and worked on say the aorta who did kind of a heart surgery sort of thing on a beating heart because there was no way...we certainly didn’t have a setup for anything other than a beating heart. A lot of abdominal surgery which was always dicey over there because you had to kind of walk through the entire abdomen and make sure that there were no fragments that were lodged because a person could end up with a nasty infection. If there happened to be a hole in an intestine where you haven’t really seen it or you hadn’t noticed it, so that was always quite harrowing if you found fragments or wounding to the intestines because the potentials there for peritonitis. It’s like being in a busy ER in a city where everybody’s always blowing each other away. It was just a constant sort of thing, when it was constant, which was not in Chu Lai.

LC: Right.

SO: And it kept you busy, but it also gave you a certain respect, a grudging respect for folks who designed weaponry because they certainly did a good job in making it a very difficult thing to do. You weren’t dealing with your cannonball and your shot that came out and dulled the forest with all the smoke and that sort of thing. We’re talking a pretty sophisticated, very ugly nasty stuff.

LC: Sue, there’s one other area that I wonder if you feel like talking about and that’s burn casualties which I know is extremely difficult to treat, it’s horrendous injuries, you know, the potential for that?

SO: Yes, I can. I don’t know what to tell you about it,

LC: Just for a minute or two. Well, specifically, did you encounter napalm burns at all?

SO: Oh yes. The problem with napalm is that when you drop it, if the wind shifts, there’s really no telling where it’s going to go.

LC: Right.

SO: It was more than once, we would get in members of a platoon who had run afoul of napalm that was dropped and suffered a wind shift or something of that sort and ended up getting our people instead of their people or their forest or whatever the hell we
were aiming for and it was very nasty because it would stick to you. Being the gel sort of thing it was and you could actually find sometimes if you were to strip off a burned shirt or something, you could see where the buttons were and you could see where the cuffs were and stuff like that on someone because where the lines were, it would burn into them, where the seams were, would burn into them. It was just awful, awful stuff and the real pity about this I think in some ways is that a lot of these guys would come in and civilians too because when napalm dropped, it’s not a precision instrument. But the people would come in often quite sensate. I mean, they’d be talking to you and they would be alert, they would be in pain or maybe not in as much as they should’ve been because the burning was more…they’d gone past the nerve endings which was really awful because of the ramifications of that. And they’d come in and they would be speaking and that, but the object was to get them as stabilized as possible and we would take them in, we would debride the wounds as much as possible. In some cases and some relatively minor cases, I think we had done a little very rudimentary grafting of skin to kind of try to cover areas before we sent somebody out, but as soon as they possibly could, they would evac these guys up and I think that Japan got most of the really severe burns and from there, they would end up in a place like Ft. Sam Houston where they were experts at it. But depending on the amount of burns over a body, the chances of survival are just tremendously less. The more you’re burned, the less chance you’re going to have of making it, not because of the burns themselves, but because skin contrary to what people think is actually an organ in itself and among its very complex features is the simple protection of using god knows whatever barriers that are built in to keep infection from the body, because everyday you and I walk through the world and are pelted by potentials for infection and a lot of foreign stuff and there are a lot of things that live on our skin that would given the opportunity, an opportunistic sort of thing, they would kind of take over and do you in. But the skin in its efficiency takes care of that. It keeps itself clean, it provides a barrier, and it provides a very complex barrier. Well, once you take that away, you fall prey to the whole potential of not just what’s out there that is normally dangerous, but what you normally carry with you and that’s like pseudomonas infections, very common after a couple of days of dealing with a burn and it’s an opportunistic
infection. It’s something you would carry around anyway and it’s present in the air and it’s there and that’s life.

LC: That’s normally regulated somehow.

SO: Right, none of us are going to experience it unless you happen to break that barrier. So, a lot of these guys would die from eventually out of our sight from infections, some of them would die from fluid imbalance because once again, the skin, part of its thing is the osmotic type of action in that it keeps the fluids that are in your body in a regulatory mode, it helps. And once that’s gone, you’re kind of left with, how do you keep the proper balance of things because it’s going to weep out and you’ll lose from certain vessels, you’ll lose this nutrient, you’ll lose that one, so forth. So, death from a burn is a particularly nasty, nasty thing because it’s always something secondary, it’s always something that you try very hard with the technology you have to equalize, but there’s only so much you can do once you pass the certain percentage of body burn. So, the heartbreak there was often knowing that this person, though they look to be in pretty good shape, if they survived, which was a big if, would be scarred for life, would have to go through a ton of PT no matter what they did operation wise to get function back because once again, the skin, once it’s stiffened with scar tissue it kind of holds everything else in check and you can’t use your muscles without breaking that scar because it’s inflexible as opposed to what the skin itself is. So, the ramifications beyond the mere first strike stuff we did in the operating room were just very sobering on that and I was always glad that I wasn’t working on a burn ward; I wasn’t up in Japan dealing with what happens with this after because it has to be about the nastiest thing that can happen to you.

LC: Did you spend much time or anytime thinking about cases that you had worked on in the OR and that you never saw again?

SO: To some extent; there’s a certain protection in not knowing who these people are because you don’t get the emotional investment, but there’s also a real curiosity. I mean, I’ve gone to the wall a few times because I’ve been in D.C both for the book purposes and also just because we’ve been in D.C. You know, I spent time in there as a stage mother for my youngest and the wall is unavoidable and strangely comforting in some ways, but it also is kind of a ghostly thing for me because I know that some of the
people on there have passed beneath my fingers as it were and I have no idea who they were, I don’t have a name for these folks. I don’t remember them clearly, only certain cases and a lot of the holes and the gaps and spaces in my memory I’m sure have to do with individual patients and individual cases that I saw and very likely they’re the same ones that are up there and yet I can’t claim to touching a name and saying, ‘Oh, I knew this person and this is very sad, but this is a certain form of closure.’ So, there is that haunting piece of it. At the time, it’s kind of weird. One of the things that really helped me vent was that I was still…I dragged my guitar with me so I still had my three chords, singing at the top of my lungs.

LC: I was going to ask you about that. You brought this guitar over with you I take it?

SO: Yes.

LC: Okay, so this is the guitar that you’ve had all along?

SO: Yes, it’s the one I got; well actually, I bought it in Ft. Wayne where I grew up.

LC: Okay. And you had this with you and how did it help you? How did you use it?

SO: Every now and then, and a couple of times a week at least whenever I got a chance, a little time off, I’d get off a twelve hour shift and there is nothing further, I’d drag my guitar over to someplace where it wasn’t likely that I’d be heard and it might be on the edge of the helipad on a busy day or it might be a hooch that was kind of outlying to the rest of the area and it was mostly used to store stuff in or something like that, and I’d just sing at the top of my lungs and beat the hell out of the guitar and that helped. I also found, it was kind of a weird thing, but probably on a basis of at least once a week, things would build up to the point where I would just want to cry and then I’d go out to the helipad, once again, find a corner of it and just cry my eyes out and it might not be any specific thing that was bothering me, it was just like things would build up, it was just bizarre. But at the end of it, I’d always feel like shit because my contact lenses which at the time were those awful things. The things would be glued to my eyes and I would be, you know how you feel after you’ve cried for no real good reason, they say, people will tell you, well, it’s great. It gets it all out, but it doesn’t, it just makes you tired
and makes you weary and stuff, but I think in the long run, it was helpful. I am once
again one of those people who will stand back and intellectualize, but it’s going to hit you
sooner or later. When it does, it will be an oddball time when you actually have the time
to think about things or you have the time to let the emotion exclusive of thoughts in
many cases just kind of overwhelm you. So, that was an out for me. Thank heavens, I
mean, I think it’s been very helpful, so both the planned yelling and the singing at the top
of my lungs and the unplanned, but rather overwhelming giving into crying I think helped
keep me on a keel somehow. Plus I was just so angry, I was just so angry at what was
happening all the way around and I think that might be a healthy thing to do in the war, to
be angry about such things. I don’t know.

LC: Well, it wont surprise you to hear that men that I’ve talked to you in combat
situations and stuff, talked about doing the same thing, just screaming.

SO: Yes.

LC: It was like the one time they could.

SO: Right.

LC: And on some level, it felt good, although, of course again, it’s coming from
somewhere that’s angry and bad.

SO: Yes, but there’s a certain acknowledgement of it there and you can’t
officially acknowledge it when you’re working. God knows, you don’t have time to kind
of take time out and drop a tear or two, it doesn’t happen. You’re just in a complete
adrenaline mode. I really think that someday somebody’s going to figure that the
adrenaline itself, the constant, you know; it’s on, it’s off, it’s on, it’s off that comes in a
war situation has to be an unhealthy sort of thing. I mean, if you were hunting as an
ancient tribe, you probably had a build up of it and you knew what you were doing and
stuff like that, but to have yourself taken by surprise on a fairly regular basis in a world
where we’re not that primitive anymore, yes, it can’t be too good.

LC: Sue, let me ask you about another piece of this kind of end of things and that
has to do with drinking and taking drugs and smoking marijuana and all that, did you
observe much of that?

SO: (Laughing) Did it and observed it.
LC: Did it and observed it, okay. Well, I thought I’d be diplomatic and start with
observation.
SO: That’s very tender of you. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
SO: No, actually, drink was, god, you know, it’s kind of the sanctioned thing and
sanctions one of those funny words that both means against and for it. If you think about
it, it’s kind of weird.
LC: Yes, that’s true, that’s true.
SO: But at any rate, it was the one kind of official outlet that you have to drink
yourself out of your mind and booze was extremely cheap. I mean, ridiculously cheap,
like twenty cents for a Chivas Regal or something like that. I mean, I’m just quoting that
off the top of my head, but it was absurdly cheap and absurdly available, any kind. You
might not be able to find the kind of stitches you want in the operating room, but you
could certainly find whatever ramifications, whatever variation on the theme you wanted
for a drink.
LC: Wow, yes.
SO: So, yes, we drank quite a bit in general. I drank, when I was at Phu Bai, I’d
find myself when I came back from a full day, I’d be sitting there and I’d have four
doubles of Chivas at that time, it was priciest Scotch, which I now can’t stand and I’m a
small person and I don’t have a lot of body weight, but it wasn’t really affecting me and
that’s what really drew me up and oh my god, look at what I’m drinking, I don’t drink
that much. On a good day, I might have a beer. I mean, it’s just not me and here I am
downing this stuff, pounding it down and it’s not making any difference in how I feel.
So, I started kind of cutting back on that thinking that this is a very unhealthy thing; I’m
turning into an alcoholic over here, that’s not really my motives at all. And I slipped
back and I got to the point where I basically drank when I was at parties and I’d smoke
pot if it was available and being passed around, but that stuff was kind of scary because
unlike what’s out there today here, which is pretty powerful stuff, what was in the states
was not that powerful by comparison and this stuff was dynamite. So, you’d be sitting
there and smoking and your brain would start to crawl out your ear. It was not good. So,
I really didn’t do much of that because it made me very depressed when I smoked pot, so
I do it if it was around and somebody was passing it about, which was pretty frequently, I might have a toke, but I wasn’t really into it. It was not my drug of choice, booze much more was.

LC: But it was a group thing. I mean, for smoking marijuana, you’d it or there would be people doing it kind of together.

SO: Oh yes. It was always the case that I saw with marijuana, but I do know that there were people who actually smoked it on their own of course and even as there were people who drank by themselves in their hooches and stuff. I mean, it was just done and I know for a fact that we actually had people operating on folks, doctors who had had a few before they went in. I never saw a competent doctor operate incompetently.

LC: Okay.

SO: We had a couple of doctors who I think pushed the competency thing, but…

LC: But that was on their own without pharmaceutical…

SO: Yes, you didn’t need anything. Those guys might even be teetotalers you know.

LC: Right, exactly. Let me ask you about something that you mentioned in the material that you gave us about a distribution house in Chu Lai. Do you know anything about that place?

SO: Yes.

LC: How did it work, do you know?

SO: It was just a marine barrack and it was informally known as Alice’s Restaurant for the song of course, ‘You can get anything you wanted at Alice’s Restaurant’ and you could literally get anything there. It was right on the beach, not far from the U.S.O and some of the guys I think were assigned to the U.S.O who were there, they had kind of a weird habit of they’d pull a guy out of the war after…a marine out of the war and after six months of duty, of really awful duty and then they’d stick him in the U.S.O.

LC: Yes.

SO: (Coughing) Doing scout work there to make sure that the place stayed clean or bartending, whatever. So, what these guys actually did for the most part, I don’t know, but they were a very efficient delivery system. If you wanted anything at all, all you had
to do is contact somebody. I actually remember waking up under a picnic table once
right outside of Alice’s Restaurant. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: And it was just a matter, all I had had was I’d been drinking and I had some
pot, but the stuff was incredible and it was just whacked and I had started out with guys
there and I woke up by myself under the picnic table. Presumably they were lying
around somewhere else.

LC: Wow.

SO: Whatever you really ‘needed’, if you really needed any of that stuff and
needed being in quotes, it was available and I have no doubt but that there were other
places, every compound had probably had somebody who could do it. Of course, it was
not officially a place.

LC: Oh no, right, right, absolutely not.

SO: No.

LC: You also mentioned and I’m sure this is a one off, but it may be an item of
interest that at some point, I don’t know whether in Chu Lai or somewhere else, there was
some abuse of the anesthesia.

SO: Yes, there was actually and it’s funny, I remember an OR tech who was kind
of this spunky little kid actually being found on the or table. I remember him as having
lived through it. Someone else remembers his having died, someone else who was there
at the time I was. Which of us is right, I don’t know. I could’ve sworn that I remember
him being awakened on the table and being really disoriented and walking off.

Somebody over there who was not with me who was from a whole different place did die
and it was well publicized that he had among…you know, you wouldn’t hear it on the
radio or anything, it wasn’t AFVN, but everyone knew about it because you knew about
everything that happened in a medical facility. It just got around. And he had died from
doing what this guy had done which is really dumb, and that was you can get a buzz I
guess from the anesthesia. They used a lot of, well, they used different types of things,
but you could turn on whichever your drug of choice was, but if you didn’t turn on the
oxygen and blend it with it, you’d end up getting that and just your laughing gas, it’d be
like the ‘Little Shop of Horrors’, you’d end up suffocating yourself because you don’t
have the oxygen going and the oxygen in your blood is being replaced by the ions of the
anesthesia which is what it’s supposed to do, but there’s no oxygen at all to help carry
you. So, your laughing gas, you’d be dead if somebody didn’t intervene. As I say, I
remember someone having intervened with this kid, but somebody else remembers him
dying so.

LC: Was this somebody who had problems that were obvious or apparent before
hand or?

SO: No more than anybody else. He was a little younger than he was supposed
to be, not in terms of actual age, but in terms of the way he acted. He acted very young
and I know he used a lot of drugs. I patterned one of the people in one of my stories after
him very much so, but he was an okay kid, he was just kind of a harsh little character and
I was kind of surprised at him. I was not surprised that he would abuse anesthesia, but I
was kind of surprised to see him in the OR because it was not sort of thing that I
would’ve expected, he was smarter than that.

LC: Well, let’s change tact a little bit anyway and I want to ask you for a moment
about the U.S.O. I gather that you had a chance to go to a couple of shows?

SO: Yes, I found this guy in the Officers Club in Cu Chi who was doing coin
tricks. Once again, there’s very much something taken from that on one of my stories,
although, I’m not certainly not that young woman in the story.

LC: Okay. (Laughing)

SO: Although I did, it’s taken from having done what I did, but…

LC: Just not in the same sequence as in…?

SO: Well, no, I never fell in love with the magician or anything like that; had
kind of an oddball character, but his name was Marty Lactman. He had done some magic
on one of the, whatever the tonight show at the time was, I think it was probably Johnny
Carson rather than Jack Parr, but he ended up being drafted and was about to be sent off
to the infantry, but got himself a gig at the U.S.O when he let the folks know that he
actually had this skill because they needed the entertainers. So, he was over there doing
that and that was his…though he was attached to one of the standard brigades, he was
actually an entertainer, and we got into talking about the fact that I used to sing and stuff
and I had done coffee houses and he said, ‘Hey, when you get a day off, why don’t you
come out to the field with me?’ And I thought, ‘Wow, that would be really cool. It’d be a great way to spend my time.’ I didn’t seem to have a whole lot going on my day off in Cu Chi. I had done a couple of medCAP things, but that wasn’t much of any big deal.

So, I took off with him because supposedly our time was our own on our day off and brought my guitar and put on my little miniskirt, which was about the only skirt I had and went out to the firebases and we did a show. We went to a couple of the different firebases. It was kind of surreal. I mean, here we were dropped into this little area and next thing I know, we’re singing and I’m playing his assistant or something like that and it was kind of a fun thing. It was fun sitting around afterwards when the guys were eating their stuff from their mess kits and that and just talking with them. They hadn’t seen a girl in a while, so they wanted to sit and talk and it was kind of a sisterly type thing.

LC: Sure, did they have any idea…I’m sorry Sue, did they have any idea that you were a nurse?

SO: Well, we talked about who I was and I explained to them that I was. That was good because most of them had a pretty healthy respect for us because a lot of them had seen us.

LC: Yes, yes, absolutely.

SO: But, anyway, so I came back to find that news of my having gone there had spread because a guy had taken a picture of me and Marty at work at one of the firebases and it turned up as a picture in the *Stars and Stripes*, and I got called in on the carpet by the Commanding Officer who bitched me up and down and sideways about how he didn’t want to have to worry about whether his nurses, even on their day off would get killed because it would be terrible publicity. And that was essentially how he couched it.

LC: That’s nice. (Laughing)

SO: Yes, thank you very much. So, I of course cried because there I was, authority figure and that kind of took him back a peg, but then I also mentioned that I had been asked to do a show, what’d they call them, the local army radio station and the TV station, which there actually was one, I really don’t know who watched those. I mean, we occasionally would see them, but we were usually too busy to do that. They played all repeats anyway, we’d see laugh-in and stuff like that; it was kind of weird. You talk about surreal. But they did these little spots where entertainers from the U.S.O and that
would do a song and it’d just be a little two minute spot, so that’s how that thing came
about in the story because I did go to Saigon to do a recording of ‘Leaving on a Jet Plane’
to use for that. It was kind of fun. I got a chance to go out and see the nightclub scene,
which was particularly interesting because at that point, it’s kind of like karaoke does
now. You know, one person would get up and it’d be the same guy every night I was
told, his specialty might be a GI was singing ‘Autumn Leaves’ and there really was a guy
who did that and every night he’d get up and he’d sing ‘Autumn Leaves’ in French in this
place. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: And then there would be a girl who would get up and do something, a
Vietnamese girl would get up and do some dance or something like that, so it was kind of
a very funky weird place. But yes, so I did have that pleasure of going out and doing
that, but like every other story, it was a, ‘What if’ type thing.

LC: Well, did you ever see the tape that was made?

SO: Yes, actually, I did see it. I was in the hooch at some point; we did have a
little TV. I don’t know why we had a little TV, nobody watched it much, but people
would keep it on. There was kind of a common kitchen area in our hooch. Those were
the ones in Cu Chi were supposedly air conditioned except that they kept the Philco Ford
guys and the folks who repaired, it kept switching out pieces because the air conditioning
was pretty faulty in the hooch for the ones who were higher up than we were, the majors
and what not. It would seem that our air conditioning would get cannibalized for theirs.
So, we had these kind of closed in places that had just very small screening up by the
eaves that we lived in, but it was in a common hooch, so there would be off…each little
tiny room almost of a monastic cell would be off a corridor that was relatively short.
There were only like a half dozen rooms or something like that in each one or I think
there might have been a little bit more, maybe eight or ten. And they’d be off a corridor
and at the head of the corridor before you went into the shower room, which there
actually was one, not necessarily always warm, there was a little tiny kitchen and it had a
table in there. On the table there was this little TV and I remember actually seeing it on
that and a bunch of us laughing about the fact that it was there.
LC: Did you think, I mean, you might’ve been laughing, but did you think, ‘Eh, not bad?’ Did you think it was all right?
SO: I thought it was okay. I thought it was kind of surreal and weird.
LC: Yes I’m sure.
SO: Other than that, it was an interesting thing to have done. I only did it basically to get a chance to go into Saigon and actually see the nightlife such as the nightlife was. There was only a couple of days that they allowed me anyway.
LC: Sue, did you actually go to U.S.O shows one or two that you found objectionable in some way?
SO: It was unavoidable to find the U.S.O shows. I mean, they came in and they’d be in the middle of a compound or they’d be in, depending on the weather, they might be in a room and you’d go in and with the object of being entertained and sometimes it was very good stuff. I mean, they had a couple of folk singers who traveled, do a lot of Simon and Garfield stuff and there would be bands where they’d come in and there’d be some girl doing the ‘Girl from Ipanema’ of course because that was kind of one of the ones at the time. You know, somebody had the very sweet little semi atonal little voice was hired specifically for that and then there were the dancing shows and these were kind of big deals. The first one I saw, which I thought it was horrible. I was in Phu Bai and they brought the thing in and it started out with a girl band. They appeared to be Korean I think. I think everybody was. They started with Beatles hits and they were pretty good and then that would kind of devolve into maybe three young women would do a traditional Korean dance in full regalia in these very heavy traditional outfits and that was kind of interesting. A little weird, but kind of interesting. And then the one, two of them would go off and they would leave one to strip to ‘House of the Rising Sun’ and it was really a gross strip. I mean, I wasn’t one who ever watched a strip show before and there she was humping this piece of cloth, this scarf. And you know, ‘Oh my god, this is just awful.’ Well, the next time I saw a show that was billed to be the same type thing right down to the whole, it was different people, but they were doing the same damn thing and by the time they got to the ‘House of the Rising Sun’ it was like, been there, done that and I realized why some of these guys instead of panting after this
woman were sitting there kind of chatting with each other and playing cards and stuff like that. (Laughing)

LC: Because they were over it as well.

SO: Because they had seen it three or four times, they’ve been in country long enough. They developed this theory that somewhere, god knows where, maybe in Okinawa, there was a big gymnasium where they auditioned these people and they taught them all the same dance and stuff and then sent them on their way. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) That’s a horrible thought isn’t it?

SO: It kind of was. Then there was the Bob Hope show, which was kind of the same thing.

LC: Did you actually see a Bob Hope show?

SO: Yes I did see a Bob Hope show and I felt very uncomfortable in it.

LC: Why’s that?

SO: In fact, I just wrote a letter to Mother Jones because there was a thing in their issue about Al Franken and traveling with a troop and it sounds like it’s almost business as usual. You know, its you and me need not apply.

LC: Really?

SO: Well, it was meant to entertain the troops and the troops as they saw it were men and everything was just uncomfortably enough off color. It probably wouldn’t have been if it were just us, but the fact that it would be one woman sitting with seven hundred men and Connie Stevens is there braless under her little clingy outfit singing something very sexy and Miss World is being regaled by Bob Hope, but with off colored jokes that she doesn’t understand and stuff. The only thing that I found totally non-embarrassing about it was that Neil Armstrong came with them and he was kind of fun.

LC: Really?

SO: He was very earnest. He looked very misplaced in the whole scheme of things among the Gold Diggers [the Gold Diggers were Hope’s dance troupe] and all that stuff. We got to ask him some questions and that. It was kind of neat.

LC: When did you see this show? Do you know where you were?

SO: Yes, I was in Cu Chi at the time. It was on the 25th Division Campus and those of us who weren’t working that day ended up there and I guess they tell me that the
performers came afterward to the hospital and that was very nice of them, so I really
shouldn’t be quite so nasty about the show.

LC: Well that’s all right. You feel what you feel at the time.

SO: Yes, yes.

LC: And it clearly was designed for young men in a certain situation and you
were neither a young man nor were you actually in the same situation they were in.

SO: No, and I don’t even know, you know, when I look at it, I don’t know how
helpful it is for a bunch of horny GIs to get a show that’s pitched at the gonads as it were
and with stars and stuff, is that good? Because it’s like a petting zoo; you can look, but
you…well, not even that, you can’t touch. So I don’t know what good that does, but
that’s years of entertainment have been exactly that, so who the hell knows.

LC: Well, I mean, you’re sitting in the crowd, did anything untoward come at
you after this?

SO: Well, there were a lot of remarks of course, but in those days, that wasn’t
sexual harassment because it was just kind of you live with it, you’re over there with all
these guys, that’s the way it works.

LC: What was your defense mechanism against that stuff?

SO: You would politely laugh, you would be part of the crowd and hip enough to
understand that this was entertainment and yes, gee, maybe it was funny, but it really
wasn’t terribly.

LC: Did it make you angry at all?

SO: No, not so much angry; I just felt embarrassed. I was hoping to be
entertained by something that was just kind of a fun variety-entertaining thing like we
had been kind of trained to expect Bob Hope to be and as it turns out, you know, it
wasn’t. It was, but the overtones were very sexual. And when you’re one woman among
all those men, you tend to take a lot of that to heart. The guys probably didn’t even
notice that so much how sexually slanted the thing was and how much testosterone was
floating in the air, but as a woman there, you notice that stuff.

LC: Absolutely.

SO: You really do because it has certain direct ramifications. You know, all of a
sudden it’s the fact of your sex which is there enormously anyway and yet you try as a
woman dealing with this sort of thing everyday, you try very hard not to be the sexual object that you just by extension of the fact of your being there are. So, it was very awkward. I felt awkward about it. I did get to wave and see if I could wave to my parents. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: It’s basically the reason you go.

LC: Right, right. Did your parents see you?

SO: No. There’s such a huge crowd, it would’ve been impossible.

LC: Sure of course. Were they writing back and forth to you?

SO: Yes. A lot of times, it wasn’t letters, it was tapes because that was kind of…it was the same type deal; you could send them for the amount that you’d send a letter. So, people often communicated that way. It was a lot quicker.

LC: Sure.

SO: Modern age, duh.

LC: What happened with those tapes? Did you send tapes back?

SO: Oh yes. You’d generally tape over the same thing. I had a little player. You could get electronic supplies over there quite easily through your local PX or through something called Paycex, I think which was a catalog, kind of a Catalog-PX as it were, that you sent stuff away, you’d send away for stuff, it would come at you in a matter of a week or so. So, we all had electronic equipment. We all had reel-reel tape recorders, but mostly what you sent was cassettes and so we would inevitably bounce the tapes back and forth and I have to admit that I was pretty awful about…I’d sit out where it was noisiest and you could actually here the outgoing rounds and stuff so that my parents would understand that this was a situation where there really was a war going on over here.

LC: You did this deliberately?

SO: Yes. I deliberately made it sound more dangerous than it actually felt.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) And was this part of your, just who you are Sue?

SO: Oh yes.

LC: Okay, and did they understand that or were they freaked out?
SO: Um, I don’t know, they never told me.

LC: Oh okay.

SO: They’re from Indiana, they don’t tell you much.

LC: I’m sure, right, right; I know that. Well, from one potentially or certainly
awkward area to another, I want to ask you a little bit about any observations you might
have made on race relations. You were there ’69 to ’70…

SO: Yes.

LC: That’s a pretty heavy time for race relations in the states and also within
Vietnam generally and I wonder if you observed any issues either between Whites and
African-Americans or between Whites and Hispanics?

SO: Mostly, it was a matter of Whites and African-Americans and for the most
part, we worked in the hospital with a certain amount of harmoniousness, although there
was a definite otherness to the blacks from the way that we would see them of course I
mean, because they were other to us and it was very much on everybody’s agenda in the
states and it had extended all the way over there. But, I didn’t see any actual
confrontation I have to admit. I did know that [after work] people kept to themselves
racially. On the job, you do what you have to do, but the black guys hung out with the
black guys for the most part and it was not a situation where a bunch of us would get to
know them and there were very few women of any other race than white.

LC: I was going to ask you, were there any African American women in the
Army Nurse Corps that you had seen?

SO: I had seen a couple along the way, but not that much. I saw Red Cross
workers, there was a Red Cross worker attached to our hospital who was very much a
black woman and quite proud of it. I thought, she seemed like quite a hot ticket and I had
a chance to not really know her because we didn’t get to know the Red Cross, but I’d ride
in her jeep and deal with her now and then.

LC: Where was she from?

SO: God, somewhere down south, I can’t remember exactly.

LC: Okay.

SO: But she was a hot ticket. But it was still, once again; she was kind of a
rarity. There were not that many even in the Red Cross who were there who were
racially any different from white. We had one woman I worked with in Cu Chi who was
Hispanic and that was less rare I guess, but still, you know, there was no real difference
drawn there. That was not a big thing, being Hispanic was not considered much of
anything. It didn’t matter that your complexion was darker or not, it was a distinct breed
apart.

LC: Okay.

SO: And as I say more common.

LC: Did you have a sense that some or more than some of the black guys that you
knew or came across were politicized in some way according to the strictures of that
time?

SO: Well, once again going back to that first story of mine where the kid freaks
out and he was kind of the exception to the rules as far as the hospitals went. He was a
kid who considered himself a Black Panther and that was a very touchy thing for all of
us. The black guys who worked in the operating room, we had at least one that I recall at
the time who was kind of a long term guy there at Phu Bai and a nice guy and he had
trouble with this kid because the kid figured that anybody who cooperated with the
whites was automatically bad news. You know, people had to cooperate in an operating
room; you just didn’t have any choice. So, they tended to kind of leave him be, too, after
initially trying to get to know him. We all tried to kind of get to know him, but he’d only
been there about a week and he was just putting everybody off. And intentionally; I
mean, he didn’t want to be there, we didn’t want him to be there either. He was a cog in
the wheel that wasn’t functioning and we needed all the function you could get. So, it
was kind of one of those things that we did, literally just kind of relegate him to the
operating room, kind of stand him in a corner and then function without him.

LC: And what was the end game with him as far as you know?

SO: No one knows, no one knew. Even the clerks didn’t seem to know what
happened to him. My guess is that he was hustled out on the next helicopter and ended
up in some Psychiatric Confine somewhere.

LC: Were you in the room when he kind of lost it?

SO: Yes.
LC: I mean, obviously we don’t know who he is, so can you describe what you observed or what you saw?

SO: Well, it’s very much laid out in the story with that he just kept…it was like he was not really…he was in his own zone. He looked terrified. He was wearing the mask and his damn beret and he was just squeezing blood bags and just kept sticking the…you know, we’d change the blood bags and we’d stick the bulb in his hand to squeeze the thing, to squeeze the blood in like I had mentioned before and he just kept at it, kept at it, kept at it. Even after he burst the blood bag, his hand was still squeezing and when he did that, just like in the story, it literally went everywhere. It just spattered the whole place. It’s like somebody took spray paint with a very fine sprayer and just went over the walls, the ceilings, the lamp above the bed and everything else. It was a real mess. We spent the rest of the day cleaning that down in silence considering what all went on, but he was removed from the room by a couple of folks and we just never saw him again. No clue where he went and what happened to him, where he wound up.

LC: Wow.

SO: It was a weird thing.

LC: Yes, very weird. And more stress, I mean, yet more stress.

SO: Oh yes.

LC: The situations already…

SO: Yes, but in a sense, I think we all kind of realized that it was probably good that he fell apart in the sense that there was nothing anybody could’ve done one way or the other and he was removed from the scene. This guy was not helping matters any at all.

LC: Sure.

SO: You could only walk around the elephant in the living room for so long.

LC: That’s true, that’s very true. Sue, did Cu Chi and your time there sort of live up to the nurse at Chu Lai’s billing as like the hellhole of Vietnam?

SO: It was busy, but there was an amazing esprit de corps there. It was once again a large facility and I can actually tell you something about that one because I just did an article for the 25th Division Newsletter and I’m hoping that they got it because I
haven’t heard from this guy in email, but let’s see if I can tell you something about…I
love cable, it’s great. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
SO: And to think I actually had a dial up modem once.
LC: I know, I know.
SO: Yes, let’s see. Four hundred bed hospital.
LC: Okay.
SO: I don’t know that they processed, throughout the four-year history; they
processed thirty seven thousand patients. Let’s see, and some other stuff…I don’t know
how big the nursing staff was there though. You know, I didn’t get that I should’ve now
that I look at it, that is the flaw in this thing.
LC: Did it feel like you had continuous flow of patients in?
SO: Oh, that was a pretty busy place.
LC: Okay.
SO: It was, for one thing, it was the only hospital there…
LC: Yes.
SO: Once it took over from the hospital it had replaced which was a little a must
unit I believe, you know, must units are the inflatable, and that was well before my time.
It had come in ’67. I don’t know, that’s no help at all. I thought I’d have something on
the staff, but now I remember I didn’t know the number of the staff.
LC: That’s okay, that’s probably findable in some other place.
SO: Yes. I’m sure it’s around somewhere, although, god only knows, most of
that stuff is pretty hidden as far as where it really is.
LC: Yes, you need to work to find it, that’s true. Was that again on twelve-hour
shifts for you?
SO: Yes, it was twelve hour shifts and when you work in the operating room,
they have twelve hours plus they have, certain people just have the shift and then they
have first call which are the people who have like maybe half the shift and then you’re on
call for the rest of the night for any of the cases that come in and then you have people on
a second call basis who might’ve worked the entire shift but are there to be called if there
is a mass cal or something like that and so forth. And if there was a mass cal, the shift
situation worked very well and the call situation worked well and often people would just come in and help out even if they were off duty.

LC: Were you…go head Sue.

SO: The longest I ever worked was like twenty-two hours.

LC: Yes, that’s a long time in OR.

SO: That’s a very long time.

LC: Do you have any clue how many patients you had during that time period?

SO: No idea. It was just one of those things where you end up with enough a lot of stuff. I can’t even remember what the situation was. One of the times we had a pretty nasty casualty situation was the invasion of Cambodia, which didn’t officially happen at that point.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about what happened at the hospital that day?

SO: Yes, but I’d have to kill you. No, not really. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Well, you know. All in the name of my duty.

SO: Yes. I believe, I think that happened right when we got back from R&

LC: It would’ve been at the beginning of May ’70, so just before you were going to leave actually.

SO: Yes, and I found myself in the operating room with a pretty good number of casualties. Not a particularly messed up, it wasn’t a real train wreck situation and a lot of mines and that because it was artillery, so there were a lot of injuries, but they were not in many cases as great as they would be if somebody had dropped a bomb on something. It was more like fighting in general and the thing that really sticks with me is that we got this one guy in, I remember who was, and I can’t remember what was wrong with him, but he looked to be, he didn’t look Vietnamese. He looked almost Montagnard, but we were not in the right place for Montagnard and that’s when they activated some, there was some word for him on the chart that was like, it was a jargon word, it was like in-country nationals. That wasn’t it though, that’s actually from The Peace Corps, but it was something different and I remember asking, ‘Well, what’s the story with this?’ And he said, ‘Well, you know, we were somewhere we shouldn’t be obviously’ and this guy is whatever he is, quite frankly, the rumor is that he’s Cambodian and he looked Cambodian
because they once again, do look like the Montagnard. There’s a whole different look to
them from the low country Vietnamese. But two days later, we were allowed to call them
Cambodians because Nixon announced that we were there.

LC: Did you have at the hospital; have fore warning about a big operation that
takes more casualties?

SO: No. No, at least not at our level and I’m assuming that not at any level
because we would’ve been geared up for it, but basically, there it happened.

LC: Sue, did you have any political views on going into Cambodia at that time?

SO: I really didn’t understand the mechanism of what was going on or what they
were trying to accomplish. So, there was that. I don’t know, I could honestly say that I
had no real idea of what they were doing. I just knew that there was…well, I can’t say
had no real idea, the rumor was that they were trying to get supply lines and folks that
came down from Laos and what not, but it was one of those weird things. You know,
you get casualties, you’re taking casualties and the oddity was that we literally couldn’t
tell a name. I just found that tremendously ironic when you consider that you’re working
on the actual people, but you can’t call them what they are because we’re not officially
there.

LC: Right, yet another of the surreal elements of that experience.

SO: Oh yes.

LC: Somewhere in here Sue, I gather you met Paul?

SO: Yes, we differ on how we think we met.

LC: Well, I’ll ask him later for his version. (Laughing)

SO: I recall meeting him in the Officers’ Club and I thought at the time,
strangely, strange as the concept might’ve been that he was married or engaged or
something because this girl that he had been dating had left recently and someone alluded
to the idea of ‘Your better half’, and I thought, ‘Oh jeez, what is this?’ So I didn’t pay
him a whole lot of mind, although I found him attractive, I didn’t him pay him a whole
lot of mind. He claims that we met on the roof of his hooch. I was playing guitar, which
was often the case and we got together and there were a bunch of us sitting there
watching the outgoing rounds and the incoming rounds and watching a firefight far off
which is its own scaled down version of fireworks.
LC: Yes, yes, in an odd kind of…
SO: Yes, because every fifth shell is a tracer.
LC: Sure, right, right.
SO: It’s kind of pretty.
LC: What unit, was he attached to the hospital?
SO: Yes, he was a medical service guy; he was attached to the hospital. He was actually younger than he was supposed to be for it. It was a major’s slot he used to say and he happened to be in the right place at the right time. He had done a Baylor College course because a friend of his father was well placed and could allow him to do that, but with on being the registrar of a hospital or something, he had the credentials if not the rank and they wanted somebody and they were thinking of putting him out he says in a battalion surgeon’s capacity as an assistant which would’ve been a whole different ballgame.
LC: That’s for sure.
SO: But he ended up there instead and I don’t know whether he was provisional when he came in, but he did a good enough job that nobody ever replaced him.
LC: When was he set to leave?
SO: He was to leave a month or a week after I was.
LC: Oh okay. And you were ready to…you were getting pretty short roundabout May of 1970?
SO: Yes. Actually, I was short and I was supposed to be leaving in May and the Army has a thing where if you had four months left when you got out, you had to serve them in the United States.
LC: Yes.
SO: And if you had three months left, you didn’t have to serve. You’d get out early. So, I would’ve had four months left if I’d left then and I knew that I would not be very functional going back to it. I’d have to go back to all that saluting and that sort of thing and my irreverence that was there to begin with was just insufferable by that point. I just couldn’t have done it and also I thought going back to doing a very circumscribed sort of work where I wasn’t even stitching, I wasn’t debriding and handling the tools, I
would be just kind of the hand maiden again. I thought that that would not be a good mix
for me.

LC: So what decision did you make?
SO: So I re-upped for a month there, just extended myself for a month to cover
that month.

LC: And the results of that would be when you left after this additional month,
you would be shed of the Army basically?
SO: I would be done, yes, and actually I said Paul had a week after me, but Paul
had a week after my extended date.

LC: I see, okay.

SO: And he really wasn’t the reason I did it. Truthfully, I suppose I was as close
to clinical depression during that month as I possibly could get. It was just awful because
I knew I could be elsewhere and I spent a lot of time just kind in bed sleeping if I wasn’t
on duty and if Paul wasn’t around or something like that. It was not a good month and
once again, I felt like a hypocrite too doing it because I knew how I felt about the war. I
knew that it was nothing that I wanted to deal with on a political basis and therefore here
was I dealing with on a personal basis and re-upping and stuff. I probably came to my
most self-loathing point of time and also to my most just generally depressive about what
it was that I was doing. Overlaying all that was knowing that I would be going back to
the world and it would be nice to be back to the world, but I just could kind of feel before
hand that I don’t know how I would’ve eased into it whether it would work for me or not.
I had signed up while I was there, I decided that I wanted to go onto college and so I had
applied to several different places. I was looking for a Journalism school and there
weren’t very many of them around, but I had applied to Hawaii because I wanted to go,
I’d never been in Hawaii and I had applied to someplace in Arizona and I applied to the
University of Texas at Austin and to my surprise, got into all of them which would’ve
said something good about me except that I understand that anybody with half a brain
who came out of Vietnam was automatically given a chance to go to college. (Laughing)

LC: So much for that ego boost.

SO: Yes, so much for that ego boost. So anyway, I chose the University of Texas
at Austin because they had the premier Journalism School in the country at that time and
one of the few. I was online to go there, I was online for my housing even which was
going to be alternative school housing, the old folks.

   LC: (Laughing)

   SO: And I didn’t know quite how I was going to pay for it, but I had saved up a
   fair amount of money in Vietnam. I figured that would help and I didn’t really give a
   whole lot of thought to the concept of GI Bill which was kind of interesting. In fact,
   when I got my DD-214 finally, my thing saying I actually was a member of the Army, I
   ripped it up and threw it out. (Laughing)

   LC: Did you really?

   SO: And you need that for the GI Bill.

   LC: Yes. What happened? Were you actually able to attend school with federal
   support or no?

   SO: Um, ultimately what happened was I got back to Oakland and I had spent a
   weekend in Japan and it was even more depressing because prior to that, I used to travel
   alone all the time and I really loved it. I loved the independence and I loved not having
   to deal with other people’s schedules because the Army was so much about standing in
   line and stuff like that and other people’s schedules. And it was so refreshing. Well,
   when I was there, I found something was terribly missing because the last place I’d gone
   with anybody was to Sydney with Paul.

   LC: Okay, during an R&R?

   SO: Yes. And I was just really lonely and I missed him and I had thought at the
   time, once again, put him at arms distance and intellectualized him into the idea that,
   ‘Well, I’ll probably never see this guy again and that hey, that’s life and I can live
   without him and so on and so forth.’ Well, I found that I was really missing him
   specifically and thinking of him and that it just wasn’t working out and yet, the
   intellectual part of my mind said, ‘Well, you might as well get used to it because this is,
   these things don’t last past the war situation. It’s a whole different animal and it won’t
   work.’ So, when I finally ended up in Oakland to go out, I went through my physical and
   I did all the…which was basically the only real debriefing that we had was a physical and
   I did not have any place that I was planning on going for the summer. I knew that I
   didn’t really want to go back to Indiana, but I’d have to do it at some point and I wasn’t
really psyched about answering all their questions and trying to be the same person I was before and so forth. It did not appeal. So, I bought myself a new guitar because I had given away the other one when I left. The bridge was slipping on it from all the damp weather coming on and stuff. I figured, why bring it back with me. So, one of the first orders of business was I went to downtown San Francisco and bought myself a new guitar and I was sitting around and plucking it and try and wondering what the hell I was going to do with my life and totally depressed and where am I going to go. And at that point, they didn’t give a shit. I mean, I occupied a bed and that was fine, there were beds there. Then one night I was in bed and mulling things over and there was a knock at the door and I opened the door and it was Paul and in his usual typical romantic way he said, ‘We going to get married or what?’ (Laughing) Whoa.

SO: So, I told him I was feeling kind of bad and I had had a pregnancy test and stuff, I said, ‘Well, I don’t think. They don’t think I’m pregnant or anything, but If I am, that’s an issue. I don’t know if we want to deal with this.’ And then he said, ‘We’ll deal with it if and when it comes up and let’s go and meet the parents on both ends and tell them we’re going to do this.’ So, we did. Ultimately, I never got to University of Texas, but I did get into...after I gave birth, Paul was taking a Masters program at the University of Mass and we were in Amherst and I decided that I really wanted to do this, to go back to school bit by bit and see if I can get that Journalism degree in bits and pieces. So, the first order of business was to get on the GI Bill and so I sent away and asked for a copy of my DD-214 and I called and everything else and months passed and nobody came out with it and finally we ended up having to call Kennedy’s office and get them to shake it loose and they did.

LC: Okay, that would be Ted Kennedy?

SO: Yes, Ted Kennedy. Well, I did end up with a copy of it and used that.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: Which was, it worked, it worked well.

LC: Did you ever in the interim though have regrets about having ripped up the document or did you still...?
SO: Well, when it became a hassle to get it, yes, I was not too thrilled about it, but at the time, it was a nice emotional release. It was kind of like when I went into Japan and stuffed all my military clothes in the trashcan in the airport restroom.

LC: Did you do that?

SO: Yes, yes. I kept a pair of combat boots because I figured maybe I want to go riding someday and they probably work as well as anything and I kept my jacket because I kind of liked it and it didn’t have any rank or anything on it. It might work as a jacket, what the hell.

LC: (Laughing) Practical.

SO: (Laughing) Yes.

LC: So it was a practical element underneath the rage.

SO: Exactly, exactly. The rest of it went into the can.

LC: Sue; is it the case that you were active in Vietnam Veterans Against the War at least in some kind of tangential way?

SO: Yes. We never signed the papers, there was nothing really to sign up, it just wasn’t that, but we did, Paul and I, marched on Washington with them. It’s funny; I read a book about J. Edgar Hoover a couple of years ago and he talked about how many members of the Vietnam Vets Against the War were really, he said were really agents who were undercover trying to bust us. (Laughing) But they seemed like…it was a good group, it was fairly active on campus and…

LC: At Amherst?

SO: Yes. And we kind of went with them and were part of the fold and that was fine by me. I joined the organization later when we were up in Maine. I think it was that, it was one of those organizations. God knows that they’ve sprung up over the years.

[Note: It was UMass at Amherst, not Amherst College]

LC: That’s right.

SO: And actually tent in a little bit of money to them, but yes, I fully appreciate what they were doing. I have to admit, that’s the one thing about this campaign. I’m no Kerry fan because he’s been my senator and he has not been really very responsive and I kind of find him a bit arrogant.

LC: You’re not the first to say that.
SO: Well yes, I mean, in terms of not returning phone calls and stuff, and when he turned the power over to Bush this last time around, I immediately said I’m never going to vote for this man in my life.

LC: Now, when you say that Sue, do you mean voting for the money or voting for the resolutions to go into Iraq and for the money?

SO: Yes, right, right. I mean, that was abrogating his powers as I saw it and with it us in our representation because I know, you know, I had a lot of people calling into him at that point in time here and I also know a lot of people who just did on their own. And these are people who were not against the war per se, but they were against the idea of not thinking it over and being more careful about it. You know, it was a big question. So, when he did that, I thought he was betraying us; his constituency because Massachusetts is a pretty liberal place and even our governors who tend to be republican are pretty close to democrats. So, I wasn’t thrilled with him, but I’ll probably have to hold my nose and vote for him because I certainly can’t vote for Bush. But on the other hand, the thing that if anything would probably push me towards some sympathy toward him is that branch of Vietnam Veterans who are on the far right who have branded him Hanoi Kerry and said things about his condemning his fellow soldiers to death by speaking out against the war. I mean, bullshit. It’s just the government that condemned them to death if anything, those of us who spoke out against it were trying to get them out of there so that the whole concept of that is just so skewed and awful and that people actually swallow it is just beyond me.

LC: And that stays with you now even looking at the Iraq conflict and the same kinds of things.

SO: Yes, it’s kind of interesting when…god, what was it, it was ten years ago when the women’s memorial was put up. A friend who was not a veteran, but who was the daughter of a veteran dragged me off to Washington D.C because I don’t do memorials very much. It’s just not in my vernacular, but she dragged me out for that. She said, ‘You know, you’re going to see some people you haven’t seen in years and it’s going to be neat and you’ll like it’ and so on and so forth, ‘And let’s make it a trip.’ So, we did and one of the people I met there I did find the Cu Chi group and got on their
mailing list which has been kind of fun because they actually do have get together and
it’s a very varied group.

LC: Now, do you mean that this is the 12th Evac group?

SO: Yes, 12th Evac. So, one of the women I met there who I’d served with and
vaguely remembered from the 12th Evac was saying something about at that time the Gulf
War One was about to start and she said, ‘You know, I don’t really have PTSD, but I
really get depressed when they start talking about war because it just brings the whole
thing back and I feel like I haven’t done anything, I haven’t made a difference at all.’
And that’s kind of the same thing that I’ve felt about this and I really got angry when
Bush went into Iraq just because it’s such a simplistic solution by someone who’s never
gone through it to accomplish ends that I think are impossible because they are totally
simplistic.

LC: Yes.

SO: To accomplish something that can’t be accomplished at the expense of both
our young people and their country and war is not something you can do lightly, you just
can’t. It’s inhumane to even consider doing it for strictly the blatantly political things
that it’s being done for, but anyway.

LC: And for you, it harks up parallel with U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia in
some way.

SO: Absolutely.

LC: Okay.

SO: And as Yogi said, ‘It’s déjà vu all over again’ because it seems that we
learned nothing from that and I know the country’s still screwed up and divided about
that, even my Vietnam Vet [Nurse] list that I participate in when I can, the matter came
up and god, it was just horrible. I mean, people jumped all over the place at each other
and started to rip heads off talking about how can you abandon the troops like we were
abandoned and so forth. There was no dodging that whole thing around and saying, well,
you know, the troops, granted some of you people had horrible experiences with folks
when you came back and that I was lucky enough not to really, but then I was essentially
on the other side of it. You know, I was against the war, so it would’ve been redundant
for someone to spit on me or out of place at any rate. But the whole sentiment that a lot
of the folks had was that they had been treated badly and now we were going to treat the
troops badly by turning our backs on them whereas my whole thing of course was why
would we send these folks into war. I mean, this is treating them badly to begin with and
it seemed kind of important that we were heard and that they were able to avoid that.
Truthfully, I was not one for getting rid of the draft and I know that it’s once again, it’s a
black and white thing on my part, which is probably uncharacteristic in a lot of ways and
it wouldn’t really turn out. You know, this is all theory with battling because I haven’t
been the one to have to stand in the line and make the decision, but to me, when you get
rid of the draft, you get rid of the popular vote to get rid of to not go into something that
was blatantly dangerous and thoroughly political and probably futile because the
government was sending in a volunteer army. It doesn’t matter that a lot of those
volunteers did it because their very nice ad campaign telling everyone, to ‘Be all they can
be’ and to get their college education through the army and stuff like that was slanted
more towards the peace time good effects of it than the idea of, ‘Join us and go into war.’

LC: In some ways, the peacetime army is created through a process of
seductions, is that fair?

SO: Well yes, it’s a lot like what we went through with recruiters, what I went
through with the recruiter. You know, people lie to you and the war end is played down,
but of course, what you’re doing when you join the army is you’re joining a group that
going to go to war at some point or maybe they won’t, but the object is that they go to
war and that’s down played just outrageously because who the hell would sign up for
that, psychopaths you know. The kind of people you could probably make a real
interesting army out of. (Laughing) So it’s kind of one of those things that when the war
drums are beating, these sabers are rattled, I guess I’m not the only one in my generation
who gets really screwed up about it because you see the same thing coming back and yet
there is this whole back lash now and it was played very cleverly I thought politically.
The backlash of people not wanting to create another ‘60s. I mean, somebody did
brilliant work with that.

LC: Yes, diffused it before it was able to kind of boil up.

SO: Or used it as a diffusing factor. I mean, they basically said, ‘Oh, you don’t
want another divisive point in time, look at this, we’re still talking about Vietnam, so lets
go on with it.’ And that was very much the official line even though it wasn’t spoken as
such and that just pisses me off too. I mean, that essentially our caution and our having
learned and our having gone through this is being disregarded precisely because it’s
divisive.

LC: Do you see Kerry’s presidential bid as a healing, having a potential to heal
this kind of national division that you’re talking about that’s a layover from the Vietnam
experience or is it likely…?

SO: I think it’s partially irrelevant.

LC: Really?

SO: I mean, it’s a big issue right now because Vietnam is once again shoved in
everybody’s face and there is all that and maybe it’s time we come to terms with it one
way or the other because once again, it was kind of nibbled around at when Bush got into
office about how this man had been absent without leave for about a year there and
nobody can figure out why. Gee, could it be because he didn’t want to…he had better
things to do with his life, whatever. But at any rate, there’s a little nibbling there and
there’s that silly issue of, ‘Did you serve or did you not serve’ being shoved into the
political end of things which to my way of thinking only has relevance in the fact that if
you served, maybe you know better or maybe you don’t when it comes to war because
once again, you become the president, you become when you become president period.
And then I think a lot of what came before gets thrown out the window. But do I think
it’d be healing, no. I don’t think it’d make much difference one way or the other
ultimately. I think the question will always be played because Vietnam is so much more
than just the war, it’s the ‘60s, it’s the turning point thing going on, interest. There’s a
whole lot of reasons that we hang onto this besides the fact that it’s the first war that we
can now say we lost, although Korea doesn’t look so good if you look at it. That it’s just
too complex an issue to be laid at rest just by having someone who fought in it show up
there in my humble opinion. I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong. It might be good to be
wrong on that one.

LC: Yes, it may be, but I think you might be right. Sue, there’s one other area
that I want to ask you about and that has to do with your return to Vietnam in 1999. Can
you tell me why you decided to go back?
SO: We were coming up on our, let’s see, 30th Anniversary at that point, Paul and I, and we had both talked about, you know, just not much, but we had kind of mentioned that it might be interesting to go back. And I was paging through *Adventure Cycling*, which is a magazine strictly devoted to cyclists and I’m a pretty avid, but not a very good bicyclist. I mean, I don’t go in for speed or anything, but I’ll endure the hell out of things. We had done a little bit of cycling here and there. We’d gone through the Yorkshire Dells and stuff like that and done some stuff and I happened to see an ad there for something called ‘Discover Vietnam’ and I showed Paul the ad and he said, ‘You know, that might be a good way to celebrate our anniversary.’ I said, ‘Hmm, I didn’t realize you were actually interested in biking it’ and it turns out that he was. So, we contacted the folks and ended up talking to the leader of it who’s a historian himself. We still keep in contact. He carries our contribution to the orphanage every year.

LC: I see.

SO: Since it’s far better to do it in cash.

LC: Yes, I would think.

SO: Yes. But any rate, next thing you know, we were signed up. We called the people who had been on the tour about how they liked it and stuff and we were signed up and went back on bike. It was not one of those, this is a healing veteran type thing, it was a very mixed group. There were about half veterans and half not and the veterans were all over the lot year wise and in terms of what they did. We had like three pilots, which is not what you want to do when you’re trying to fly some of those airplanes. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

SO: They talk about, ‘Oh, that’s the French one over there. If we get that one, that’ll be okay except that it usually has engine failure at such and such. And there’s the Russian one, oh my god, those things are still held together with bolts.’ Yes, you don’t want to hear this stuff. But, at any rate, it was a really interesting reintroduction to the culture and we went through the My Lai memorial, which was quite touching. We just had a lot of…actually, I’ve got it on paper if you want it. Did I ever send that to you?

LC: No.

SO: Well, I have my, what do you call it, journal that I send to people who are interested in going over. Although, by now, it’s quite dated because Hans, the guy who
runs the tour was telling me that they’re actually doing tunnels and they’re thinking of
putting a subway in Saigon and all this other weird stuff. So, they got a lot of stuff going
on. And it’s much more modern than it was, but it was an interesting sort of thing. I
mean, it’s such a blend of the old and the new there. Let’s see, what your address here.
What’s your email address?

   [Giving email address]

   SO: Okay, great. I’ll just send you my journal then.

   LC: Super, that’s terrific. Sue, is there anything else that you’d like to add to this
oral history interview that perhaps I didn’t ask you about.

   SO: Gee, I don’t know, I mean, it seems like we’ve covered just about everything
there is to cover in the world.

   LC: I feel like actually that I could continue to ask you questions and you’d come
up with fascinating things.

   SO: Maybe I’d make it up.

   LC: There you go. (Laughing)

   SO: (Laughing)

   LC: If you feel that it’s complete, then we’ll draw it to a close at this point.

   Thank you very much.

   SO: Okay, as far as I know, I can’t think of anything else that I’ve left out.

   LC: Okay, thanks Sue.