Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Stephen W. Dant. Today is March 4, 2005. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It’s approximately 8:36 a.m. Central Standard Time and Mr. Dant is in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Steve, why don’t we start with some biographical information on yourself? Can you tell me where you born, when you born and a little bit about your childhood?

Stephen Dant: I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, August 30, 1949. Both of my parents are Hoosiers, come from Indiana. My mom was from Indianapolis. My dad grew up on a farm in southern Indiana. I lived in Indianapolis when I was very young then we moved out to about, I don’t know, 20 miles outside of Indianapolis into a rural area. There was a pocket of about five or six homes. My dad commuted every day into Indianapolis where he worked for the railroad as a low-end or a lower supervisory role of scheduling cars for the, at that time, it was the New York Central Railroad. My parents are devout Catholics. I’m what ended up being the oldest of 11 children. When we left Indiana, when I was about ten or eleven years old, you know I was in the fourth grade. My dad got transferred to Cleveland and I think when we left Indiana, I think there were six of us. When we left Cleveland after two years, he got transferred to New York.

RV: New York City?

SD: New York City.
RV: How old were you when that happened?
SD: When I moved to New York I was seventh grade, so what’s that 12, 13?
RV: Yes, around 13.
SD: Right. There were I think eight of us when we left Cleveland. Then there were three more born in New York. I went to junior high and high school in a community just outside of Peekskill, New York. Where I lost my midwestern accent and gained a New York accent, which I’ve subsequently lost along the way as I got into broadcasting, but that’s another story.
RV: How do you spell Pink…?
RV: And whereabouts is that?
SD: It’s about 45, 50 miles north of New York City, right on the Hudson River.
RV: Oh okay.
SD: The last, for a lot of trains the commuter stop into New York. So my dad took the train into New York City every day.
RV: What was his job in New York?
SD: Similar to what it was in Indianapolis and in Cleveland. He worked in an office that scheduled virtually all of the cars. For a while he worked with passenger, then he worked with freight. You can imagine doing this without computers. All over the entire line. So he was one of the supervisors of overseeing that.
RV: Did you have any people in your family, your dad or uncles or grandparents, anybody involved in the military?
SD: Most of my uncles who were military age during World War II were deferred because they were working on farms. My dad couldn’t go into the Army because he had health problems. He had MS as a child or some form of it. So all of his life he’s had problems getting around. I have had some cousins who were in the Army or Air Force and I used to see them every once in a while.
RV: Tell me about your mom. What was she like? Did she work? I imagine she had her hands full at home.
SD: Yes she did. She grew up in Indianapolis. She graduated from nursing school, married my dad. She’s a registered nurse, an RN, which is helpful bringing up 11 kids.
She was a good mom. We all seemed to do okay. She did work from time to time out of the home. She would occasionally work weekends or work a night shift here and there to kind of supplement the family income, which I would describe as lower middle-class.

RV: Well, you’ve moved around quite a bit here. You’ve gone; I’m counting four different places by the time you were 13, or excuse me 14 or 15. Did you finish high school in Peekskill?

SD: Yes.

RV: What was it like moving around like that? Was it difficult for you?

SD: It was and it wasn’t. I mean in some ways looking back on it I think it better prepares you for life and adjusting to new situations, but when you’re growing up it’s tough because you’re having to make new friends and get accepted in new places. In those days, I’m not sure if this is true anymore but the Ohio school systems were ahead of the Indiana school systems and the New York school systems, at least in the schools that I went to, were ahead of the Ohio School systems, particularly in the math and science area. So I can remember moving to Cleveland and leaving Indiana and just getting through my multiplication tables and getting to Cleveland and they were standing up there doing long division or something to that effect. (Laughter) Then it was another step ahead when I moved from Ohio to New York. They were another half a grade ahead of what I was in Ohio. That was probably the most difficult part of my move, is trying to play catch-up.

RV: What kind of student were you Steve?

SD: Oh I would say I was Bs and Cs. Cs toward the end of my high school years because I was less and less motivated.

RV: What were your favorite subjects?

SD: Favorite subject was history…English, Social Studies. Least favorite was math and science.

RV: What were your duties at home? You were the oldest, what was expected of you?

SD: When you’re the oldest you kind of become a third parent once you reach a certain age. Me and my sister…I have seven brothers by the way, three sisters. So me and Mary Jane, the oldest girl, end up kind of taking on more responsibilities. Once you hit
about, oh I would say about 11 or 12, 13 you find yourself….you know the family goes to
court in segments. There are six that go into the early mass and another six go to the ten
o’clock mass. So if the parents are going together then Mary Jane and I would be
watching the group that was home. You learn to do things like make breakfast and you
know I could fry an egg when I was 11, 12 years old. I knew how to make meatloaf and
pork chops and all kinds of things.
RV: Did you like that? Did you enjoy that role? I mean I guess you didn’t really
have a choice.
SD: You know I never really thought about it, just that it was there. So you deal
with, like everybody else, you deal with the cards that you are given or you play the cards
you’re given. I’m mixing my metaphors.
RV: Do you think that helped you as a leader later in life?
SD: I think so, sure. You know one of the things as I’ve interviewed for jobs
along the way in the broadcast industry that I’m in and I tell people that I’ve been in
management all of my life.
RV: (Laughter) That’s an excellent point. Let me ask you first of all, in New York
City, what was that like? Now this is in the 1950s, I presume, or early ‘60s.
SD: Early ‘60s.
RV: Oh, early ‘60s. Can you describe New York City to us?
SD: Well I used to go to New York every once in a while. I used to take dates in
high school. I could ride free on the train because my dad worked for the railroad so
everybody in the family had a train pass. In fact, side bar story, that’s how we used to go
back and visit folks in Indiana after we moved to New York. We had a large family, had
a lot of aunts and uncles that also had a lot of children. Half of us would ride on the train
in Peekskill and get off in Indianapolis and the other half would ride the station wagon
across from New York to Indiana. So anyway, I used to go into the city every once in a
while. I would either catch a show or more often then not, with a couple of my friends we
would take the train into Grand Central and then get on a subway and go out Yankee
Stadium and watched the Yankees play a double header.
RV: I was going to ask you if you were a Yankees fan or a Mets fan.
SD: I’m not anymore but when I lived there I was a Yankee fan and had the
opportunity to see Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle and all of those guys.
RV: Wow. I bet that was a lot of fun. How many times were you going to games?
Did you go to two or three or did you…
SD: I would go a couple of games in the summer. At least two or three.
RV: Now that brings up sports. Were you into sports as a youngster?
SD: Oh yes. I loved playing baseball. I played a lot of sandlot basketball. I played
on the high school football team.
RV: What position did you play?
SD: I played defensive corner and first-string defense, second-string offense. I
played a lot of special teams, ran back kick-offs and was on a punting team and kick-off
team.
RV: Well tell me early 1960s, this is the Kennedy years. What was the mood like
in the house around John Kennedy, a Catholic President?
SD: Well I was in Catholic high school at the time. I went to one year of Catholic
high school, Archbishop Stepinac High School. Actually their annex, which was in
Tarrytown, New York. I remember being in a…oh God what were we in? We were in
some kind of assembly at the time and one of the Brothers walked in and said, ‘The
President has been shot and it’s reported that he’s been killed.’ I mean just the whole
place was just stunned. Nobody could move it seemed like for five or ten minutes.
RV: Were your parents supporters of Kennedy?
SD: Yes. As I remember, you know political talk in the house, politics were pretty
much Democratic, Democratic Party as opposed to Republican. I think that’s changed
along the way over the last 30 years or whatever. I think both of my folks became more
Republican after Reagan became President. But yes, it was pretty much Democratic
politics in the house. I don’t know how else to describe it, when Kennedy got shot and
killed, I mean it just stunned the family and there was… and I think it stunned everybody.
RV: Sure, absolutely. Did you like Kennedy? Do you remember how you thought
about him as a President?
SD: You know I remember liking him. There was an aura around that White
House at the time. I remember the aura being as much around Jacqueline Kennedy as
much as being around John Kennedy. I mean she brought something to the White House that I don’t know; I would describe it as sophistication. Well the women that I was around including my mom admired her very much for whatever reason. I think maybe some of it was the fact there were young kids in the White House and that hadn’t been the case in a long time. They were all families with young kids so you could relate somewhat on that level as well.

RV: Right. Tell me about your high school years. What do you remember most about high school when you think back?

SD: You know I enjoyed high school. I didn’t enjoy the academic part of it towards the end because I was still in some ways trying to play catch-up from my earlier years, but I had a good set of friends in high school. I found that I was adept at…you know how there are different cliques in high school? I found that I could hang out with the jocks and that I could also hang out with the more blue-collar folks because I could kind of relate to them coming from…I felt like I had some blue-collar background. I was also on the class council. I don’t know how I got elected to that. And if you’re on a high school football team that helps as well.

RV: Sure, right. What about girlfriends? Were you dating in high school?

SD: Yes, I was dating in high school. I had a pretty steady girlfriend throughout most of my high school years. We kind of separated after we both went to college.

RV: What years were you there in high school Steve?

SD: Well I went to two different high schools. I should back up on that. I went to a Catholic high school, which I really hated.

RV: Why?

SD: Because I found that you were either there because you were going to be a priest or a brother or you had some kind of problems. People were starting to try to straighten you out by putting you in a stricter school. So I didn’t fit into that mold very well. In fact, I ended up getting into a couple of fights in high school with guys who thought they were buster badasses. I really was the kind of person that even if I thought I wasn’t to win this fight I wasn’t backing up an inch. So I won a couple and lost a couple but it really seemed like it was a very tense ninth grade. So I convinced my parents, although I think it broke my mother’s heart at the time after I had been in parochial
school for nine years to go to the public high school. She was mad at me for a while but eventually she got over it.

RV: (Laughter) So you spent your ninth grade year at the Catholic High School.
SD: Then I went to Lakeland High School, which is actually in Shrub Oak, New York, which is kind of a community just outside of Peekskill.

RV: What year did you graduate?
SD: 1967.

RV: Wow, right there in the middle of the war.
SD: Right in the middle of it.

RV: Tell me before we go past high school, what was your impression of first Lyndon Johnson taking over and what he was doing as President and did you have much of an opinion or not? Then let me know what you thought about the Vietnam War and what was happening in Southeast Asia.

SD: I didn’t know what to think Lyndon Johnson other than to know he certainly wasn’t the, not a word I think I would have used at the time, but charismatic leader that John Kennedy was. I did as I was in high school, as you start moving out of your freshmen year to sophomore year to junior year you suddenly become more aware of the Vietnam War because you start to know people who are soldiers who are going over there or coming back home. You know, I think there was an apprehension that some of us were going to have to go over there although we all understood that we all had friends…as you get into your junior year then you know friends who go off to college who are dealing with the deferments that a college will get you. I’m not sure I’m answering your question.

RV: No you are exactly, totally. Now this is a unique time for you. I would imagine that you do know people that are graduating a couple of years in front of you who are faced with going to a war, going to college, you know and making a choice or not having a choice sometimes.

SD: I remember there were a couple of young teachers, particularly a History teacher I had and I don’t remember his name. I think it was my sophomore or junior year, and obviously if he’s just graduated from college and he’s 22 or 23 years old, he’s in good health. I don’t think he was married at the time. Man he was top of the list to be
drafted. So I had a few teachers like that. He got into trouble as I recall and this happened back in the ‘60s as well as it happens today for espousing some of his beliefs about the war in the classroom. On one afternoon, it was a Friday afternoon or something he was in the classroom and he was playing Bob Dylan songs to the class.

RV: (Laughter) Okay. What were you all thinking when you’re hearing Dylan sing?

SD: I thought it was cool at the time, but as I remember he got in some trouble for that. I think that summer he got drafted.

RV: Do you know whatever happened to him?

SD: No, I don’t.

RV: Well what did you think of the Vietnam War? Did you know why the United States was even there or was it kind of a mystery to you all?

SD: I remember hearing a lot about the domino effect, you know if we didn’t stop the Communists in Southeast Asia then the next place was going to be Thailand, then it was going to be the Philippines. So I think I kind of bought into that when I first heard it. We come through World War II. You know I was the generation that was the sons of, you know…a lot of World War II Veterans were parents of kids my age.

RV: Yes.

SD: I had one cousin who was in the Korean War so I kind of acquit [accepted] it, I guess, kind of thought of it as another Korea.

RV: Did your cousin talk to you about Korea?

SD: No. At that time I was kind of really young and just kind of amazed to see this guy in uniform.

RV: Did you think at all when you were a kid, not in high school but when you were really young about wearing that uniform, about going into the military?

SD: I guess I enjoyed cowboy and Indian pictures. I liked wartime pictures but I never really thought of myself as being a professional soldier if that’s what you’re asking.

RV: Did you see yourself like, ‘Wow, I would like to be a soldier one day, or I would like to be a Marine one day,’? Tell me Steve, when you graduated in ’67 I mean the war is in full swing here. Tell me about going to college. Were you encouraged to go
to college? Did you want to go? Was it something to do with the war, about your entry into college?

SD: I did want to go to college. I did see myself as getting a degree in something. I wasn’t sure what. I did have an interest even at that time in broadcasting.

RV: Did your parents say, ‘Steve, we really want you to go on and continue your education,’ or was it really up to you?

SD: They encouraged me to go to school to get a college degree. My parents didn’t have Bachelor’s degrees but my dad had an associate degree and my mother an RN in a two-year program. So they understood the value of a higher education. So I was encouraged to go to school. All of my friends were going to college. Most of the group that I was hanging out with, it was just a given that you were going somewhere; so I kind of rode that whole wave.

RV: Where were you interested in going?

SD: I was interested in going to the SUNY system, which is really the one that I could afford because I was going to have to pay for this myself with my student loans, because my parents couldn’t afford it. My grades had deteriorated enough by the time I was in my senior year that most of the places I got accepted to were two year schools, junior colleges so that’s where I ended up going.

RV: Which one did you go to?

SD: Went to SUNY [State University of New York] at Morrisville, New York, up near Syracuse.

RV: And you were there for two years?

SD: I was there for [less than] a year. I was totally bored, uninspired. I was partying a lot. I was a disc jockey at the school radio station. I was on the basketball team. I was on the ski team and I wasn’t doing a whole lot of studying, even with the Vietnam War hanging over my head I just didn’t get inspired to go to school.

RV: So what happened after the year?

SD: I think I had a bad case of…what do they give kids Ritalin for?

RV: Attention Deficit. (Laughter)
SD: Attention Deficit Disorder. Ritalin probably would have helped me. I was a pretty hyper person and I was partying, too. I was smoking too much marijuana, which a lot of people were doing at the time.

RV: Yes, I mean this is right in the middle of the…

SD: ‘60s.

RV: The ‘60s, right. A lot of stuff happened socially in the country. Do you remember what you thought about the Civil Rights movement? It was really ’57 to ’64, ’65.

SD: I was four square behind what was happening in the Civil Rights Movement. I saw the things on TV that were going on in Alabama and Mississippi and marches in Washington and there was no question in my mind that…if I would have been on the streets I would have been marching with the folks for the civil rights as opposed to the cops that were trying to beat them over the head with night sticks. I think most of my friends, my peer group at the time, felt the same way. There were a lot of women’s rights groups.

RV: Yes.

SD: Women’s issues at the same time too. That’s the time that the bras started coming off, which was nice in a way.

RV: (Laughter) I wasn’t going to say anything. I was going to let you take that one. This is a time of social revolution in the United States and you’re smack dab in the middle of it and you’re in your first year of college and you’re having a good time. So after this year up at Morrisville what were your plans?

SD: I dropped out of Morrisville and moved back home and was going for about a year or so to a community college there but it ended up [first] being more part time than full time.

RV: That insured your deferment I take it?

SD: Yes.

RV: About that time my dad got transferred again. He got transferred to Philadelphia. So they moved to Newark, Delaware, which is just south Wilmington. Wilmington is just a short train ride into Philly. So I got an apartment over near the community college and was there for about six months. That neighborhood ended up
turning into a rough neighborhood and a lot of drug dealers were living there and police
were showing up a lot at night and I thought, ‘I got to get out of here.’ So I quit school
and followed my folks down to Delaware and got a full time job working for some
division at DuPont, you know making, no, what was I doing? I was testing some kind of
equipment that went into fighter aircraft.

RV: So in the defense industry, in a way.
SD: Yes, right.
RV: This is what, 1969?
SD: This is 1968, probably late 1968 and early ’69.
RV: What was your draft status?
SD: When I dropped out of school it became, what is it? 1-A. I received a draft
notice in I think it was March of ’69.
RV: What did you think when you got that?
SD: ‘Here we go.’
RV: I mean, were you expecting it?
SD: Yes. I knew it was just a matter of time. I had some friends who had gotten
drafted. I had a lot of friends who were trying to talk me into going to Canada.
RV: Really?
SD: Yes.
RV: Why didn’t you go?
SD: I just couldn’t picture myself avoiding the draft. It would have, I think, really
been a slap in the face to my parents.
RV: Did you feel a duty to your country?
SD: Yeah I did. I guess I was brought up that way. We were a pretty red, white,
and blue family. I remember getting into arguments with my dad about demonstrators. I
don’t remember where they were; maybe it was during the ’68 convention in Chicago
where the police went after the demonstrators in the street. I was all upset that the
students were getting beat up and my dad said, ‘Well they shouldn’t be there in the first
place.’ We had quite a little, 20-minute argument. I still wasn’t…I don’t think I was
convinced that the war was wrong in ’68 or ’69. I wasn’t convinced that the people who
were, I didn’t have a lot of high regard for Johnson, I guess. I was never enamored with
Nixon. So I didn’t think very highly of those guys. Kind of hard to remember all of this stuff. I wasn’t the kind that was going to go and demonstrate against the war.

RV: Do you remember who you voted for in ’68?
SD: Well I wasn’t eligible.
RV: Oh you weren’t 18?
SD: Well no.
RV: That’s right the age hadn’t changed.
SD: Hadn’t changed.
RV: So you’re going to go to the war now. You’re drafted and you’re going to report for basic. Did you want to go to a particular branch? Did you want to try and go enlist and do something like that?
SD: I remember thinking at the time I’m just going to go and get this over with. I’m going to do my duty and take the shortest route through this thing and get back out and figure out what I’m going to do with my life.
RV: Were your parents supportive of you going over, I mean obviously they are going to be worried as parents would be, but how did they feel when they knew you were going to be drafted and eventually you would be in the war zone?
SD: I think they were apprehensive. They were scared, but I believe that they felt like if one of their children was going to get drafted then it was their duty to go. It was a strange summer to get drafted. I lived in, I was constantly back and forth visiting with friends I had still up in Peekskill. We rode over to Woodstock for an afternoon to see all of that.
RV: During the festival?
SD: During the festival.
RV: Oh yeah, what was it like?
SD: Muddy.
RV: (Laughter)
SD: Wet.
RV: Right.
SD: You know you could see the stage way down there. We had to hike like ten miles to get there. The roads were jammed and packed. Once we got there we only stayed there a few hours and turned around and left because it was mess, I thought.

RV: Did you hear any music?

SD: I heard some but I don’t remember who was down there. I think it was Richie Havens.

RV: Well that’s interesting. So you were actually at the Woodstock Festival.

SD: Yes. And a few minutes later I was getting my haircut.

RV: Right. So where are you going to report to? Where were you ordered to go?

SD: I got my draft notice to be inducted in Philadelphia. Actually I was drafted, my draft board was in Peekskill but the orders came for me to show up in Philadelphia.

RV: And when did you go?

SD: I think it was September, early September of ’69.

RV: And this is the U.S. Army.

SD: U.S. Army.

RV: Right. Where did you go for basic?

SD: Well first they sent us down after we were inducted. The induction process, I remember they pulled like six of us outside before the induction and they said ‘We’re drafting into the Marines this morning. One of you six guys is going to be a Marine, any volunteers?’

RV: Really?

SD: Yes.

RV: How did they pick the six of you?

SD: They took the fourth guy alphabetically.

RV: (Laughter) Okay.

SD: And he went out crying.

RV: Oh wow.

SD: From what we heard, they don’t treat drafted Marines as well as they treat guys who volunteered.

RV: Right. Did you have any desire to be a Marine?

SD: No.
RV: Right because you wanted to kind of get…
SD: I wanted to get the responsibility done and over with.
RV: Right. So when you’re inducted, where do they send you?
SD: First went to Ft. Bragg where I took a whole battery of tests and originally I
think I was suppose to go to basic there, but they ran out of room for us and so they sent a
couple of bus loads of us down to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.
RV: Now I guess that was a bit of a cultural shock for you.
SD: Yes.
RV: Tell me about what North Carolina and South Carolina were like for a boy
from the…
SD: Well I knew some of that because I still had a lot of relatives in southern
Indiana. I don’t know if you have traveled through southern Indiana, which is, in my
mind, more like Kentucky then Indiana.
RV: Yes, it’s very rural.
SD: Very rural and a lot of Southern accents. So it reminded me of where my dad
grew up in Loogootee, Indiana. I don’t think I was as shocked as some of the other guys
that were with me on the trip.
RV: So tell me about basic training. What was it like? What do you remember?
SD: Up at 4:30, 5 a.m. after coming from the environment I was coming from
where you would go to work at 9 or 8:30 or something. Getting up and doing PT at dawn
was different. The drill sergeant seemed like they were in your face all the time. They
were trying to, you know like the book said; they were trying to get you to think like a
soldier as opposed to a civilian.
RV: Were these guys Vietnam Vets, Steve?
SD: Yes, some of them were. At least a couple of them I met. I thought that, you
know, looking back on it you know I think in their hearts they were really trying to get
you ready in case you were sent to Vietnam so that you would be as prepared as you
could be when you got there, particularly some of the instructors who were out. You
know you marched different places during the day to learn different, how to operate
different weapons or whatever. That was particularly the case, not so much in basic but
when you got to AIT, which for me was Advanced Infantry Training, those guys really
you could tell they wanted you paying attention and if you weren’t…they were in your face but I think they were in their face because they realize most of you guys are not going to Germany. You’re going to Vietnam.

RV: So did you adapt well to military life at basic?

SD: I guess I adapted as well as anybody. You know I didn’t have any real run-ins with any of the sergeants. I didn’t have any problem marching in cadence. I did well on the rifle range. Somewhere along the line the process started the…and this would happen to me every once in a while. They would take a group of three or four of us and take us into the mess hall and try to convince us to enlist for another year and make us into warrant officers and want to send us to Officer Candidate School because I guess I had done well on the aptitude test. The aptitude test that you took when you first put on your uniform.

RV: When you were at Bragg?

SD: When I was at Bragg, right.

RV: What were your thoughts on that? Were you still committed to kind of getting your enlistment over with or…

SD: You know I thought about it a couple of times. About being a helicopter pilot, I thought that might be cool. I was in a commitment of, I have forgotten what it was but it just seemed at the time like a long term. I was going to have to be in the Army for six years and I thought, ‘Man I just don’t see myself doing this for six years.’ So I just kept on staying in the course of, ‘I’m going to do my duty and get this done and be a good soldier and go home.’

RV: What would you say was the most difficult thing about Basic Training for you?

SD: Lack of sleep. (Laughter) I don’t know, it just always seemed like you were, that you never got enough sleep. I guess that prepares you for when you get into a combat situation, because once I got to Vietnam if you’re out in the field. You would be dealing with sleep deprivation all the time.

RV: Right. What was the easiest thing to you in Basic?

SD: Probably a weapons training, although I was never a hunter as a kid. I grew up in the country and I guess also the patrol stuff, learning to read maps, Peekskill was
kind of a rural area at the time I grew up. I was always in the woods. I was a boy scout, an explorer scout. I was with a scout troop who we always, you know we did a lot of canoeing, canoe rides down the Susquehanna, the Delaware River, a lot of outdoor camping. I didn’t have a problem with sleeping outside, pitching tents, dealing with reading trail maps that a lot of other guys had a tougher time getting used to.

RV: Were you a leader, Steve, or were you kind of trying to blend in and stay under the radar?

SD: You know at that time, just trying to stay under the radar. I have forgotten what they made the leaders and the companies you were in in the barracks. I wasn’t a barracks leader or any of that stuff. I was just low profile.

RV: How did you get along with everybody else there?

SD: I got along with everybody pretty good. I mean I don’t remember getting into any fights with anybody or anything. Everybody in the barracks sometime or another are going to get cross with somebody, but I got along with pretty much everybody.

RV: Okay. Your family still okay with everything going on?

SD: Yes.

RV: So at the end of basic you’re going to get an AIT. Were you selected infantry? Did you request it?

SD: No, I was selected.

RV: How did that happen? Were you kind of trying to get away from that? I mean that is something that’s going to dictate your future in Vietnam. That you’re going to be a rifleman versus doing something else.

SD: As I remember, oh man, I think it was after we graduated from basic. You know you do this graduation ceremony. God, I had forgotten about that. Or maybe it was just before, but somewhere along the line you’re in formation and they start peeling you off, handing you a piece of paper and peeling you off to certain trucks that are going to take you to a different part of the base or you’re packing up to leave to go to some other fort someplace for whatever specialized training. So that’s when I got handed the sheet that said that I was going to advanced infantry training.

RV: How did you feel?
SD: I guess that I had somewhere in the back of my head had kind of resolved that there was more probability that that was going to happen than not. So I guess I wasn’t really surprised.

RV: Where did you go for AIT?
SD: I stayed at Ft. Jackson.
RV: Okay so you stayed right there.
SD: I just moved down the road.
RV: How long was your advanced? Was it nine weeks?
SD: Yeah nine, ten weeks, something like that.
RV: Tell me about what they taught you. How did it differ from basic?
SD: Well the drill sergeants weren’t in your face the way they were in basic. You know you were a soldier now. I mean you weren’t some trainee. I think that there was some you know, I mean it was still tough and it was still very disciplined, but it wasn’t in your face disciplines like it is in basic.
RV: Right.
SD: I think as I said earlier that that’s when, you know you go through some of the same training that you’re in in basic, only it’s a little more in depth and a little more intense. I mean you learn how to strip down a rifle when you’re in basic but when you’re in AIT they expect you to practically do it blindfolded and to really know the weapons that you’re going to be utilizing inside and out. You spend a lot more time on the firing range. You really spend a lot of time with claymores and those kinds of things.
RV: Were you comfortable with all of the weapons?
SD: Yes. I never had a problem with any of the weapons that I was trained on. There were some that I knew I was going to be more comfortable with than others.
RV: Such as?
SD: Well I really couldn’t see myself, if I’m out defending myself I couldn’t see myself carrying an M-79. I would much rather have an M-16 in my hand.
RV: What kind of field tactics were you learning? What were they drilling you on there?
SD: I learned a lot about camouflage, a lot about what was it called, what did they call it, concealment techniques-looking for the right kind of cover versus concealment. Learning how to read trails, read maps, how to spot booby traps.

RV: I guess that’s where a lot of their, I would imagine where they brought in what their, the instructors experience in Vietnam. Did they specifically say, here’s what the Viet Cong… here’s what to look for?

SD: Well they had examples of different booby traps that the VC were utilizing at the time, everything from punji sticks to trip wires to holes dug in a ground that you would fall into, those kinds of things. And what to look for in terms of when you’re walking a trail, what to step on, what not to step on. We did a lot more training at night.

RV: Did they teach you how to ambush, things like that?

SD: Yes, those kinds of things.

RV: How about, did they teach you how to walk point?

SD: I don’t remember that being part of the curriculum. (Laughter)

RV: (Laughter) Tell me what you’re feeling. You’re going through this and you know that all of this is leading to me shipping off to a war where I’m really going to be doing this for real. What’s that like? Is this something you even think about or is it way kind of in the back of your minds?

SD: You know it’s…what’s the word I’m searching for? Surrealistic. You’re almost kind of outside yourself watching yourself go through this, really not believing that it’s happening sometimes.

RV: Right. Is it scary?

SD: Well yeah. It seems like you’re very apprehensive. Looking back, I guess you’re more apprehensive about the unknown than anything else. Because there’s no way, even though you’re all these guys are describing how you…what you need to do in different kinds of situations. There is no way that they can describe it to the point where you really understand what’s going to happen here.

RV: Right. Was there any excitement?

SD: I don’t remember anybody being excited about the possibility of going into combat or going to Vietnam.
RV: So all this stuff that these Marines have been telling me is a bunch of bunk?
(Laughter)
SD: Yeah.
RV: They can’t wait to go over and kill a Commie for mommy.
SD: I never bought into that.
RV: Anything else about Advanced that you want to talk about? Any incidents that happened before you graduated and get ready to go?
SD: No. I think it was pretty, what I went through was probably pretty normal.
RV: This is 1969? Or are you into ‘70 now?
SD: Late ’69 and it may have been, I can’t remember. Did I go home for Christmas or not? I think I was and then I went back to the base and finished up a couple of weeks and then I had a week’s leave or something like that and I shipped over in early February of ’70.
RV: Okay. Why don’t we go ahead and stop here, Steve? This seems to be a good place where we can pause and continue at another time.
SD: Okay.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is March 9, 2005. I’m again in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room. Mr. Dant is in Colorado Springs. It is about 8:23 a.m. Central Standard Time. Mr. Dant, why don’t we continue with where we were? Tell me a little bit about before you went over to Vietnam and what you were feeling. You had some time off before you’re deployed, what did you do, did you go back home?

SD: Yes I went back home, visited some friends, went to a few parties, spent whatever money I had in my pocket.

RV: What were your friends saying to you, do you recall?

SD: As I remember they were just…I don’t remember exactly what was said but you know, wishing me a lot of luck and I think they were apprehensive and a little afraid for me.

RV: Did they know you were going to be a rifleman basically?

SD: Yes, they knew I was infantry.

RV: How were you feeling?

SD: About the same. I resigned to the situation. You know I didn’t want to go but I kind of wanted to go and get it over with.

RV: Did your parents have anything to say especially about it? I can only image they were upset and worried.

SD: Yes, my parents are quiet people to begin with but they were even more, seemed to be more quiet during this period. They took me to the airport, saw me off on a
plane, I mean we just kind of sat there and looked at each other for about 15, 20 minutes it seemed like. Then lots of hugs and kisses and I was off.

RV: And you flew from where?

SD: I flew from Philadelphia to Seattle, Washington, then was in Ft. Lewis, Washington for a few days. I think two or three days. I remember seeing one of the greatest renditions of *Jail House Rock* that I can ever remember. Some guy was on a…the barracks were two-floor barracks and I don’t know some guy from, I met him later, he was from Tennessee or Kentucky or somewhere in there. We were all standing there in a chow line or something and he stepped out onto this balcony or this walkway that got you down to the ground, maybe it was a fire escape, and just had a broom there and started singing into the broom handle Elvis’ *Jail House Rock*. We gave him a standing ovation. It kind of lightened up the time that we were all there.

RV: What was the mood like overall with everybody there right before leaving?

SD: You know it was serious, I know I keep using the word apprehensive but it just fits so well. It was strange, it was a deployment stop for the Army but it was also a place where you came back into the States, when you came back from Vietnam. In fact that’s where, when I came back from Vietnam, I came back through Ft. Lewis. Every once in a while you would run into some guys who had been here and I mean they wouldn’t really talk to you. They just had this look like they had been there and done that. And really didn’t want to have much to do with the guys that were going over, it didn’t seem.

RV: Did you all want to talk and ask what can we expect, how was it?

SD: You know I think that they would have thought our questions were stupid.

(Laughter)

RV: So tell me about the flight over, what was that like?

SD: You know I really don’t remember much of the flight over. I just remember getting on a plane, and I basically remember landing. Maybe I slept a lot on the plane. I do remember that we had one stop. We stopped in Guam and refueled and had some lunch or dinner there. We were there for probably a couple of hours and then we’re back on a plane and the next thing I knew we were landing in Cam Ranh Bay.

RV: Wow. You had heard of Cam Ranh Bay I assume beforehand.
SD: Yes.
RV: What did it look like from air? Was it at night or in the morning?
SD: No it was day, I think it was about mid-day.
RV: Do you remember what it looked like?
SD: Yes. I remember flying over it and seeing the beach and ocean and then heading a little inland as I remember and landing on the tarmac. I guess I remember more about landing than anything because we all...I remember talking to guys thinking, ‘Well you know, we’re unarmed.’ (Laughter)
RV: You were really thinking that. ‘We’re landing in a war and we don’t have weapons.’
SD: I don’t have a weapon anywhere near me. You have no expectations of what it’s going to be like when you land there and as far as we all knew as soon as we get off the plane we’re going to start getting shot at. But that didn’t turn out to be the case. It was a huge base and then we came down off of the plane and got onto some buses and headed over to and area where you kind of checked in. Where you handed them your orders and they gave you other orders and got you situated for the first couple of days you were there.
RV: Did you remember what it felt like when you stepped off the plane and onto the tarmac? What were your first impressions of the country itself?
SD: That it was very hot, very muggy, and it smelled weird.
RV: What did it smell like?
SD: You know kind of a cross between what I had smelled in Guam I guess in terms of tropics and you know I got my first whiff of burning human excrement.
RV: (Laughter)
SD: What the hell is that? Then people tell you. You go, ‘You’re kidding.’
RV: The shit patrol.
SD: The shit patrol, yeah. You know they set up outhouses around and they would cut up oil drums and sit them under the toilet seat and then somebody would have the duty of pulling those oil drums full of shit out once or twice a day and they would pour kerosene and mix it in and set it on fire. I guess the ground wasn’t very conducive to
building any kind of sewer system and if you tried to dig some type of, what’s the term
I’m searching for?
RV: A trench or a hole?
SD: Yes. I mean you couldn’t dig it very deep because I think the water would
burble up. Cam Ranh Bay was probably five feet above sea level. So they had to deal
with it some way, so they burnt it.
RV: So you check in and you stay there for what did you say a day or so?
SD: I think I was in Cam Ranh Bay for about four or five days. I think that’s right.
RV: What were you waiting on?
SD: I was waiting on orders of where I was going to go. I mean it was kind
of…you know I hadn’t been…that’s where they decide what unit you’re going to go into.
And it could be really anywhere in the country. I walked a couple of days of guard duty
in Cam Ranh Bay. I remember they gave me a, to walk guard duty, they gave me an M-1
rifle. I had never fired or seen an M-1 rifle until they handed me one that day. I had
always trained with an M-16. I’m going, ‘What the hell am I going to do with this thing?’
RV: This was your first weapon issued?
SD: Yes.
RV: (Laughter) Okay. Did they tell you how to walk guard duty?
SD: Well you know you had been trained in walking guard duty, you know we
walked a lot of guard duty in basic and AIT and I was just walking a perimeter inside of a
perimeter so it wasn’t like I was walking the very outside of the perimeter. So I think they
gave us that duty to give us something to do more then anything else, to keep us out of
trouble.
SD: Any incidents, anything happen during those few days?
RV: No.
SD: Okay. Did you hear the war going on?
RV: No.
SD: Okay. I don’t think the whole time I was there I don’t think I heard one siren.
I don’t remember any incoming. I just remember being very sun burnt.
RV: Oh yeah?
SD: Well you know I was pretty much raised in the north. It gets hot and muggy in Indiana and upstate New York and Delaware but nothing like the tropics of Vietnam. When I went to basic training in South Carolina, it started in September so I went there mostly during the fall. It took some getting used to the heat and humidity.

RV: So tell me when you finally got your orders which unit were you assigned to and where did you go?

SD: I was assigned to Charlie Company, the 5th of the 46th battalion, 198th brigade in the Americal Division.

RV: And where did they send you?

SD: They sent me to Chu Lai. I took a, I don’t remember this but I’m sure I took some type of airplane transport, C-whatever it was.

RV: What was Chu Lai like?

SD: Smaller version of Cam Ranh Bay. It was right on the South China Sea. The area really is, as I look back on it, was really a beautiful area. There were mountains to the west and white sandy beach coastline. The base was surround by barbwire and lots of bunkers and you know it looked like an Army base and I think there was a, I don’t know if it was the Marines or the Navy had a squadron of fighters there and there was some other aircraft there as well. I think that’s correct.

RV: Was this your permanent base or how long were you there?

SD: I was only there briefly to kind of sign into the battalion and then went to the company headquarters there at the base and I mean in pretty quick order, I don’t even know if I was there a night, I was on a deuce and a half heading down Highway One to somewhere near… I have forgotten if it was Bayonet or Gator to meet up with the company. I think I spent a couple, again I don’t remember if it was Gator or Bayonet but I spent a couple of nights there waiting for the company to come in. That’s when I first saw some incoming. We got mortared that night. There were dinks in the wire. That was pretty exciting.

RV: Tell me about the mortar experience. Is this your first kind of taste of the war?

SD: Yes. You could hear the ‘thunk’ of the mortar round coming out of the tube and you knew what it was because you had heard that sound back in the States when you
were training and who knew where it was going to drop and that’s where everybody just
kind of, at least I was the first time out, kind of holding my breath. I soon learned that the
Vietnamese weren’t very good shots with those things but they did manage to get a
couple of rounds inside the base that night. I know that they had a couple of VC in the
wire. I think they got off one satchel of explosives at some bunker at some place but I
don’t remember anybody getting hurt.

RV: Well from there what happened? Where did you go?
SD: From there I got on another truck and headed up the road a few more miles
and there was my company standing on the side of the road of Highway One. So I got put
in a squad, a platoon and a squad and we humped down the road about…oh, I don’t know
probably a couple of clicks down this trail and set up a perimeter for the evening and off
we went.

RV: Steve, how did the company receive you? What was it like when you stepped
off the truck and walked over and joined them?
SD: Everybody was I thought pretty quiet but friendly. You know, ‘Welcome
aboard.’ There was a sergeant that kind of took me under his wing. He had been there for
a while. His name was Olsen as I remember. He was from I think Wisconsin. He said,
‘Stick close to me for the first few days here till you figure out what’s going on.’ That
was very helpful.
RV: I imagine that made you feel a little bit better.
SD: Yes a little better. I had somebody watching out for me that I didn’t do
something stupid the first few days that I was there.
RV: I assume you were issued your M-16 at this point.
SD: Yeah M-16 [actually I was issued an M-16 and ammo in Chu Lai.] and I was
carrying a couple of hand grenades and everybody was assigned in a squad to carry an
ammunition belt for the M-60 and canteens and you know the rest of the stuff. I think I
had two or three bandoleers of ammunition for my M-16. I probably was carrying…I
know off and on I did a claymore. You know everybody kind of divvied stuff out so it
was pretty much evenly weighted throughout the squad.
RV: They didn’t make you carry more since you were new?
SD: No, I don’t think so. God I couldn’t have carried anymore.
RV: What did that weigh, all that stuff together?
SD: (Laughter) I don’t know. I guess it probably weighed around 65 pounds, something like that.
RV: Wow.
SD: Yeah it’s one of the things that people ask me, ‘Well what was it like to be in the infantry and to be out in the field?’ I would say, ‘Well it was a lot of very hard physical work.’ Because you’re carrying around a 65-pound rucksack and you know carrying a weapon and during those days they made you wear a flak jacket and a steel pot. It was probably 92 degrees and 95% humidity and a lot of the time if you, especially in the Batangan Peninsula where I first was, you know you tried to stay off the trails which means you were walking in rice patties so you were up to your knees in mud with all this weight on you. You know I played high school football, two-a-day work outs, worked in some construction, you know I had done some hard work but I had never worked this hard carrying this much weight through that much crap in all my life.
RV: Was it a shock to your system there at first?
SD: Yes I thought…a couple of time I was straggling a little bit behind the squad and I began thinking, ‘Jesus, I don’t know if I’m going to make this.’ But you get acclimated and I guess you get toughened up and you know you do what you have to do. I don’t know that you ever get used to it but you get better at it, I guess.
RV: What else were you carrying besides your weapons and ammo and your steel pot and flak jacket? What else did you have with you?
SD: I know I had a bayonet. What else? Some personal belongings, not very many, a wallet, and I carried a couple of quarts of water. I can’t remember really anything else.
RV: I assume a relatively new uniform.
SD: Yeah, the standard poncho liner that everybody used as a blanket at night and as a tent during the day if you were stopped down for something. It’s a way to put a couple of sticks and hook it up as a little lean-to tent and get out of the sun.
RV: What about food rations?
SD: God, I guess I was probably carrying probably one day of rations. You know I really don’t remember. I must have been though because you didn’t get resupplied every day. I remember carrying water more than I remember carrying rations.

RV: How fast would you go through your water?

SD: Well you would really if, that’s the thing, I would try to, and some guys carried less then I did and I don’t know how they did that, but if you were really out humping a lot during the day I tried not to drink more then a quart during the day and save a quart so I could really replenish at night. And when you stopped down at night you would usually find someplace where we could fill up the canteens and throw a lot of tablets in them, which made it taste like shit but you still had water.

RV: Tell me about the first few days. What were you feeling? I mean you got this sergeant that’s helping you out. Did you stick right by his side?

SD: Well I wasn’t right by his side but I was no more then one guy away from him, usually following him. We were working the area that was kind of out near My Lai, which is heavily mined, lots of VC. We were on patrol during the day and at night certain squads would go out and set up ambushes or listening posts at night. I didn’t have to go and do it. I didn’t go out at night for the first few weeks, I don’t think, that I was there.

RV: Because they didn’t allow you?

SD: I think they spared me that.

RV: What kind of things were they telling you Steve? You said the first night you guys kind of, when you hooked up with them, you went out and you dug in for the night, you set up a defensive perimeter. Were they saying, ‘Now here’s what you need to be doing, here’s what you don’t need to be doing,’ or were they just not talking, or were they saying ‘Just watch and learn.’?

SD: They would tell you where to dig your foxhole, how to set up your line of fire but I already pretty much knew that from AIT. A lot of it was the importance of if you’re on guard duty and that foxhole is the importance of staying awake. Don’t be smoking cigarettes at night, no radios. A lot of guys had radios in the field and they would plug in an earphone. If you got caught doing that you were in a lot of trouble. So you know things like that I guess. Not to be afraid if you really think that there is something out
there and you see something don’t be afraid to fire off that claymore. Once you did that
you can assure that everybody was going to be alive and awake and after it.

RV: Did you ever have to do that early on?

SD: No. I think I was in the field like three or four days the first time that we got
attacked. We set up for a perimeter in the evening and it was just about…oh, it was
heading towards dark, twilight. Some VC must have gotten close to our perimeter and
threw two or three grenades into the middle of our perimeter. Everybody ducked down
and headed for the foxholes. We just kind of RECON by fire for about 30 seconds or so. I
remember my sergeant saying to me, ‘Well congratulations, you just got your CIB.’

RV: (Laughter) What was your reaction?

SD: (Laughter) I said, ‘I did?’

RV: (Laughter)

SD: I think I laughed with him.

RV: What was that first taste of combat like?

SD: Well you know it’s confusion, because when something like that happens
everybody kind of, at least I did, you know the hair on the back of your head goes straight
up. I guess I probably froze for a second or so and trying to figure out, ‘Okay, what do I
do?’ You know then you’re looking for that foxhole, that place where you’re supposed to
be setting up that defensive position. After you go through that the first time and you
react the way you’re supposed to react, that’s somewhat of getting a…a little bit of
getting a monkey off your back because you never know how you’re going to react to it
until it happens. Then once you see yourself react accordingly or the way you’re
supposed to, you feel a little better. You go, ‘Okay, I guess I know what I’m doing or I
know a little bit about what I’m suppose to be doing.’

RV: Were you pleased with the way you reacted?

SD: Yeah I guess. I think it built my confidence level a little bit. I don’t know
about pleased, but it was a confidence builder.

RV: Well Steve tell me after, this is after the first few days you said out in the
field?

SD: Right.
RV: Describe for me what a typical day was like for you as you’re out there in the field doing this. What would you all do?

SD: Well the first month I was out there it was you would be up in the morning just as the sun was coming up, that’s when everybody was getting up and getting after it. Almost every day we would be on a patrol, some type of sweep or some type of search and destroy mission.

RV: Was it company size?

SD: Sometimes it was company sized and sometimes it was platoon sized. The only time we really operated as a squad was if we came upon something and you wanted to check something out a few hundred yards away you would send out a squad of guys and have them report back on radio or come back into the platoon or company strength. Or you would send out a squad of guys on a night ambush. Daytime missions were usually in platoon or company size wise. Batangan Peninsula was I think I said earlier just full of VC. It was heavily, heavily mined. I mean we found mines every day. We had guys, seemed like every few days we would have somebody wounded who had hit a mine. Some of them, most of them weren’t all that serious but enough that they would have to sent back to the rear. So everybody was just very uptight, nervous, and getting angry.

RV: What do you mean?

SD: Well you would come into these villages and you would see women and children and old men. You wouldn’t see any men between the ages of probably 15 and 50. So you know it was a VC village and you knew that these people were…what they were doing…what was happening at night was very much different then what was happening in the daytime. This was the same area of operation of Lieutenant Calley. So we were feeling the same frustration as his troopers were. We were handling it a lot better then he did. There was a lot of tension and apprehension and frustration in dealing with the people out there. I really didn’t understand tactically why we would let this go on. Why wouldn’t we just take all these folks, gather them up, get them back to the rear, ascertain whether they were good guys or bad guys and then let us go through this area in a sweep and assume that anybody that were left out there were bad guys.

RV: Would you all talk about that or is this something on reflection?
SD: I think we used to talk about that. It was part of the frustration. We knew they were VC and that we’re not allowed to do anything about it in many cases.

RV: Would you search the village?

SD: Sure. And find tunnels. And sometimes, not often but every once in a while we find ammunition and we would fire that up.

RV: Tell me how you search a village. Like you walk in the main road and what happens? Or what you guys did, how you all did it. Not necessarily the textbook way but just how it happened for you.

SD: Well if you would come across a village and you had just been shot at and somebody had disappeared back towards this village you would come on the village. You would be coming up in a single file up to the village and then you would spread out so you would kind of sweep through it on line if you would, pushing all the people in front of you. So you would get them all into one spot so you would have some control then. You didn’t want anybody behind you. Then you would start going through the hooches and seeing what was in there. Sometimes you didn’t find anything. You would just find food or tools, supplies, those kinds of things for farming the rice paddies. Everyone once in a while you would find some tunnel that lead to who knows where.

RV: You wouldn’t go down in it?

SD: Well, we had some tunnel rats. (Laughter) I remember this one guy, I mean I thought he was absolutely nuts to go down there. You would hand him a .45 and he would crawl down in there. More often then not he would bring out something, some satchel charge, or AK-47 or bunch of unexploded mortars or something.

RV: What would happen when you find things like this? You suspected the village was VC but now you got some proof that they are doing something against you.

SD: I never remember burning a village down in the Batangan Peninsula. I remember burning one up in the mountains later, a few months later. As I recall we would, if we found the weapons we would take them back or we would get somebody from ordnance to blow them up or we’d attempt and sometimes ordnance would come in behind us and attempt to blow up the tunnels. Sometimes depending on what we found, we would round up some people in the village and send them back to the rear for questioning. Beyond that it’s kind of hazy what would happen.
RV: What was morale like during your first few weeks there and did that change?
SD: I don’t think it was high because everybody was so tense. You know, kind of
ticked at how this whole operation was going. So there was kind of a disgruntled spirit, I
guess. It really you know, a lot of that was caused by if every two or three days or so
somebody in the unit was getting wounded guys would get you know, they would be
more fearful they’re going to be the next to step on a mine. They would be ticked that
their friend had got hurt and there is nobody to shoot at to retaliate against.
RV: Right. I hear this myth, people hear this myth that you didn’t get close to new
guys first of all because they didn’t know what they were doing and they likely would get
killed or hurt quicker but tell me how bonds form. And was that myth true?
SD: I think there is a little bit of truth to it. In the first few days that you’re there I
think you know I think people are kind of wanting to know who this guy is. They want to
know that you’re going to have your act together and you’re not going to be some kind of
jerk or cause them to get hurt. Once people figure out that you halfway have your act
together and it really doesn’t, in my mind, I don’t think it took that long to get acclimated
to the process. Within a week or two I thought I had a pretty good relationship with most
of the guys in my squad and with the other squads in the platoon. So I guess there is a
little truth to that but I think it’s exaggerated. If on the other hand, and I saw this happen,
you get somebody who comes out to the squad or comes out to the platoon and this guy is
dumber than a rock or just has no common sense you’re: A, trying to stay away from him
and B, you’re trying to get him sent back to the rear.
RV: How would you get that done?
SD: Call the first sergeant and tell him to get his ass out of here. Find him a rear
job someplace. (Laughter)
RV: And you were able to get that done?
SD: I saw that happen a couple of times. It didn’t get done by me, but it got done
by somebody. Either one of the squad sergeants would call the top sergeant back at the
rear and say, ‘Man, you know, who are you sending us here? Get him out of here.’ That
didn’t happen very often but I saw it happen a couple of times during the five, six,
however many months I was out in the field.
RV: What were those relationships like overall for you while you were there out in the field, I mean is that the most important thing motivating you or is it the policy of the United States, or is it your own survival?

SD: I think that your own survival is dependent upon survival of the squad, the survival of the platoon. I don’t know if Vietnam was any different than any other war, you know, in some of the stuff I’ve read. You fight for each other as much as anything else.

RV: Tell me about your supplies, were you able to get adequate supplies and resupplied when you needed it? Did you ever have to go without for a while?

SD: I think there were a couple of times where for whatever reason the hueys were grounded and we might not get resupplied for like a day past or two days past when we would normally get resupplied but I don’t ever remember anything more than that. One time when we were pinned down in a valley out west of Chu Lai and then we had all kinds of problems. But the worst part of the Batangan Peninsula was walking the mine fields and then either having, being mortared every night or I remember one night we had a number of…a pretty big rocket attack on the company that really, that was the only night when I was out at the Batangan Peninsula where some of those rounds from the rockets really got close.

RV: To you or your squad?

SD: Well they got inside the perimeter. It was close enough where it shook the earth. I mean I was down in a hole in the ground and that hole was about equivalent of a six or seven on the Richter scale.

RV: Wow. I can only image that was a bit scary.

SD: Everybody was scared that night and we had dinks in a wire. We had a number of kills I think that night. Them, not us, and everybody was pretty ticked off the next morning.

RV: At the enemy?

SD: At the enemy.

RV: And when you were ticked off did you want to go up…
SD: You wanted them to stand and fight but in typical guerilla warfare I mean their tactics were just the opposite and I understood that. For them to stand and fight they were going to get hurt.

RV: Right. Did you all understand that?

SD: I don’t know if everybody understood that. I had read enough American History to know that the Americans were successful a lot because they hid behind the trees and shot at the guys in the red coats. That wasn’t always the case in every battle in the American Revolution but it frustrated the hell out of the British on a lot of occasions.

So I understood the tactics that the VC were trying to use. You had to work hard to try to flush them out. I’m not sure that everybody in the unit understood that but I was talking to some guys that were there at the time, you know. There were guys that knew what was going on in that regard.

RV: Steve, tell me about the mines. You said this was perhaps the biggest problem, something that you encountered everyday. It was a constant threat. How would you find a mine, what did you look for?

SD: You’re looking for…I didn’t walk a lot, I didn’t walk at any point out on the Batangan Peninsula.

RV: Why not?

SD: I was still a…an FNG.

RV: And they didn’t quite trust you out there.

SD: No, most of the guys who were walking point had been out in the bush for a couple of months. I think there was some trust built up. I had their trust but I didn’t have their trust enough that you were going to put somebody who had only been in country a few weeks out walking point.

RV: Right.

SD: That just wasn’t going to happen. It would be stupid on their part and it would be stupid on my part to even think about doing that.

RV: Did these point walkers, did they volunteer for this or were they assigned?

SD: No, most of them I think kind of accepted the position I guess is the best way to put it. I don’t remember when I did walk point volunteering for it but I just thought that I was probably the best person for it.
RV: Go ahead and tell me then about the mines, locating them.

SD: There are two guys really that are walking point. There’s one guy who is out in front and he’s looking down and the guy behind is looking out. So the guy who’s looking down is looking at the trail, looking where he’s putting his feet, looking for something that is out of order. Something that doesn’t belong or something that looks like it’s just been moved or looking for a trip wire.

RV: Now these are on trails?

SD: Mines are almost always on trails, which is why if you get to a point where you go, ‘Geez we’re in the middle of a mine field, get the hell off the trail and get out into either the bush and cut your way through it or get out into the rice paddies and walk through the rice paddies.’ There’s never really an easy way to set up a mine in a rice paddy. But that made it a lot tougher going and you weren’t going to get to where you were supposed to be in maybe the time you were suppose to be there. So if you could, you tried to walk the trail. If it got impossible to walk the trail you got off the trail and walked the rice paddies.

RV: So these two are they within sight of you guys, are they that far out where you can’t see them?

SD: They are within sight. I would say the next guy behind them is probably 15 yards, 20 yards and these guys are probably…one looking at the ground and the next guy is probably ten feet behind him.

RV: I would image that’s a pretty hairy task.

SD: Yes that’s a little hairy. And the hairiest spot I ever saw with regard to mines was out in the Batangan Peninsula. I mean you ran into mines every place else but nothing like what was out there.

RV: You’re talking about one about every 100 yards or at least one a day?

SD: At least one a day. Sometimes there would be it would seem like every, and I wasn’t up walking point but you remember stopping and everybody would stand still and that means we found something else. That might happen you know several times in an hour.

RV: Right.
SD: At that point you start saying okay we’re probably going to get off the trail here and I got to hump this damn thing through a rice paddy.

RV: I can see where you all would get pretty pissed off at the enemy. You want to say okay whoever is making us do this I want to take them out.

SD: And it’s hot as hell and it’s just you know, you’re tired and you know you’ve been up half the night every night that you’re out there. Sleep deprivation is just kind of normal.

RV: What keeps you going? In that kind of situation what keeps you going instead of saying the hell with this I just can’t do it anymore.

SD: Well it’s not like you have a lot of choice. (Laughter)

RV: But civilians listening to this they are going to be like, ‘My God, that just sounds like hell on earth.’

SD: Well you’re in the Army, you’re under orders, and there’s guys around you who are depending on you. I know that sounds a little hokey but I mean, that’s how it is. You know I’ve never been so dependent on a group of people, a group of guys in my life I mean with the exception of my wife than those guys who you fought with in Vietnam.

RV: The injuries from the mines would these mainly from the two up front or could it be something, someone back in the line?

SD: Mostly up in the front. You know occasionally the point guys would miss something or it would be something that was slightly off the trail. That’s what you tried to do as you were following these guys. You try to almost follow in their footsteps. It narrowed the path as much as you could because maybe if you got off two feet or three feet to the right there was something that they missed and somebody would hit that and an explosion would happen. I saw that happen a couple of times but I don’t remember any more than that. It didn’t happen very often.

RV: Tell me about the basic differences between the daytime and nighttime. You hear all this stuff about that they ruled the night and you guys ruled the day. What was the actual reality of the situation there?

SD: I don’t know that I would say that they ruled the night but some of the advantages that we had we lost during the night. The odds evened more at night; let me put it that way.
RV: How so?

SD: Well because the loss of sight. I mean it’s really that simple and they did know the area better then we knew it. So we took in more defensive posture at night. The only time that they could take the offense was at night with the exception of one time that I was there. In my mind even though they were taking the offense, they were up against some pretty solid forces that were dug in. As many times as you hear about you know VC and they got inside the compound and so on and so forth. I mean most times when they did that, they weren’t very successful. They ended up being killed and the amount of damage that they did versus, the amount of lives that they lost you know I…I was never in a situation where I saw the VC or the NVA win a skirmish with the exception of one time and I wasn’t there. I was in the rear when my squad got overrun.

RV: We’ll save that and talk about that when we have a little bit more time. Let me ask you a couple of just basic questions that people want to know about the war, want to know about…this stuff is either perpetuated by movies, by books, or just rumor. Tell me about fragging. Was that ever discussed, did you ever see it, witness it, hear about it?

SD: About what?

RV: Fragging.

SD: Fragging?

RV: Yes.

SD: You’re talking about fellow soldiers?

RV: Fellow soldiers killing officers because of you know whatever. Personal reasons or professional stuff. You know, ‘I don’t know what to go back out there the next day and this guy is going to make me so I’m going to take him out.’ That’s a basic scenario.

SD: I remember it being talked about a couple of times but I don’t ever remember it happening.

RV: When it was talked about was it just more of a joke?

SD: No, you would be pretty pissed off at either a sergeant or at a lieutenant or captain who you felt was out to make a name for himself, who was more gung-ho than he was smart. You know, I don’t know this for sure but I remember having a conversation about how some lieutenant, and it wasn’t in our company but it was in one of the other
companies in the battalion, I guess woke up in the morning with a hand grenade down at
the bottom of his poncho liner. That’s what I heard.

RV: As a message.
SD: As a message

RV: What about tension between those who were enlisted and maybe career
military, the officers, or even the lower ranks between those who are drafted. Did you see
any tension there, any problems?

SD: No. Maybe there was some in the rear but once you got to the field all of that
disappeared in a hurry. I thought I had good relationships with my platoon lieutenant who
later became company commander and most of the sergeants that were my squad leader,
with the exception of one. So I thought that those guys all pretty much had their act
together and were pretty good leaders.

RV: What about tension between those in the field and those in the rear?

SD: We saw some of that. (Laughter)
RV: Tell me about that.
SD: (Laughter)
RV: You know Steve that’s almost a positive answer almost every time.
SD: Well we were almost in a riot. We came back to the rear on a three-day stand
down after being out in the field for I don’t know how many weeks, you lose track. We
were tired and weary and wanted some beer and steaks. We had just gotten back. We had
only been there for about a day and a couple of our guys were over at the EM club, there
was a lot of racial tension in the rear as well. I was back catching a nap at the hooch and I
got waken up by a couple of guys in my squad and said, ‘What’s going on?’ He said,
‘Well,’ I’ve forgotten his name, ‘just got the shit kicked out of him by a bunch of black
guys in the EM club.’ I said, ‘Why’d they do that for?’ He goes, ‘I guess because they
can.’

RV: This was a racial thing?
SD: This was a racial thing. And when I got a rear job I saw a lot of that. Anyway
here’s a whole company of infantry, guys that had just come down on stand down and
they take your weapons away from you when you come in or you lose all your
ammunition because officers don’t want to be fired on by the grunts. (Laughter) So you
know we didn’t have any guns or anything to take over there. We would have fired on these guys I’m sure. So we’re taking apart the cots and we’re on our way in force headed over to the EM club. They are about 20 other guys standing there waiting for us. The MPs show up in a deuce and a half and start waiving their nightsticks around and managed to get us corralled and back to our quarters on the beach there. Then they turned right around and said hook them up guys; you’re heading back out.

RV: Oh really?
SD: Yes.
RV: They’re going to get rid of you?
SD: We got suited up and got all of our gear and the helicopters were out on the pad within an hour and a half and we were back out in the field.
RV: Was that planned?
SD: I think they wanted us out of there because we were going to hurt some people. You just don’t fuck with a guy who’s come out of the field.
RV: Right. And the guys who beat up your friend, they were rear personnel?
SD: They were rear personnel. Yes they were REMFs. You know it’s probably a good thing that they sent us back to the field because we would have found them and hurt them.
RV: This was Chu Lai?
SD: This was Chu Lai.
RV: This is what, in 1970 still?
SD: Yes. This is all 1970. You’re going to ask me what month and sometime between March and August.
RV: Actually I’m not going to ask you month because I know that’s hard to remember. Tell me a little bit more about the racism in the rear when you were in the field, that part of your tour.
SD: I didn’t see any racism in the field. We had black guys in our unit and I mean they were all good soldiers. One of them was a medic and all good straight tough guys. It’s when you got back to the rear that you saw the racial issues.
RV: Why was that?
SD: Some of it had to do with what was going on back in the States. It was a
reflection of that. The black guys tended to hang out together. A lot of black power
salutes. They would attempt to intimidate white guys.

RV: How would they do that?

SD: Just by getting in your face, trying to start a fight. When I got my rear job…I
liked to play basketball and I played a lot of basketball in the rear. I had played a lot in a
sandlot growing up in New York and often times on the basketball court if you’re playing
and something didn’t go their way I mean you would find two or three of these guys in
your face.

RV: That sounds like it’s really tightly wound.

SD: It was. You really, in my mind, had to be careful where you were at night in
the rear.

RV: Really?

SD: Much like walking around in some cities in the United States where there
were certain neighborhoods that you just didn’t want to be in at night, same kind of
feeling.

RV: That’s incredible and you’re all there. When they did the black power salute,
was that an insult? Did you all take it that way?

SD: We thought it was an insult and a threat. I took it as a threat. I really didn’t
understand why the officer corps didn’t shut this stuff down.

RV: Were there black officers?

SD: Not a whole lot. I can remember a couple but that’s all.

RV: Why do you think the officers didn’t deal with it?

SD: Maybe they were intimidated by it too. Maybe they felt that politically, if
they tried to step in they would have a bigger problem than what they had

RV: How often did you go back, when you were in the field how often did you go
back to the rear to rest up?

SD: Oh geez, not enough.

RV: (Laughter)
SD: I guess you would be out in the field like three or four weeks and then you would come back for like a three-day stand down and then you would go back out again. I think that’s right but I…

RV: Give or take.

SD: Give or take.

RV: Do you remember any other incidents, any racial incidents besides this one? I mean you talked about the black power salutes. Anything happen to you personally?

SD: No, other than guys get in my face. I guess I said earlier I was always the kind of guy that didn’t back down for much of anything. I guess once somebody sees you’re not going to intimidate this person they kind of leave you alone. The group dynamics were different than the individual. It just seemed like if the black guys would get in a group, I mean they would just get more full of themselves.

RV: Was that true for you all as well?

SD: I don’t think so. There were some guys in and around that would use the N word but not very many of them. I don’t know about anybody else but I always tried to discourage that. I mean what do you want to do that for? Why do you want to light that match for?

RV: Were there any people straddling the fence? Any black guys, white guys who were friends with both sides?

SD: Well like I said the guys who I had served with in the field that were black, they weren’t that way at all.

RV: Really?

SD: Yes. It was always the guy in the rear. The black guys working in the motor pool or they were cooks or clerks. Well not so much the clerical people either. If you were a clerk in a brigade or battalion headquarters or even a company headquarters I don’t think that you would get away with that.

RV: Right. The black guys in the field with you, when they came back to the rear they acted differently.

SD: No, they hung around us.

RV: Really?

SD: They hung around with the company.
RV: Well Steve why don’t we go ahead and stop for the day. We’re right at our
time limit.
SD: Ok.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Dant. I am again in Lubbock, Texas. Today is April 20, 2005. It’s approximately 8:22 a.m. Central Standard Time. Steve you’re in Colorado Springs again. Why don’t we pick up where we left off last time in our conversation? Basically it was covering what your typical day was like and what some of your activities were. I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about you equipment and some of the things you carried with you in the field. If you want to pick up there, Steve.

SD: Sure. Well what I think I said last time we were talking about of the basics. One of those was the amount of water that you carried. It was very hot there, very humid. I remember I carried two containers of water. One was just a bladder thing. I think it held like 2 quarts of water and I also carried a standard canteen on my belt. I tried to drink as little as I possibly could during the day and really replenish as you kind of standing down in the evening. You had to replenish water during the day but you were losing it probably as fast as you were putting it in your body.

RV: Were you able to get a resupply of water? Were you filling up your canteens in the streams and using your…

SD: Mostly – especially out on the Batangan Peninsula – we were filling it up wherever we could find it. Dropping in…which sometimes was even rice paddy water. Then dropping in a lot of whatever the tablets were that would hopefully sterilize in some fashion the water to make it drinkable. It never tasted very good, but at least you didn’t get sick from it.
RV: Did you have people in your unit who had problems with water rationing and making sure they were careful about it?
SD: Yeah I mean I think I carried as much or more water than anybody certainly in the squad maybe in the platoon. There were other guys that just carried a couple of canteens and seemed like they were always thirsty. You learned really not to share your water or you were going to be in as much trouble as they were. They had to learn to conserve or carry more water.
RV: So you guys didn’t ask each other for water very often?
SD: No, that just wasn’t done. You carried what you needed. It’s one thing to bum a cigarette off of somebody but it was another thing to ask somebody for somebody else’s water.
RV: Right.
SD: It was the same thing with ammunition. I carried three bandoliers. I carried an M-16 rifle so I carried like three bandoliers of, what do they call them?
RV: What, the ammunition for the M-16?
SD: Yes the ammunition, clips of ammunition. I think there were seven or eight clips of ammunition on each bandolier. And those were, a couple wrapped around my belt and one wrapped around my shoulder. Most guys carried two. I was always afraid that I did not want to run out of ammunition.
RV: Wanted to have as much as possible.
SD: Yes.
RV: Well that makes sense in a war zone to be kind of ready for that.
SD: It makes for a heavier pack.
RV: Sure. Did your equipment function properly, starting with your M-16?
SD: Yeah for the most part. I really didn’t get some of the stories that I was reading; you know negative stories about the M-16. I never had a problem, never had the weapon not fire when I needed it. I always thought that if it was taken care of and it was sighted properly it was a very accurate weapon. I never had an incident where a pin came out of a hand grenade when it wasn’t supposed to. I never even saw any of our M-60 machine gun. It always worked fine. So I thought our equipment was…we were in pretty good shape.
RV: Tell me about your weapons in general. You had your M-16. How about a .45, did you carry that?
SD: No I didn’t.
RV: What else did you carry with you as far as weapons are concerned?
SD: I carried a knife. I don’t know if it was a bayonet or not. It could have been a bayonet. I carried usually a couple of hand grenades. The other stuff, the other weaponry was kind of divided amongst the squad. If you weren’t carrying a belt of M-60 ammunition then you were probably carrying a couple of claymores. Or maybe a few extra rounds for the guy who was carrying the M-79.
RV: Was that expected for you all to kind of pick up a load for those?
SD: It was kind of divvied up. When I first got into country the squad leader kind of handed you the stuff that you were going to carry. Once you got into country for a while you just kind of understood that you’re carrying this, I’m carrying this, you guys are carrying that. It’s just kind of automatically divvied out. I would bet you that it came within a half a pound in terms of weight division amongst the squad in terms of evening it out.
RV: So everything was distributed equally.
SD: By weight.
RV: Yes, you pulled your own share.
SD: Right.
RV: Were you ordered to do that or was that something you all just did on your own?
SD: Well it could have been ordered. I mean it would have been ordered, but I never heard an order to that effect. It was just done.
RV: What was your favorite weapon?
SD: The M-16.
RV: Why was that? You already said it was accurate
SD: It was accurate. I felt like next to the M-60…I felt like I could react a lot quicker with an M-16 to anything that was going on then any other weapon that I could be carrying. I did feel like it was accurate. I felt I could turn and fire or be on the ground and fire with a great deal of accuracy in a hurry if I had to. That wasn’t the case.
necessarily I guess if you’re carrying an M-79 or grenade launcher but you couldn’t spray
ammunition with an M-79 the way you could with an M-16. An M-60 took a lot longer to
get going. Besides I wasn’t the biggest guy in the squad. That usually is assigned to the
biggest guy in the squad because it was a pretty heavy weapon to carry but it took a little
while to get that weapon going.

RV: What would you say was the most feared weapon?
SD: From the enemy?
RV: Yes.
SD: Probably RPGs, at least in my case. Man those things come at you and maybe
because I’ve been under a couple of attacks where a couple of them have come pretty
close.

RV: What it is like for an RPG round to be shot at you?
SD: Well the first one I remember was at night and you can kind of hear it coming
in and I didn’t realize what it was at first but once you hear one you know what the hell it
is the next time.

RV: What does it sound like? Is it very distinct?
SD: I just remember seeing a flash of light and whistling through the air. Then
you know the explosion hits with a thud and it’s actually bigger I think, the grenade itself
is bigger than a hand grenade so it’s a bigger explosive going off. I mean it caused a lot
of damage in the surrounding area. If you weren’t well fortified or underground a good
piece I mean you’re going to get hurt.

RV: Right. Okay.
SD: I’ve been close enough where it’s literally you know shook the ground and
knocked stuff over in my trench. It felt like the trench was going to come down on top of
me.

RV: That’s pretty powerful. Why don’t we talk about the enemy for a little bit?
Tell me what your general impressions were of who you were facing in the fields.

SD: Well I faced two different enemy in the field. When I first was in country it
was almost all Viet Cong and they were guerilla warriors. I don’t know where they were
in the daytime, I never saw a man over probably the age of 14 under the age of…well, it
was hard to tell how old they were, but under the age of 50 during the day. During the
day if you would go through the villages it was all mamasons and kids, babysons. They
were good at it. They knew the terrain. They were operating where they lived. I mean
they knew how to put together booby traps and mine the trails and attack and disappear at
night, good at ambushing at night. So you really had to be on your guard all the time. In
the daytime if you’re walking trails you had to be constantly looking for mines. Very
rarely did we ever get attacked during the daytime in the Batangan Peninsula. At night
you had to make sure that you set up your perimeters, your ambushes correctly and you
had to be careful to stay alert and awake and you just had to have your act together or you
were going to get hurt.

RV: What about the strengths? People talk about today, looking back that they
were fighting in their ‘backyard.’ Did that make a difference?

SD: Sure it does. It would have made a difference if I was fighting in Peekskill, New York where I grew up as opposed to the jungles of Vietnam because I knew all the
woods and the terrain in that area. I knew all the hiding places and how to get over a hill
quick, or just where the trails were. It’s a real advantage in a guerilla warfare setting.
That having been said, I never felt like that they…you know things were kind of equal at
night between the Americans and the Viet Cong I thought because what we gave up in
terms of knowing the terrain. I think we made up for in terms of firepower and how much
we could bring to bear. We always had pretty much control of the situation in the daytime

RV: What were the major weaknesses of the enemy would you say?

SD: Well firepower, for sure. They couldn’t bring to bear nearly the amount of
firepower that we could. I also had a sense that when we were being attacked by them
from time to time that there weren’t nearly as many of them. We had a squad of ten
people and I always thought there were probably two or three guys that were throwing a
couple of grenades at us and they were disappearing into the woods. But to their credit
they knew what their weaknesses were. It would have been a big mistake on their part to
try to stand and fight. That would have played into our hands.

RV: So that was rare when they would stand and fight you.

SD: That’s exactly right. The whole time I was over there I got into an extended
skirmish or even small battle maybe twice.

RV: Wow. And the rest was?
SD: The rest was all hit and run. Either you were hitting them in an ambush or
they were hitting you in an ambush and it was over in a matter of, if not minutes, then
seconds.

RV: Wow. How frustrating was that for you all? Or was that perfectly okay for
you?

SD: Well it was frustrating because you realize that you have the firepower to
really hurt these people and to win this thing and so when you can’t…you know it’s like
chasing somebody around in a ring who you know if you could just get after them and lay
a glove on them you’re going to knock them out. But dancing like a butterfly and sting
like a bee kind of deal. Steal a phrase from Mr. Ali.

RV: That’s a good analogy.

SD: You know some of this registered at least with some of us from a political
standpoint. I never understood or disagreed a lot with how we were going about fighting
this war. I thought that we should be putting notice out that if you’re going to control the
countryside then you have to control the population. If you’re going to control the
population then from my standpoint is that you move the population out of the field so
that you consider anybody that is in the field the enemy. And quit screwing around with
all the political governors, and regional governors and chieftains where you have to go
into these zones where the rules change in terms of who can be fired upon and when you
can call in artillery and you know it just gave more advantage to a guerilla fighter. Take
that away from them so that if you’re in the field and you see somebody you know then
that’s the enemy.

RV: Were you all aware of the overall strategy of your enemy? That these hit and
run tactics were basically, we know now looking back, just a kind of maneuver or a tactic
to keep you all occupied, keep the United States occupied and just waiting over year after
year after year until we basically said enough is enough, this is not going to end or we’re
not changing our strategy to do certain things such as invade North Vietnam or invade
Laos. Were y’all aware of the big picture? Were you seeing this over time or some of
you?

SD: Well I think in a roundabout way the frustration with regard to the tactics we
were using was I guess part of that. To me looking back, you know and even somewhat
then I think I had it in the back of my mind but you know it goes back to what I was saying earlier. We needed to control the territory and in doing so we needed to divide the people into either you’re with us or you’re against us and move the people who are with us back behind Highway 1 and we will consider anybody on the other side of Highway 1 the enemy. Because the issue of, I didn’t see where body counts were getting us anywhere.

RV: So you felt that policy was not quite the right one?
SD: Right. That’s why I say just because you kill a few enemy doesn’t mean you’ve won anything. You would go up and you would take a hilltop where you had been taking mortars or grenades from the night before and find a cache of weapons and you give them back the hilltop. You would leave. They are going to be right back on that hilltop the next morning having not lost any strategic location.

RV: Was this discussed by you all? Did you say well this is crazy, we just did that and they are doing this?
SD: Yes. I remember talking about you know, you know after…I may have mentioned this to you last time. We got into a firefight one evening, one night and it was one of the more sustained firefights in that we were taking incoming for more then a few minutes and we were trying to get our artillery support. We called in for artillery but we couldn’t get a political clearance from whoever the regional chief or whatever they call them for like 20 or 25 minutes. And those 20, 25 minutes in the kind of warfare we were fighting; you know that just ties one hand behind your back. It was stupid.

RV: So you were all actively discussing this on the ground?
SD: Yeah. The frustration that we felt that we were fighting a war for the South Vietnamese but we couldn’t get an artillery clearance from this regional and I’ve forgotten the term they used but administrator, Vietnamese administration person. We’re fighting for his country. So the tactics, that’s an example of how the tactics were in our minds. We were all pissed off about it.

RV: Was there anything to do about it? You couldn’t change on the ground?
SD: Well I wouldn’t know at my level. I’m sure my company commander had something to say about it the next morning or that night or our platoon leader, our LT had
something to say about it. I don’t know what was said and I don’t know what was said
back to them.

RV: Tell me about the tactics of the enemy besides a hit and run. What else would
they do or is that what you saw mainly?

SD: I saw a lot of, you know, we’d set up a perimeter at night. They would…and
it’s hard to say that you saw ‘a lot of’. You would go for a week or ten days and not see
anything. My sense was that they would watch us and see how we were operating and try
to determine where we were going to go. Watching us to try to determine if we were
going to go someplace that might work to their advantage or find or observe some type of
something that somebody was doing that they could use to their advantage. Sometimes I
felt like they were out there in the woods waiting for us to fall asleep. You know so that
they could sneak in and throw in a couple of grenades into the perimeter or where we
were setting up an ambush. That was my sense at least in dealing with the Viet Cong.

RV: How about NVA? How often would you run into them?

SD: Well I started seeing NVA when we got out of the Batangan Peninsula. We
started operating more west of Chu Lai, up in the foothills. The terrain looked a lot like
the hills the size of what you would see in like Pennsylvania, that kind of thing. There
you would see pith helmets. I think that they were also operating in conjunction with the
Viet Cong because we continued to see some of them from time to time, but more NVA
who had their act together with regard to RPGs. Sometime, I don’t know, I think it was in
May we walked into this valley and got pinned down for a couple of days and I’m sure
that was NVA.

RV: Okay. Why do you say that, because they were able to keep you down there?

SD: Because they were able to sustain a kind of ongoing confrontation longer
than the VC ever would. They had position kind of a triangulated high ground that they
held and they used it very well.

RV: Steve, you describe some of your tactics that you guys would do, kind of out
setting up the ambushes and what not. Can you describe some of those common tactics
and how you all would actually go about doing that? I’m not sure people listening to this
in the future will understand fully what it means to set up an ambush or what it means to
set up a defense perimeter or what it means to go search and destroy.
SD: Most of the time that I was out in the field I operated at either company or platoon strength. A lot of times it was at...the company would set up at night somewhere and set up a perimeter. The company consisted of three platoons and each one of those platoons was about 25 or 30 guys. The platoons were divided into three squads with 8 to 10 guys in a squad. So you would set up as a company at night and try to find a hilltop or someplace that was defensible in a circle and dig your positions so that you would triangulate your lines of fire if you came under attack that night. So if everybody opened fire at once there would be ribbons of fire cutting through the night. It would be very difficult, if everybody’s firing at once, to come through all of those fire zones. There were also a lot of times we were operating a platoon and a platoon would set up a perimeter so it would be a smaller perimeter. Instead of having three or four guys in a foxhole, you might have two or three guys in a foxhole. Then it’s tougher to stay awake because you’re doing two on and two off. I mean two hours awake and two hours asleep kind of deal. Or from time to time and usually if you went out as a squad and that didn’t happen very often during the day unless you were sent out on some kind of tangent to check out some spots. But most often we operated as squad at night where we would go off the hilltop where we would set up the perimeter either in a platoon or company size and eight or ten of us would find a location near a trail that we thought that the VC or NVA may be using that night and we’d set up an ambush.

RV: How was that done?

SD: Usually it was either a semicircle or a straight line that ran parallel to the trail that you thought that the VC or NVA were going to operating. In front of us we would set up a line of claymores and we would set up the M-60 in a position that we felt that it could be used to utilize the firepower as much as we could. It would hopefully take out as many of the enemy as we possibly could in the first burst. As I remember, we probably also set up a couple of claymores behind us although usually we had some...usually there was a lot of heavy brush or we were in heavy jungle so it would be tough to get to us from the back end without hearing a lot of whatever it was coming through the brush. We were really backed up against something that we didn’t feel like somebody could come at us from the rear. Then we would call in on the radio our exact position. You really had to have your act together with regard to the map so that we could, if we got attacked, or we
were successful in triggering an ambush we could also call in artillery on the position in front of us so that the arty guys in the rear had our exact position and they were prepared to fire at a moment’s notice on the position in front of us if we called for it that night. Then it was a lot of… I’ve forgotten how the sleep breaks worked but if there were nine guys in a squad there was at least three or four of us awake at any given time. So you’re either doing one hour on and one hour off or two hours on and two hours off all through the night.

RV: Was sleep deprivation a problem?

SD: Always. (Laughter) You never had enough sleep in the field. That was the worst with setting up, with setting up on a squad level out somewhere on an ambush because you had eight or nine guys that divide up a whole night’s sleep and you had to have at least half the squad awake at any given time. You did that for safety. You know it is very difficult to stay awake so if somebody does fall asleep there’s still two guys awake. Chances are all three of you aren’t going to fall asleep. Even if you were operating as a company on top of a hill or something where you had set up a perimeter. You would still have a couple or three hours of… in a foxhole at night you know watching out for the enemy. So you know I don’t think that if you’re in the field on any given night you’re probably not getting more then five hours of sleep and that’s interrupted sleep. There’s not more then three hours altogether.

RV: I can imagine during the day the heat, the movement, the stress; I mean it takes a toll on you physically for the tiredness.

SD: Right. Well sometimes during the day we would, I mean we would stay in that same perimeter and guys would be operating on patrols off that perimeter so you would have some down time during the day where you could just kind of put up your poncho liner and stake it out and get under it and just kind of maybe snooze for a couple of hours. You could catch up on that every once in a while.

RV: Right. Was there anything that you found after you had been there a while in the field that you wanted to do differently, that you could have done differently as far as tactics are concerned? Or was what you just described in the daily activities sufficient in your mind?
SD: Well again, I’ll go back to what I said before. You know I thought that our
tactics were pretty good but I thought that…in terms of the smaller picture. But I thought
that the bigger picture was all screwed up. I really felt that we needed to do a better job of
differentiating the enemy and forcing the issue with the people that were living out in the
countryside. You’re either with us or against us. That would have made the job easier.
You wouldn’t have to have to go through first trying to identify who you’re shooting at.
RV: I’ve heard that when you all would have to wait to call in fire missions and
wait to move out on an enemy who just attacked you. People higher up than you having
to check with the province chief or the village chief if it was ok to move through that
region. Did you have problems like that?
SD: Yes. Well that goes back to…
RV: You describe that at one time.
SD: Right. That’s the one that is most vivid in my memory because when you’re
getting attacked and you can’t get artillery because some province chief won’t clear your
artillery support. You tended to get a little frustrated.
RV: Yes.
SD: But I know that there had to be other times where we saw the same thing.
Again you go into a zone that would change from a free fire zone to whatever they called
it zone. I never understood that. It just made no sense to me.
RV: Was it true….
SD: If you’re out there as an infantry unit, you’re tying one hand behind your
back if you’re establishing different parts of the countryside in terms of how you can
operate against the enemy.
RV: Well that makes sense. That’s very different from previous wars that the
United States have fought. Were there clear lines of demarcation?
SD: Sure. I know when you’re…when the GIs in World War II went into a village
or something I guess they had to differentiate between the people who lived there in the
village and the Germans that were trying to kill them. There wasn’t that same, from what
I’ve seen or know, there wasn’t that same kind of thing going on all throughout the
countryside.
RV: No. Tell me about the Vietnamese civilians. How did they treat you and what was your impression of them?

SD: Some of them treated us very nicely. Some of them I wouldn’t trust to turn my back on. By the time…well, let me go back for a second. There was a time where I had supper a couple of times with a Vietnamese family where they invited a couple of us guys into their house and they cooked a meal and it was very nice and we sat there with the Mamason and the Papason and the kids and everything. I couldn’t eat the food.

RV: Why?

SD: Because it was so hot.

RV: (Laughter)

SD: I mean whatever spices they were putting on this thing. I’m sure it tasted fine. It was some kind of fish and egg meal but the spice would just, you know you think Mexican spices are hot. I mean those Vietnamese, unbelievable the things that they can eat. But that was you know I thought was very nice and very gracious of them to do that. But there were other villages that you know that you could just see that the people were looking at you out of the side of their eyes kind of thing. I didn’t know if it was because on the hillside a couple hundred yards away there were VC or NVA looking down at them to see how they would handle us or what. But I guess my…the realization came to me you know after I had been in country…I don’t know, six or seven months. We were operating with an ARVN unit. That’s the South Vietnamese Army in a joint operation. We came under attack somehow and we brought in, we called in for artillery support and gunships showed up and we’re strafing the hillsides where the attack had come from. I turned around and that ARVN unit was gone.

RV: They had taken off?

SD: They had di di mau man, they were gone. We were all sitting around talking amongst each other and I go, ‘What are we fighting for these guys for if they won’t stand and fight for their own country?’

RV: Was that a common experience?

SD: You know I don’t know. I have heard in conventions that I go to now some other guys talk about that. I didn’t know if it was common or not at the time. When I saw that they wouldn’t stand and fight in that incident I thought, ‘If we ever leave these guys
are dead.’ Now having said that there were, we had what we called Kit Carson scouts that operated with us, Vietnamese soldiers who went out with us to help us on patrols and help us with the terrain and the logistics of being out in the field. Those guys were pretty gung ho. But the regular Army guys that I saw on that particular day were not good soldiers.

RV: How debilitating was that to morale?
SD: Well it was very. You know in conjunction and seeing that at the same time we’re also becoming aware of what was going on back home. While I was over there Kent State went on and we’re turning around and going, ‘My God, we’re turning rifles on ourselves back home because we’re at war for a people who won’t fight for themselves.’ You know you just felt like you were stuck in the middle of a bad nightmare.

RV: After Kent State that was more apparent or was it before that?
SD: You know it’s like a whole number of things come together at once. I guess Kent State was…at least it hit me pretty hard. I just did not understand, you know what the hell is going on back at the States? This is nuts.

RV: How did you find out about it?
SD: I think I read it in…I either heard it on the radio or read it in Stars and Stripes. I do remember seeing an article on it in Stars and Stripes. I’m sure it was on the radio too. It was on, what do they call the radio station, I’ve forgotten.

RV: You’re talking about the station for Vietnam itself?
SD: No, I’m taking about Armed Forces radio in Vietnam.

RV: Right. Well just for a second let’s talk about the antiwar movement. How did that affect you all while you were in country?
SD: It was a mixed bag. Because on one hand I appreciated what was I guess the position of let’s get out of this war because I felt that if we’re not in this thing to win it let’s get the hell out of here. I felt like when I was in the field that due to some of the circumstances that I described earlier with regard to political issues and the ARVN wasn’t going to fight and we were talking about…from my standpoint we needed to go and conquer this land. As opposed to just shooting people and putting numbers up on a board. If we weren’t in this thing to win it then let’s get the hell out of it. From that perspective I guess a lot of other guys felt like we appreciated the antiwar movement
because maybe it would get us home. On the other hand we were hearing stories about
how guys you know got home and they weren’t being treated very well and being spit
upon or being called baby killers. We really were frustrated about that part of it and
didn’t get why you wouldn’t support the troops that were trying to help the people in
South Vietnam. I think ultimately most of us felt that the Communists were bad guys.
That as frustrated as we were about what was going on in South Vietnam and all the
hypocrisy with the politics was going on there. The North Vietnamese were not good
people. The North Vietnamese were totalitarians; it was Communism. They were going
to come down there and they were going to hurt some people if they ended up winning
this war. So it wasn’t as though we didn’t feel that the cause was just. It was just that the
cause was all screwed up.

RV: When you got home were you able to reflect more on that overall big picture
or was that something that you just wanted to move away from, move past?
SD: Um…
RV: Your describing stuff and you seem to be really aware of when you were in
country of this bigger picture and I’m wondering once you got through the experience did
you just drop that, move away from that.
SD: Well some of this bigger picture had to do with some of the images that I was
seeing. I really remember thinking that if we aren’t in this thing to win it, let’s get the hell
out of here. I never felt like, and I think a whole lot of other guys felt the same way, that
we weren’t there to win it. For some reason we were just going through the motions. So
when I got home, you know when I got home I was just frankly happy to be home. I was
hooking up with friends. I was fortunate in many ways that I had a rear job for the last
few months that I was in Vietnam so I had some time being in the rear to decompress
from being in the field. It would have been…so it wasn’t as difficult for me to come
home, as it was probably for some of those other guys who came out of the field. You
know they do a little stand down back in the rear someplace and then get on a plane and
end up back in Ft. Lewis, Washington and man that’s a 180-degree turn.
RV: Yes.
SD: Whereas I had the opportunity to at least 40 degrees or so before I came
home. Also when I got home, I got home in April of 1970. John Kerry was testifying in
armed services committee or wherever he was. Saying we were all a bunch of heathens and war criminals. You see recently in the last couple of years that we’re a bunch of barbarians. You know people are looking at you like you’re from Mars.

RV: (Laughter)

SD: And I would say to my family, ‘I don’t know where he is coming from or what he’s talking about but the things he’s talking about I never saw. It didn’t happen in my unit.’ So it was a combination of…and I’m not sure I’m answering your question here but it was a combination of, if Vietnam ever came up it was in the context of what was being portrayed as the American GI at the time or nobody wanted to talk about it.

RV: That’s very interesting. We can get into detail about that once we get to that point chronologically.

SD: Yeah I think I’ve digressed here.

RV: Well no you answered the question and it’s an interesting observation and it’s a phenomenon that has not…it did not happen before in the United States and it really hasn’t happened since in the United States. It’s something very worthy of discussing. Let me ask you about something else. November 1969 the My Lai massacre news came out in public for the first time and you’re in country.

SD: Right.

RV: Tell me about that. How did you find out about this and how did it affect you and what did you think?

SD: God I don’t remember when the first time, when I first heard of My Lai. I must have been in AIT if it was November, yeah it would have been Advanced Infantry Training at Ft. Jackson. I guess I was appalled. I just couldn’t believe that an American Army soldiers would do that. You know almost in a weird sort of way my first…when I got to Vietnam and I arrive with my company we’re operating out in the same area that Lieutenant Calley was.

RV: Yes.

SD: By that time it was…the full investigation was really going on and the hearings were happening. In fact as I remember hearing about it there was some kind of congressional delegation or there was a lot of investigators, high muckety-muck investigators that went to My Lai at the time that I was there in the field. We had to
spread out our company in smaller units then we had ever done before. We were out on
four, five men ambushes. I figured out later it was because we were the, you know they
wanted trip wires everywhere while these guys were there investigating. (Laughter) So
we were the human trip wires for all of these, whoever was doing the investigating for the
hearings that were about to happen in Congress and the court-martial and whatever.

RV: It kind of provided security in a sense.

SD: You were out providing security. I’ve digressed here a little bit. After
operating in the Batangan Peninsula and walking through all of the mines field there and
the frustration that goes with having all the Vietnamese be very friendly to you during the
day and you know damn well they are throwing hand grenades at you at night. I think I
said earlier, I don’t think that there was… almost every day somebody would hit a mine in
our company or it seemed that way. Sometimes it would be minor injury and sometimes
somebody would lose a foot or an eye. I don’t think anyone ever got killed but a lot of
people got hurt by those mines. So you walk through those mind fields long enough and
you do it week after week and month after month and you think that you have bunch of
Viet Cong trapped in a village. I mean I can understand how it would happen but I could
never condone it. As frustrated as we all were out there, none of us could ever picture
ourselves going in and massacring a village. There was something wrong with that unit.

RV: How about as part of the Americal Division? Did it make it extra difficult,
for lack of a better phrase? I mean this is your unit.

SD: I didn’t think so at the time and I’ve thought about that over the years and I
guess it’s left its mark on the Americal over the years but it didn’t occur to me at the
time.

RV: Okay. Well, a couple of other questions here before we break. Did you ever
experience any friendly fire incidents? Was that something that was common?

SD: Only from a, we called in artillery one night and either we had given them the
wrong coordinates or they had the wrong coordinates and the first few rounds that came
in were virtually right on top of us. I remember the RTO guy screaming into the radio,
‘Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire!’ I think a couple of guys got hurt but I don’t remember
anybody getting killed.

RV: Okay.
SD: I don’t ever remember anybody shooting anybody else by mistake or a
grenade going off by mistake, that kind of thing.
RV: Did you guys ever operate with snipers ever in your unit?
SD: Not that I can remember. I do remember…we operated with dog teams in our
unit from time to time and you know as I said with Kit Carson scouts. I do not remember
any snipers in our unit. I remember we had one guy who left the unit to go off to sniper
school. Had a couple guys who left the unit to go be door gunners, that kind of thing.
RV: Right. Tell me about the canine experiences.
SD: It was great to have a dog in the unit, but it was so hot they didn’t last very
long. We really used them more to get the scent of, if we were in a village, get the scent
of weapons or if there was somebody down in a tunnel, get their scent, that kind of thing.
In terms of walking point, hell at least when I was walking point, the dog was behind me.
But they also helped you if you were on a perimeter help to come to alert in a hurry. It’s
good to have their nose around. It was so hot over there that they really…you had to stop
for them probably more than you had to stop, well I know, more than the soldiers because
they just, they couldn’t take the heat.
RV: Right. So they would be out there and you would just get a new dog or they
would retire it?
SD: They would come out with a handler. There would be a dog handler with
him.
RV: Would the handler take him away or give him water?
SD: Yes, they would slow them down and give them water. They’d go, ‘Hey we
got to stop here for a few minutes and get him some water and let him cool off,’ or let her
cool off, ‘or they’re going to collapse from heat stroke or something.’
RV: How would you rate the intelligence you all received?
SD: Well that’s hard for me to say because I was a lowly grunt. My orders were
just kind of to go over there. (Laughter)
RV: (Laughter) Right.
SD: You know I didn’t often know why. You’re probably better off asking
somebody who was higher rank than I was, somebody who operated as a platoon leader
or a company commander. They can probably tell you that better than I could.
RV: Okay. Steve, what about communication? Could you all communicate effectively in the field?

SD: You know I thought so. I don’t remember a time that we lost radio contact unless the radio got injured, or I mean…injured. It got shot up. I only remember that happening once. I just don’t remember not being in radio contact.

RV: Okay so that was not a problem. And how about out on an ambush or walking the trails, you all had effective communication?

SD: Yes. If you were on an ambush you had a radio with you and basically it was a matter of you sent, nobody talked on the radio, you sent a bunch of…the RTO operator would be listening for headquarters in the rear. They would call out your call sign and you would answer them by just clicking once or twice on the phone, sending out two SQUEL signals so that you would never have to talk.

RV: Okay. Did you ever work with troops from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea?

SD: Korea.

RV: Oh yeah?

SD: Yeah. I worked with what are they called, ROK Marines.

RV: The ROKs, yes. Tell me about them.

SD: They were some tough son of a bitches. They really were.

RV: Why?

SD: I mean they are physically tough. They just had a chip on their shoulder it seemed like all the time. If you had a couple of beers with them you know they were the kind of guys it would go to their head and the next thing you know there would be a fist fight someplace.

RV: (Laughter)

SD: But you know on the other hand and I think I only spent like a week with these guys or something but they had their act together. They were more gung ho then we were, very, very, very aggressive. I felt like when we were operating with them we were operating with some first class infantry as opposed to the South Vietnamese soldiers that you know were, as I told you earlier at least in one incident they cut and ran.

RV: Yes. It seems like two opposite experiences there.
SD: Yes.