Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview for the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project with Mr. Timothy P. Vail. I’m in Lubbock, Texas. Today is October 6, 2005. It’s approximately 2:32 PM, Central Standard Time. Tim, you are in Roanoke, Virginia, where it’s 3:32, Eastern Standard Time. I am in the interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Tim, before we begin the formal interview, I’d like to ask for you to give me a yes or no on your awareness and permission to conduct this interview with you; that you’re willingly doing this; that you agree to go through the interview process with us; that you agree to donate this interview to the archive; and for us to make it public in the ways that you and I discussed prior to recording. That is, depositing the interview here physically at the Vietnam Archive in Lubbock, and then also making it available on the Virtual Vietnam Archive on the World Wide Web. Do you agree or not agree to that?

Timothy Vail: Richard, I feel very comfortable with this entire process and the answer is yes.

RV: Okay, very good. Well, Tim, let’s start. Tell me a little bit about your early life. I’d like to know where you were born, when you were born, and then going forward, what was your childhood like?

TV: I was born in Altoona, Pennsylvania, June 4, 1947. My dad had just gotten out of the Navy. He was in the submarine service in World War II.
RV: Wow. Okay.

TV: That was, Altoona, was home for him and my mom. Shortly after that, he rejoined the Navy and we moved to Norfolk, Virginia. I guess I was around two.

RV: Okay, so you spent very little time there in Pennsylvania.

TV: Very little time, and now I’m a rebel and Virginian. I don’t claim to be much of a Pennsylvanian at all.

RV: (Laughs) That seems pretty accurate, considering you only spent two years there.

TV: Grew up in Norfolk. Again my dad was in the Navy for twenty-three years. I guess a typical middle-class experience, at least in my view. Went to Granby High School and graduated in 1965. Spent that summer working at the Norfolk Airport just doing general maintenance work and whatnot. Then I attended a year of college at Old Dominion University, also in Norfolk. I had really too much freedom and too much time on my hands, I ended up at the end of the second semester with four Cs and a D, which put me, I guess at [a GPA of] 1.9999 or something like that, and Old Dominion asked me to sit out for a semester.

RV: Right. This is in 1966?

TV: Yes it is.

RV: So that means the draft was looking at you.

TV: I was, just turned eighteen, I think. Wasn’t really thinking much about the draft at the time. But the draft did exist and it was real and it was just in the back of my mind, I guess, at that time.

RV: Sure. Tim before we get there, would you mind if we went back and talked a little bit about your youth and growing up in Norfolk?

TV: Surely.

RV: Did you stay in Norfolk, or did you all move around?

TV: We stayed in Norfolk the whole time. The first few years, we had rental houses, I guess. Then in about 1957, my dad bought a house and we stayed there in my whole childhood. He was stationed—he had sea duty rather than shore duty his entire career—on submarines. So he would be gone for extended periods of time sometimes. But my childhood was pretty stable as far as staying in the same home.
RV: Right. Tell me about your family. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

TV: I had one sister. She was born in Portsmouth Naval Hospital when I was about five years old.

RV: Okay. So you’re the older brother. I’d like to know a little bit about your parents. Tell me more about your father. He was in World War II. But where was he from and what was he like?

TV: He was from Pennsylvania. I think, probably—he grew up without a dad. My grandmother divorced her husband. They were married at a very early age and ran him off at a very early age. So she raised my dad by herself. I would think they were pretty poor by any standards, and going through the Depression and whatnot. But he joined the Navy before he finished high school, I think, with her permission. He was actually in the Navy when the war started. In fact, he was in a battery school for submarine service in, I think August, before Pearl Harbor. It’s interesting that, I guess when the people graduated from that school, they passed each other’s certificates around to get their classmates to sign and write little notes. They knew at the time they were going to be fighting Japanese real soon. This was in, you know, the summer before Pearl Harbor.

RV: That’s very interesting.

TV: He told some stories about the war, but he didn’t have much to say about it. He did say that they went through the Panama Canal and ended up in Pearl Harbor while some of the ships were still smoking. It was probably in January, after Pearl Harbor and went off into the far Pacific. I’m not sure how many war patrols he made. But, you know, he was on subs the entire war, stayed in the Pacific the entire war, and was probably very lucky to survive. The mortality rate of submarine sailors was extremely high.

RV: Yes, it was. So did he talk to you about the war very much when you got a little bit older, or not?

TV: Not much. He just wouldn’t talk about it much.
RV: Did your mother say anything about the fact that that was consistent with her, as well, that he just really didn’t talk too much about it? Or did they talk about his service?

TV: They didn’t talk about his service much. I can’t recall her ever talking about his war experiences. He was just very closed mouthed about that.

RV: I know from research and lots of reading about World War II, the submarine warfare when it was undergone, when it happened, was very intense. Living on a submarine is a whole different animal than doing anything else in the service, especially in the Navy. It takes a different breed to serve in the submarine fleet. What did you see in your dad that kind of maybe enabled him to do that, and to go through that, and to serve so well?

TV: Well, as a child I got to take a few dependents’ cruises on the World War II era submarines and the small—the crampness of the quarters is just unbelievable. Just fucking very cramped quarters. If you lay in your bunk, you might have four inches or five inches above your face before the bunk that’s on top of you.

RV: Wow.

TV: The engines are extremely loud. I recall seeing a sailor sleeping on top of this giant engine. It was making a huge racket and he was sleeping on it. That’s something that stuck with me. I do recall one story that my dad told about himself. He was shaving with a straight razor for some reason. I guess he thought using a straight razor was cool. He was shaving during a depth charge attack and almost cut his own throat. After that he went to safety razors. He told those kinds of stories about himself pretty often. He also told a story about having been nearly bombed by a friendly plane. I’m not sure if it was Australian or American, but later on they were in a bar in Australia and some Airedales came into the bar and somebody made a joke about almost hitting a US submarine and a huge fight broke out. (Laughs)

RV: He was in the middle of it?

TV: He was right in the middle of it, and he would’ve been. That’s the kind of guy he was.

RV: Yeah. How do you best remember your dad growing up? What was he like?

I mean, you said he was gone from time to time. What do you remember about him?
TV: He was a real stickler as far as being honest. That was important to him. Just those virtues of honesty and truthfulness were very important to him. If I ever lied to him, I mean that was the worst thing that I could do. Generally, if I did something wrong even, and told the truth, you know, man enough to tell the truth, he would be very lenient.

RV: So he respected the fact that you had the guts to stand up and say, “This is what I’ve done wrong, or this is what really happened.”

TV: Exactly, he instilled that in me and probably some bad things. When I was younger I had a hot temper. Tended to raise my voice when I shouldn’t have and I got that from him, I think, also. But also I gained some good qualities from him in being honest about things and being respectful of people. He was a good teacher as far as how to be a man.

RV: What do you remember about him being gone a lot? Did he say, “I’ve got to go away for six months,” or was there a lot of discussion? How did that affect you?

TV: You know, we ate different when he was gone. Mom would cook different.

RV: Oh, yeah? How so?

TV: You know, she was more—I guess the meals are more structured when he was there. We might have pancakes for supper or some foods he didn’t like, perhaps. He wouldn’t eat corn on the cob, for example, for years and years. I guess where he grew up poor people ate corn on the cob. Because of that, he would not eat corn on the cob. But later on, as he got older, he relented and thought corn on the cob was a pretty good thing. That was just something from his childhood, I believe.

RV: Did you get a sense when you were growing up about where he came from and where your mother came from? Kind of what their backgrounds were, what kind of family they came from?

TV: Not too far back. But his mother was a single parent and when I was, I guess, seven or eight years old, she moved to Norfolk to be near him. He was the only family that she had and so it was nice growing up with a grandparent pretty close by in the same town. She was a very special person and told a lot of stories about how she grew up. One story I remember her telling is when she was a, I guess, maybe a pre-teen, maybe ten, twelve years old, they went to visit somebody in another town. Which, you know, traveling that far back in nineteen—before World War I, I guess, or maybe during
World War I, was a pretty long trip. She got there and caught the influenza. I’m not sure what year it was but she got it and was in bed for months.

RV: Was this the 1918 big flu pandemic that happened?

TV: I think it was, yeah. She ended up in bed for a couple of months and then got home. You know like, overall three or four months later, you know. So the trip that was supposed to take a few days ended up taking several months.

RV: Wow. She survived?

TV: She survived.

RV: Okay. Tim, I want to know about your mom. What was your mother like?

TV: She was a great mom, a great person. Both of her parents were alive and lived in Altoona and so every couple years we would all pack up in the car and go to visit those folks. Make a nice long road trip. Visiting old folks, the house always had a certain smell and feel about it. My grandmother always had incense burning, and she was for some reason very fond of little knick-knacks and artifacts and things. The house was overrun with those. But just very kind, gentle people. My granddad on her side was a very quiet, typical grandpa-type fellow. You know, a very gentleman. He always wore Old Spice and I still wear Old Spice probably because of him.

RV: Right uh-huh. Your mother, I assume she probably had to be a relatively independent woman with your father being gone the way he was.

TV: I’m sure she was. You know, yeah, I’m sure she had to be strong and take care of financial matters and whatnot without him, make decisions, keep the house going. You know, hire people to fix things if something went wrong. So, you know, she was, I guess, typical of her era in that she wasn’t a feminist. She was a very traditional person, but also probably a lot stronger than those kinds of folks would have ever given her credit for.

RV: Tell me about your sister. What was her name?

TV: Terry Colleen Vail.

RV: Okay and how do spell Carrie?

TV: T-e-r-r-y.

RV: Oh, Terry. Okay.
TV: She’s married to another Vietnam veteran, and so her name is Blount now, Terry Blount. [Her husband, my brother-in-law, is James T. Blount. Jim served in the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam, and to me, he is the brother I never had.]

RV: Did you all have a good relationship? You’re five years older than she is, but how was that?

TV: Oh, I probably teased her when we were young. I probably teased her more than I should have. Then as we got older, she saw me as a teenager and a big brother and always I was her protector. You know, that was one of my jobs was to be a protector of my sister. I guess that gave me leave to tease her from time to time. But as we got older, as we were teenagers, you know, she definitely looked up to me, especially when I got a car and could, you know take her places. I guess we certainly had a good relationship our whole lives and still do.

RV: Okay, good. Tell me about how you were as a young boy. How would you describe yourself?

TV: I guess just fairly average. Left-handed, but I got to probably junior high school and found I needed glasses to see the board. That was one, I guess, the first big disappointment was having to wear glasses. I remember mowing lawns for years as a— just when I was like ten, twelve years old or twelve or thirteen years old, because I really wanted to get a car. I mowed lawns and saved my money and was kind of frugal, I guess, probably. Didn’t spend a lot of money on records and clothes and things because I wanted a car, and got one right after I turned sixteen.

RV: So you had saved your money up?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay. How were you as a student? How would you describe your schooling?

TV: I was definitely leaning towards academics. Going to college was something that was, you know my dad and mom both planned for me, you know, my whole life. I always took academic courses.

RV: How did you feel about that? Is that where you saw yourself going? Kind of staying up on your academics and then going forward from there?
TV: It was expected. Good grades was expected and taking academic classes was expected. So it just seemed like the thing to do. You know, I liked sports but I wasn’t great in sports. I played intramural football and stuff.

RV: What were your favorite sports growing up?

TV: Baseball, probably. Played a little pony league baseball and we played sandlot football a lot.

RV: Okay. Tell me about school. What was your favorite subject or subjects?

TV: Probably math

RV: Really?

TV: In one form or another. I was good at—actually I was bad at [algebra] because the teacher gave us a homework assignment and this was about the tenth grade probably when I was starting to be a little bit rebellious. She gave us a homework assignment every night and I refused to do them every night. Only class I ever failed was one semester of algebra and I had to go to summer school and make it up. But I failed not because I—in fact, my grades were passing but she failed me because I refused to turn in any homework. Of course, I don’t blame her. But it wasn’t that I couldn’t do the work, it was that I hated to do it after class. Other math classes, you’d usually have a study hall or time to do the homework beforehand so I didn’t have any problems in other years. I remember my senior English year I had a high enough grade average that I didn’t have to take the final exam. That really tickled me. I was intermittent honor roll.

Sometimes I’d get a C, but generally I was mainly A’s and B’s. Took Latin.

RV: In high school?

TV: In junior high school.

RV: Oh, in junior high. Wow.

TV: I thought I had done real good in that but a few years ago I found one of my report cards and apparently I hadn’t done as good as I recalled because the teacher said something about there would be no more foreign languages for me after that class. But actually I took three years of Spanish after that and did okay.

RV: Uh-huh. Okay. What were you like socially, Tim? How did you interact with your friends?
TV: You know, I didn’t go to a prom, you know in my last years. I just had some
select friends that I hung around with. Earlier in junior high school I was a Boy Scout
and did a lot of camping and things. Then in high school, I had a car. But I was, I guess,
probably backward with girls. Didn’t do a whole lot of dating.

RV: Why was that? Do you know?

TV: I just wasn’t, you know, as slick as I probably—it dawned on me how to do
better when I turned about eighteen or first year of college, actually. I suddenly awoke as
to how to interact with girls.

RV: Right. Well, that’s a good time to wake up to it.

TV: It was a wonderful time to wake up for it. But I had a pretty tight curfew on
me. I mean I couldn’t stay out late, even on weekends. My parents were stricter on me
than they were on my sister, you know, when she got into high school. Probably that was
a good thing because in retrospect I did not get into any trouble, any big trouble. I guess
my parents being strict was probably part of the reason.

RV: Were you rebellious as a young man, or maybe typically rebellious?

TV: I think typically rebellious for a year or so, when I was about fifteen or
sixteen. I mean I was one of those folks that was amazed how smart my dad got in a few
years, you know, after I grew older. But I guess not so rebellious other than that one
class I failed. You know, there just wasn’t an opportunity or thought in my mind to be
extremely rebellious or do anything really stupid. I think my parents instilled me with a
feeling of, if I let them down it would be just the worst thing. So even though I was a
little bit rebellious maybe, I knew that I wouldn’t want to let them down.

RV: What were your hobbies, Tim? What did you enjoy doing outside of school,
outside of refusing to do homework and things like that?

TV: I always had a chemistry set as a kid, and that was just something I’ve
always loved and played with.

RV: Did that come naturally to you?

TV: I think so. It was just something that I always liked to do. I did a few little
crazy experiments with the chemistry set but, you know, nothing dangerous. I used to
like to go camping. My dad had a single shot Springfield .22 and I could shoot the lights
out with it. It was just a very accurate little weapon.
RV: Did he teach you how to shoot or did you pick it up on your own?
TV: No, he taught me how to shoot it. He taught me how to handle it, and deal with it, and be safe with it, and then also how to shoot it. That was the only firearm he had but it was just fun to plink with.
RV: Um-hm. So you like to camp? Did you spend a lot of time outdoors, as much as you could?
TV: Quite a bit. As much as I could. I had a friend that I used to go camping with after we got out of the Boy Scouts, we left the Boy Scouts. We used to go camping over Christmas vacation. Just go out in the woods just to get away for a few days.
RV: You said you worked a lot. You cut yards and mowed the grass. Did you do that for a number of years?
TV: For quite a few years. I guess I started when I was around twelve or thirteen. I’d do that in the summertime and also odd jobs for neighbors. Every year my grandmother’s landlady would hire me to do odd jobs around her house. So there was an opportunity to make extra money there.
RV: Okay. Is there anything else that you want to talk about as far as your childhood is concerned? Any specific incidents?
TV: My parents, I guess the term might be “got religion,” but you know they started going to church when we were young and so we went to church. It was a Lutheran church and one of the things that I gravitated toward was being an alter boy. I did that for several years.
RV: How did you like that?
TV: When I was young, I thought it was pretty nifty. But as I got older it became more of a burden. You know, something that I was asked to do that I didn’t really want to do on my own. I was doing it for my parents. So when I got around fifteen or sixteen I stopped doing that.
RV: Okay. So would you describe yourself, before you went to college as a religious person or just kind of following what your parents did? How did you see yourself?
TV: I think I was and am a religious person.
RV: Okay.
TV: I haven’t been in church in a lot of years and that’s probably because of
growing up with it, but I still consider myself a religious person.

RV: Okay. In high school did you kind of continue the same thing as far as not
being so active in sports and kind of typical thing, or did you start to see yourself
changing in high school?

TV: Took a lot of work to keep those A’s and B’s going. I think I was
concentrating mostly on my studies and on my car.

RV: Were you able to work on your car yourself?

TV: Uh-huh. Actually had a neighbor, a youngster, you know, he might’ve been
ten, twelve years old, down the street that would come and help me work on my car. He
ended up being a master mechanic years later for Chrysler Corporation.

RV: That’s interesting. Okay. You sound like you were an independent person
and that you didn’t take yourself too seriously and you just had a pretty typically normal
childhood.

TV: I think independent is how I would view myself and I think more than that,
my family and people who knew me would definitely call me independent.

RV: Even to this day?

TV: Still, yeah. I tried not to ever be swayed by or to join a fad. If everybody
was doing it, then let them do it. I didn’t necessarily need to do it.

RV: Getting finished with high school, you were going to go to ODU. Is this
something that you chose to do and is that the university you chose? Or was that
expected that you would kind of stay there at home and go to Old Dominion?

TV: I applied to Old Dominion and Virginia Tech. It was VPI (Virginia
Polytechnic Institute) back then. To be honest with you, I can’t remember if I was
accepted at Tech or not, but I think I was. But financially, it just seemed that Old
Dominion was—you know, because I could live at home—was the way to go. You
know, probably that made it easier for me to not study and to not pay attention to things
and I had my mind on other things I’m sure.

RV: Is that kind of what you attribute to that year, academically? You just were,
I guess, sound like a typical freshman. Just kind of having a good time but also just not
being into the academic as much as maybe you thought you would be.
TV: I think you’re exactly right. I was always expected to go to college. When I got there I just didn’t feel like it. I just wanted to do other things. I just didn’t put the effort into it that you need to do.

RV: Do you regret that today or do you feel like that was just kind of in order for you at that time?

TV: I regret that immensely.

RV: Really?

TV: Yeah.

RV: Did you ever go back to college?

TV: Never had time.

RV: Okay. At ODU, did you feel out of place? Did you feel like, “This is not really for me at this point? I don’t want to be here.” Or after some time did you think about that?

TV: No, I enjoyed being there. I just didn’t take it seriously. I just had time on my hands. So, you know, I could—I believe I mentioned the ladies. Just time to do all kinds of things in between classes and I did those things. In between classes I should have been studying but it was just too much fun.

RV: Well, Tim, let me ask you about this: You grew up in the 1950s in America. Basically you had, I guess, your major youth years there and into the early ’60s obviously. But what do you remember about America in the 1950s? How would you describe it?

TV: In which year?

RV: In the 1950s, in that decade.

TV: Oh. In Norfolk one year, I guess before I went to the seventh grade, I must’ve been in the sixth grade, the junior high schools and high schools were closed for part of the year because of integration.

RV: Right, yeah. Basically the Norfolk public schools were saying, “Instead of integrate, we’re going to close?”

TV: They did for a while, yeah. I guess it was my seventh grade. Richard, I’m not sure what year it was. I think, no, it was probably my ninth grade when I had the first black person come to attend our school.
RV: Wow. What was that like?

TV: For me, I didn’t understand. It just didn’t make sense. I didn’t understand why people acted so miserable towards black people.

RV: Were you raised that way to kind of be more tolerant, to see people more as humans than the color? I mean, you’re growing up and your dad is getting an international view of things in the Navy, and you guys are from Pennsylvania. The family is from Pennsylvania, but you’re right there imbedded in the Deep South or in Virginia and you know—

TV: Yeah and well Virginia is definitely Deep South in a lot of aspects.

RV: Yes.

TV: I’m sure it was just the way I was raised and the fact that I wasn’t raised around black people, didn’t have any experience with black people.

RV: Right, right. Yet you had this attitude of acceptance, is that what you are saying?

TV: Well, I certainly didn’t have an attitude of intolerance or—I mean some people were just terrible towards the black people and I couldn’t understand that at all. You know, I would never have dated a black girl for any circumstances whatsoever. That would be entirely impossible. But on the other hand, saying hello or saying good morning or whatnot seemed the thing to do rather than call somebody a name.

RV: Right. What about your friends? What did you witness?

TV: My friends probably thought pretty much like I did. But you know, I got to see in high school at least, some of the people in our school be very intolerant towards blacks. There was, you know, four or five black students each year in high school. They had to be a very brave bunch of folks to come into our school. Actually the girl in ninth grade, she was the daughter of a doctor I remember. He drove her to the school every morning in a big pink Cadillac, which had to be very stereotypical in a lot of people’s minds. She was very brave to have gone there. I don’t know if she established friends with the folks or not but she was very, very quiet is what I remember. Then in high school there were four or five black students. They all seemed very well dressed. I can’t remember even having any in my classes but you’d pass them in the hall and some of the
people in the hall would say and do things that were just really inappropriate. The
blacks’ attitude seemed to be to not make waves.
RV: Just deal with it and get through the day?
TV: Yeah, just take it and live with it. You know, nothing like today. But
certainly seeing somebody get shoved against a locker just for being black happened then
and it was not an everyday occurrence but it happened and it was unpleasant.
RV: Right. Were you politically-minded at all as you saw yourself going through
the ’50s and into the early ’60s?
TV: Not a bit.
RV: Okay. Did you pay attention to or were you aware of international incidents
and controversies and events happening around you?
TV: I was certainly aware of the Cuban Missile Crisis.
RV: Right. Tell me about that, 1962.
TV: Uh-huh. My dad was at home and he got a call. The sub was deploying
immediately and he was just going out there right in the middle of it.
RV: Was he going to be part of the blockade?
TV: Yes.
RV: Wow. Did he tell you where he was going or did you all kind of figure
where he was going?
TV: No, he would never talk about it. He was the kind of person that if even
when he had jury duty if they told him, “Don’t discuss this with your family or anybody,”
he would not discuss it with family or anybody. The Navy had rules about talking about
missions and things they were doing and if he wasn’t supposed to talk about it, by God,
he would never talk about it. But I think in general, like in the case of that we knew
exactly where he was going and there wasn’t anything for him to say about it. He just
told us he loved us and left.
RV: And that was it. What else do you remember about that time, about the
missile crisis specifically?
TV: We certainly paid attention to the news. I remember having A-bomb drills
in school.
RV: Tell me about those.
TV: You know, they would—there was a certain alarm that would go off. I can’t remember the name of it, but when the certain alarm went off everybody had to assume a position underneath your desk and stay there until the alarm stopped.

RV: Kind of a duck and cover?

TV: Uh-huh.

RV: Yeah.

TV: It was exactly—you know, I guess we grew up knowing that if the Russians sent any nukes our way that Norfolk would certainly be one of the primary targets.

RV: Oh, yes. Yes.

TV: So that was all the time in school, you know we had those. But we didn’t dwell on the fact that we were a target or the fact that we had these drills. It was just something that we did.

RV: But during the Cuban Missile Crisis it became quite real for a lot of Americans. Did you feel that at the time?

TV: Yes I did. I remember following the news and knowing that my dad was out there and knowing that we were very close to war. It was just a scary time.

RV: When your dad came back I assume he didn’t say much about it.

TV: He didn’t, no. (Laughs)

RV: (Laughs) Okay.

TV: You know, he just said he went out there and nothing happened. You know they didn’t have any encounters with any Russian ships or anything, I guess. He didn’t say much at all.

RV: Okay. Well, what about other things going on around the world? Let me ask you this: What do you remember about President Dwight Eisenhower?

TV: I remember that he played golf.

RV: (Laughs)

TV: Really not much more about him other than that. Don’t really know much about Ike.

RV: What about John Kennedy?

TV: I remember how enormously popular he was because he was young and good looking. I can remember the day he was assassinated. I had just finished classes
and a bunch of people had gotten the news from somewhere, and were just very upset and
crying. Girls, especially, were just very upset and crying. I went home and it was all on
the TV.

RV: Did you all watch?
TV: Uh-huh.

RV: Was your dad away, or was he there?
TV: I can’t remember, Richard.

RV: Okay, okay. How did you feel during that time?
TV: You know, stunned that the country lost its president. Stunned that the
Secret Service could be so lax as to let that happen. I guess I saw it as just, you know,
Lee Harvey Oswald as being a crackpot, a crazy person. Didn’t really know much about
it. Just, I guess, stunned was the general reaction to it.

RV: Well, at that time before you go into Vietnam, tell me what you thought
about Lyndon Johnson, I mean his successor? What do you remember about LBJ? Of
course, before you go to Vietnam, because I know that a lot of people’s opinions change
or they simply get swayed by immaturity. But what do you remember about that, him
kind of stepping in and taking over and going forward?

TV: You know, just that real heavy accent. I think I was aware that he was a
consummate politician. I didn’t like Lady Bird much at all.

RV: Do you remember why?
TV: I mean just her personality. Just the way she dealt with the camera. I can’t
remember being fond of Johnson any way at all. Just, I guess, I knew he was a lot older
than JFK and was on the ticket to bring votes for Texas. I think I understood that and that
he was just a consummate politician.

RV: You don’t have to answer this question, Tim, but were your parents more
Republican or were they Democrat?
TV: I’m pretty sure that at that time both my parents were Republican. I think
my dad voted for Carter. He would’ve never told anybody that, but I believe he voted for
Jimmy Carter. My mother would have been the last person he would have told. In more
recent years, they were both very staunchly Republican.

RV: Okay. Are they still alive?
TV: No, both have passed away.

RV: Okay. Do you remember when you became kind of politically aware in your life?

TV: Probably when Jimmy Carter was president.

RV: Really? Okay, so this was after Vietnam?

TV: Yeah, I didn’t think much of—I mean I certainly followed politics. But as far as really caring how things went, I don’t think I really did until Jimmy Carter.

RV: Okay. Well, we can talk about that when we get to that point, your post-Vietnam years. Is there anything else that you want to talk about as far as your youth, your high school years, and your year at Old Dominion before we move beyond that?

TV: Richard, I can’t think of a thing.

RV: Okay, okay. Well, if you do we can obviously come back to that. So ODU said, “Take a semester off, Tim, and think about this,” and so you did. What did you do during that semester? This is like in 1966, is that correct?

TV: Yes it was. Actually I had a conversation with a friend of mine’s dad that really changed my life quite a bit.

RV: Tell me about that.

TV: He was the director of the Coast and Geodetic Survey Office in Norfolk.

RV: Say that again. What was that?

TV: Coast and Geodetic Survey.

RV: Okay, okay.

TV: At that time in 1966, the Coast Survey was building a brand-new ship. It was built in Jacksonville, Florida. Actually, two ships. The one I was—well, I’ll keep it in order. He asked me if I was interested in joining the Coast Survey to sail on this ship on a maiden around-the-world voyage. He said it would probably take about two years of my time. I was thinking about how poorly I had done in my first year at Old Dominion and how I really wanted to get out and see things, and just get away from home and just go. So I told him I was ready for it. He signed me up in the Coast Survey. I rode a bus up to Washington and joined the ship. The ship was tied up at the Washington Naval Yard. It was the US Coast and Geodetic Surveys ship Oceanographer, was the name of the ship. At the time they were also building a sister ship called the Discoverer. But it
hadn’t sailed yet. I joined the crew as an ordinary seaman, which was the title of just a regular deckhand and worked on getting the ship ready for the commissioning ceremony.

I didn’t actually get to see LBJ, but LBJ came aboard the ship and did the commissioning ceremony. The Coast Survey was branching into, or expanding into more deep water ocean surveys. The ship was commissioned with instructions to make this around-the-world cruise in 1967 and the idea would be to involve a lot of other countries, the scientists from other countries in the things that the ship did. So LBJ came aboard and commissioned the ship. I also remember that year at, while I was up in Washington, there was a riot.

RV: Really?

TV: In the area—in between where I had been that evening out drinking and riding in a cab with some friends back to the ship the cab came upon a race riot happening. The cabby was a black fellow, very scared. We were all doing what sailors do and so we weren’t as scared probably as we should’ve been. But that was the mood of things in Washington in that summer.

RV: What happened that night? Did you guys just kind of make your way around it?

TV: Yeah, we just made around it, got back to the ship, and everything was fine. Then the ship sailed down the Chesapeake Bay to Norfolk and I got to bring a girlfriend aboard and give her a tour of the ship. Stayed in Norfolk for a few days, and then sailed to a new home in Jacksonville, Florida. First thing I did was write a letter to the draft board saying, “You know, I’m no longer—” Well, actually, I wrote letters to the draft board—I was required to write letters to the draft board whenever I changed address or moved. So when I went to Washington I wrote them a letter and then when I went to Jacksonville I wrote them a letter. I was home on leave in Christmastime of—well, let me back up. When the ship got to Jacksonville, the first thing we did we go to South America for some scientific work off the Falkland Islands.

RV: This must be very exciting for you.

TV: It was wonderful. I got to go to—we stopped in San Juan, Puerto Rico, because it was a brand new ship and had engine troubles and then went on to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, Argentina. There was going to be a full solar eclipse of the
sun, a full solar eclipse, that the ship would track from out in the middle of the ocean and send data by radio link back to an airplane that was flying overhead. It was tremendously exciting. I loved every bit of it. Seeing foreign ports and South America was, for a nineteen year old, was a wonderful thing. I was home on leave at Christmastime when orders for my draft physical showed up.

RV: What did you think about that?

TV: I looked at it as something I just had to do. I knew it was coming. I just saw it as inevitable, I think. Like a freight train that was going to involve me sooner or later.

But—

RV: Tim—oh, I’m sorry. Go ahead, Tim.

TV: I went to—actually I drove myself to Richmond for the physical. Actually, I wasn’t happy about being there at all. I was very unhappy about having to stop my leave from the ship and go there. I remember being very unhappy and kinda just angry. Apparently it affected my blood pressure because at the end of the day, they asked me to come back the next day. I asked them why, and they said because my blood pressure was elevated. I came back the next day, had to spend the night in Richmond. Came back the next day and they took my blood pressure in the morning and then said, “Come back after lunch.” I came back and it was still elevated, and they said, “Come back the next day.”

You know, I had to go back to Jacksonville. So I went home to Norfolk and sent the draft board a letter saying, “I’m leaving today back for Jacksonville. So I have to finish the physical in Florida.” Never heard a word. Then in March the ship was getting ready to leave to go around the world and I wrote the draft board another letter saying, “I’m going to be out of the country for almost a year.” Didn’t hear a word until after the ship left. When the ship left Jacksonville, before it arrived in its first port, which was England, they—I guess the draft board sent federal marshals looking for me.

RV: Really?

TV: Really.

RV: Wow.

TV: They contacted my parents, who then called my employer. I learned later, this was much later, that my employer told whoever was calling, I think it was federal marshals, that if they needed my blood pressure, the ship had a doctor onboard and could
take my blood pressure rather than them sending somebody to arrest me when the ship
arrived in England. So I remember just working and whatnot, just doing my day-to-day
thing and the doctor came to see me and said, “I need to take your blood pressure every
day for a week.” He did and it was fine. He sent the results back and the ship got to
England and there were no federal marshals there, which I didn’t even know about until
later. But just went on around the world. I mean the ship stopped in England and
Monaco, saw Grace Kelly and Prince Rainier.

RV: Really?

TV: Had to stop in Odessa in Ukraine in Russia. Well, it’s actually the Ukraine,
but everybody called it Russia back then. Went through the Suez Canal two days before
the ’67 war started.

RV: Oh, my gosh!

TV: In fact, we were down in Massawa, Ethiopia, in port, tied up next to a US
destroyer when, I guess, the war started. The destroyer recalled all the sailors and they
left. We went on to India and Penang Island. When I got to the first port in Australia,
which was on the western part of Australia, I got my draft notice.

RV: Was it waiting for you?

TV: Yeah, the mail caught up to us. It was way overdue and the mail was way
behind.

RV: Approximately, was this in 1967 now?

TV: Uh-huh, 1967. Probably in the summer. The [Arab-Israeli] war started in
June and probably July or August by the time we were in Australia. The draft notice was
way overdue. I wrote another letter to the draft board saying, “I’m in Australia. I can’t
make it.” The next port, which was Sydney, Australia, I got another letter from the draft
board saying, “You didn’t show up and we’re going to have you arrested,” or something.
You know, more of those threats. So I wrote a very strong letter. I didn’t use any
profanity but just in the strongest terms told them that I had communicated every step of
the way and I was tired of this and et cetera, et cetera, and, “I’m out here in Australia and
I can’t come home until later.” Next port, I guess, was New Zealand and I got a letter
from the draft board saying, “Don’t worry about it. Just come by and see us when you
can.” That’s basically what they said. Then I looked at the back of my draft card and
noticed that employees of the Environmental Science Service Administration should be
classed C-1. So the cruise went on to a couple places in South America and then the first
US port we touched was San Diego. I left the ship there and flew home and reported to
the draft board. I showed up with letters from my employer saying that I was employed
by the Environmental Science Service Administration, which is the parent owner of the
Coast and Geodetic Survey—which is now NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration), by the way—employed me and they changed my status to C-1. I went
out and bought everybody in Norfolk a drink that night and then rejoined the ship in
Seattle. After I had been in Seattle only a few weeks, they sent me a letter saying, “We
put you back to 1-A and did I want to appeal?” I said, “Sure, I’ll appeal.” Meanwhile the
ship made another cruise up to the North Pacific. When I got back, I had been back for a
few days, the draft notice showed up. This must have been the first of July and I was
supposed to report, I think, the tenth. So I just flew home and reported to the draft.

RV: Wow. So you didn’t decide to fight it anymore?
TV: No. I was—I didn’t—no. It was just—you know, I could have said, “Draft
me here in Seattle. That’s where I live now.” But the draft notice was for Norfolk after
all that time.

RV: So your appeal was turned down obviously.
TV: Yeah.

RV: Did they ever tell you why?
TV: No.

RV: You just received the notice and that was it?
TV: Excuse me. Yes.

RV: Okay, okay. How did you feel when you got that knowing that, “Now,
okay, this is real. I’ve got to go?”

TV: At the time I had really had enough sailing and what I really wanted to do
was to go to school at the University of Washington and get a degree in oceanography.

RV: So this had really kind of hit home with you? This work, this kind of
scientific work?

TV: Oh, yeah, very much. Actually, when I went back to the ship in December
of ’67, after I had been to visit the draft board I changed jobs and I became a survey
technician rather than an ordinary seaman. So I was doing different work there and really enjoyed it and thought maybe this was something I might want to do. But when the draft came it was just nothing to do but go. I guess I was tired of dealing with the draft board.

RV: So that was December 1967 when this all went down?

TV: Well, it was July when I got the final draft notice.

RV: The final thing was the following summer, okay. Well, let’s back up just a few years. Tell me as much as you can remember what you thought about the United States being in Southeast Asia. What did you know about it? What did you understand about it at the time?

TV: I understood the spread of communism and thought that stopping communists was a good thing to do. I understand that we had a SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) Treaty with South Vietnam and never really thought much about the French being there and why it was divided and whatnot. But I knew we had promised to protect them if they were invaded. So even as I was being drafted I wasn’t anti-war. I just was—my feelings were that I wanted to do what I wanted to do, but I knew I had to do my service.

RV: Um-hm. Did you feel like this was kind of a patriotic thing or this was your duty to do this?

TV: Duty.

RV: Okay.

TV: Definitely duty.

RV: How much question did you have? Or was there none, really?

TV: When I got drafted I knew I was going to end up in Vietnam. It was just a done deal as far as what I felt.

RV: Do you remember how you felt about the war in 1968?

TV: I guess I thought that we were killing communists and stopping the spread of communism and that if we didn’t stop it, you know, sooner or later we’d be fighting them here. So I can’t say I was anti-war in any manner whatsoever. The idea of stopping communism was pretty worthwhile to me. I can’t say that I really thought much about the actual war itself or being in the war.

RV: You didn’t?
TV: Probably felt pretty much bulletproof. But when you’re very young—or when I was very young I felt [I was] pretty much an invulnerable kind of fellow. I think I was particularly—it was a matter of, “I’ve got to do this rather than go to school or rather than sail around the world or do what I want to do. I’ve got to do this.” That was my—what I was thinking in my mind was, “It’s a real inconvenience.” But as far as being worried about coming home in a box, I don’t think that was heavy on my mind.

RV: Do you remember how your parents felt?

TV: Before I went, I think they were just kind of, you know, knew that I had a duty and had to do it. Yet they wished that I didn’t have to do it, both of them, especially my mom. But I think that they resigned themselves to the fact. During the war, my mom, she was tremendously worried and it really weighed—my service, my being there really weighed heavily on her. I wasn’t much of a writer but she knew I was in combat. I think she became a lot feistier when somebody she knew would make an anti-war comment or whatnot. She was very likely to get back in their face about it. But before I went there to Vietnam, she wouldn’t have. She’d have kept her mouth shut if anybody made an anti-war comment. But I think, you know, then and thereafter if anybody did, they would hear about it from her.

RV: Do you remember what she said to you before you went? Kind of her worries or fears or just her basic feelings? You said she did express some of this to you.

TV: Yeah, I think as a family we didn’t show a whole lot of emotions or whatnot. You know, she just said she was going to worry about me and please write. I’d been gone for two years already so they knew what kind of letter writer I was.

RV: You stayed pretty faithful in that? Keeping contact with them?

TV: No, no. (Laughs)

RV: Really? (Laughs)

TV: I was a terrible letter writer. In fact, my dad one time sent me a form letter where I didn’t actually have to write a letter just check the boxes on the one he wrote and send it back to him. It was a joke, of course. You know he was saying, “More mail.”

RV: Okay. So you’re getting ready to go in. What did you see as far as anti-war protests and the feeling inside the United States before you go into the Army?
TV: I can’t remember much about anti-war protest. I’m trying to think of the
time period. I don’t remember seeing much of protests then. Of course, it was right in
the middle of 1968 and I don’t think all the—I had missed for two years the news myself
and didn’t really see much of it. But my parents probably saw it every night. But I
wasn’t aware of much protest up to the point of the time I got drafted.

RV: Okay. Did you get a sense for what the country was feeling? I mean you
really had been out of the country, literally.

TV: I probably didn’t have that good of a sense about the country.

RV: Well, what about around the world? What did you run into, all these many
stops you made, all these different liberty calls?

TV: I didn’t run into any anti-American sentiment anywhere. The people in
Russia, or in the Ukraine, were scared to talk to us it seemed like.

RV: Oh, really?

TV: Or wouldn’t talk to us. But everywhere else, everybody liked Americans,
especially in Australia. I remember getting a shave in a hotel barbershop in Penang,
Malaysia, and the barber was a young Malay girl. I guess I read *The Ugly American*, I’m
not sure what I was—but I remember breaking out in a cold sweat thinking, “What if she
was Vietnamese?” I knew we were at war and [what if she] decided right here and now
to make it known that she was a Vietnamese citizen, or North Vietnamese citizen and cut
my throat. But I remembered that going through my mind just very briefly for half a
second. But don’t recall anybody being anti-American back then. There were racial
problems happening in the country, you know quite a bit. But at that point I wasn’t really
aware of much anti-American sentiment.

RV: Do you remember—I’m not sure if you were in-country or in the United
States or not—but April ’68, Martin Luther King being shot and the reaction to that?

TV: I was out in the Pacific Ocean at the time. So I missed that one.

RV: What did you think about that when you heard news?

TV: Well, I knew it was bad news for the country.

RV: In what way?

TV: Well, you know he was a peaceful person. He was a peaceful leader and
trying to be peaceful. I figured with him out of the way that that would give non-peaceful
people a chance to take over. I think that the thought might have crossed my mind even that some of his competitors in the civil rights movement might have had him killed even. I think I might’ve had that thought just because there were plenty of people who didn’t want a non-violent approach. So I missed a lot of it but what I knew and what I heard, I knew it was going to be bad for the country.

RV: Um-hm. Okay. So in 1968, January to, really April was the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. Did you have any thoughts at the time about that event and your understanding of it, what it meant, things like that?

TV: I was out in the North Pacific Ocean and didn’t really—we got some news, but very little news. Internet didn’t exist. There was just almost no news. I probably didn’t think about it. It just never crossed my mind.

RV: It was the war, and the war was the war, basically?

TV: Yes, exactly.

RV: Yeah. What was it like being out in the North Pacific Ocean? I mean just out there with nothing but water around you? What was that like?

TV: It convinced me to stop my sailing adventures. All the way around the world we had sailed no more than two or three weeks, and went to nice, sun-drenched ports in nice weather and just didn’t stay out long. Sailing for three or four months, or whatever it was, out in the North Pacific, it was cold, it was rough weather. There was no place to go, except we went into Adak, Alaska. It was a miserable cruise and I was going to do something to—actually I had resigned from the Coast Survey right before I got my draft notice because I was intending on going to school or doing something different. We did stop at one little island, I can’t remember the name of it, but it was an uninhabited volcanic island, after we had been at sea for several months. The captain had brought a lot of beer on board and put it in a [cooler] and chained it up locked and safe until we got to this island. We had a barbecue and played some baseball games and whatnot on the beach on this uninhabited island and drank beer, had a beer party. The island had been an Army base during World War II. I’m not sure if it had been invaded or not by the Japanese, but there was the remnants of a base there. I remember finding even some old 1940s-era C-rations. It was a fun day.
RV: Yeah. It sounds like you’re going to enter the war at—I mean you’re twenty-one years old. You’ve been around the world, seen so much and experienced so much, you’ve had a really different context in which you’re going to be approaching the Vietnam War. Did you see that at the time or have you since realized that?

TV: Yes, I saw it then and I’ve reflected on it since then. I was just a couple years older than most of the draftees and I thought just some of that the nonsense that the cadres during training threw at you were—you know, I could see that as a big deal. It was just, I think, just a little immaturity in my part.

RV: Did you think that it changed the way you behaved or acted or served during the war? All this experience; all this exposure around the world; all these different cultures you’ve already seen?

TV: It probably had to. I mean that trip, that experience definitely changes you. I’m not sure to what extent or how it did but I’m sure it changed me than if I had been just nineteen years old and fresh out of school.

RV: Right, right. I’m sorry, go ahead.

TV: When the ship was in Buenos Aires, they had just had a revolution down there. This would have been in 1966. The place was kind of an armed camp. There were soldiers and police officers everywhere. Actually somebody, it was an Argentinean person, was murdered on the dock right next to where the ship tied up.

RV: Wow.

TV: So yeah, there was a little bit of experience there that you wouldn’t get back in Norfolk, Virginia.

RV: Um-hm. Yeah, I’d say so. So going into the Army, what was your view on the US military? Or did you have one?

TV: I knew that being drafted would be two years and joining the Navy or joining something else would be three years. So two years versus three years? No question.

RV: (Laughs) Get it over with.

TV: Get it over with.

RV: Did your dad have anything to say about that?

TV: No, he didn’t.
RV: As a Navy guy he didn’t say, “Hey, you know you need to kind of follow this way?”
TV: No.
RV: Okay.
TV: He just left that totally up to me.
RV: Do feel like you, looking back, made a good decision going into the Army? I mean, I know that’s a tough question to ask.
TV: The fact that I survived. There were many times when I regretted the decision. After I got through it and was alive, I thought it was pretty brilliant. But at the time, there were plenty of times when—well, I could have reenlisted and gotten out of the field. I was probably—felt like I was close to that a time or two but I didn’t. So no, I think two years versus three or whatever I just wanted to get it over with.
RV: Um-hm, okay. So in July of ’68 you’re drafted in and you’ve chosen the Army and that’s the way you’re headed and you go to your basic training how soon after you were drafted?
TV: Well, let me back up a little bit. Interesting story. When I got my draft notice in Seattle, I only had a few days before I had to report. So I flew home and settled everything with my folks and everything. Then when I went and reported to the draft board, they said, “Oh, you’re Tim Vail, the Tim Vail.”
RV: (Laughs) Did that scare you? What did you think when they said that?
TV: Well, you know, I had written a lot of letters telling them where I was and you know complaining about—then the marshals after me and all that. So they all came out and I shook hands and met everybody and I was startled it was a bunch of very young ladies that was running the draft board. That’s just the way it was. But because they knew me so well, they put me in charge of the group that went to Richmond and then on to Fort Benning. One interesting thing happened right before they swore us in was they asked if anyone wanted to be drafted into the Marines.
RV: Oh, yes. I have heard of this happening. What were your thoughts?
TV: I was thunderstruck because I know how Marines conduct combat and how everything about them is—you know, I wasn’t about to get drafted into the Marines.
They asked for volunteers and nobody volunteered.
RV: What had you heard, Tim? What was your understanding of how the
Marines conducted themselves?

TV: Just that the Marines were very gung-ho. I saw being a draftee amongst all
these volunteer Marines being much different than being a draftee in the Army because
there would be a lot more draftees. Just the idea of going in the Marines just—to this day
I’ve pondered what I would have done if they had said, “You’re going to be a Marine.”
I’ve never come up with an answer on that. But I didn’t get picked and some others did
and went off and took a separate oath.

RV: Now you said up until today you’re not really sure what would have
happened or what you would have done. Was it a selection or were they asking for
volunteers or did they kind of come—I’ve heard stories where they went every other
person.

TV: They needed a certain number out of our group. They asked for volunteers,
didn’t get any, and it was like every third or fourth guy. Just, “You, you, you, stand over
here.”

RV: Isn’t it amazing that’s how fate played out for you?

TV: Oh, yeah. Getting drafted was fine with me. It was part of what had to
happen. It was like a steamroller, just inevitable. But being drafted in the Marines was
not in my mind. In my attitude of things, I’m not really sure what I would have done.
You know, just being a draftee in the Army was one thing, but telling your Marine drill
instructor that you were a draftee and didn’t want to be there, that just didn’t work. It
wouldn’t work. I got lucky.

RV: Well, you definitely went into a different branch, into the US Army. I’ve
heard lots and lots of things about the US Army in the late 1960s post-Tet and I’m
interested to see of how you underwent your training and what they were telling you
about Vietnam and how they trained you, first in basic and then on to advanced. You
said you were put in charge of the group that was going to Richmond. Tell me about that.
You were immediately selected for sort of a leadership position. Was that because they
were familiar with your letters and all of the discourse, as you said, or was there
something that they might have recognized or you think they recognized about you that
you could be entrusted with this?
TV: I think it was just because they were so familiar with my name.
RV: Okay.
TV: I really do. I don’t think they had any other clues about me. No. They couldn’t have known me, they just—other than what I’d wrote in my letters and the fact that I faithfully followed along and told them exactly where I was and what I was doing. They didn’t seem to be able to keep track of that, but I think that’s the only reason that they put me in charge of the little group and that meant I carried the papers is all.
RV: How did you feel about it?
TV: About?
RV: About being put in charge of it? Carrying everybody’s papers and kind of being the one go-to person for that travel?
TV: I knew it was no big deal. I didn’t see it as a big deal.
RV: Um-hm. Okay, okay. So when you get to Richmond, what happens?
TV: They swore us in and put us on a train down to Columbus, Georgia. This was after the deal with drafting Marines and whatnot. The rest of us took the oath of joining the Army and they just put us on a train and off we went to Georgia. We knew we were going to Fort Benning. Didn’t know anything about what Fort Benning was or even where it was.
RV: So what was it like there on that train going down for basic training? What were you thinking and feeling? Was it hitting you? You know, “I’m getting ready to go into war here?” I mean, “I’m going to train to go into war?”
TV: No, but I think what was hitting me was that this was the first day of the seven-hundred-and-some that I’ve got to get behind me. That was all. I really wasn’t thinking about the war or I really didn’t have a lot of thoughts along those lines. It was just a matter of just doing what I needed to do to get through.
RV: How did you think you would react to the military style of life?
TV: Generally, I mean, I knew all about the military. I could spit-shine my dad’s dress shoes when I was eight years old. I knew how to polish brass and knew a lot about the military. I didn’t really think it was my cup of tea, particularly. I’ve been known to use the term lifer a time or two just to talk about a career person. Even though my dad was career Navy. I just didn’t think and I still think that the military wasn’t for me,
especially as it existed back then. You know, what I see of the modern-day military, I’ve encouraged young people to join the Army. Because—this is a bit of an aside—but what I see of today’s Army is quite a bit different than the way things were back then and I think it’s much better than it was in my era.

RV: What did you see back then that gave you pause?

TV: Mediocrity was rewarded, people just getting by, people being there because they couldn’t hack it on the outside maybe even. I’m sure I had that feeling. Just not a real—I just didn’t have a very high opinion of a lot of the people. I’m getting ahead of myself here, actually, because those are the people that I encountered at Fort Benning. Actually encountered a much better class of people and different people later on and had a lot of respect and still do for them.

RV: But just initially reflecting on it, you definitely had a sense of, just kind of looking at where you were in ’68, that the Army had some problems that it has fixed by today’s time?

TV: I think they have, I really do.

RV: Okay. Well, tell me about arriving at Fort Benning and what that was like.

TV: Initially not too much confusion. They put us in a barracks, I remember, and started—I’m trying to think—I guess at first it was a couple days of tests. I think we were still in civilian clothes and they hadn’t done the haircut yet. They had a couple days of testing. I believe that’s the correct order. What I recall about that was I was hoping to outsmart the Army’s psychologists in that anytime they asked a question about camping or being outside or anything rugged or hiking, you know—if they asked me, “Would you rather hike or read a book?” I answered, “Read a book.” I was trying to—

RV: You were trying to be honest?

TV: No.

RV: Or trying to get out of it?

TV: I was trying to mess their minds a little bit and hope that I got maybe something other than infantry. Not just to be honest, you know. “Did I like camping?” “No.” “Did I like using firearms or baking a cake?” I’d put baking a cake. That wasn’t true but—(laughs).
RV: Sure. Are you thinking intelligence, or something, you know, non-combat?
Or non-infantry. Non-what you actually had to go out and do, where they actually put you.

TV: Non-infantry was what I was thinking, anything other than infantry. I just, you know—the tests were probably a lot smarter than I was and they probably saw through that. Or maybe it didn’t matter about the test. But the bottom line was, well, you don’t know until later. A couple days of tests and then they issued the uniforms and a bunch of gear and everybody got a haircut. Then they assign you to a basic training unit. You get off a bus and you don’t really know even after a couple of days. You know how to make a little bit of a formation, but there was drill sergeants everywhere. They just started mass confusion on the first day. Just everybody running this way and that, doing PT (physical training), stop and try to form a formation, do more PT. I recall, you know, just running ragged for half-an-hour or so and some drill sergeant called me over and said, “How are you feeling?” I said, “A little tired, drill sergeant.” Oh, it was the wrong thing to say! “You need more PT.” But they were just—it was just absolute confusion and pandemonium because people hadn’t been trained on how to act as a group at all in any way. That was just the first day.

RV: What kind of shape were you in physically?

TV: I was in fair shape. I smoked back then. I was not ready to run five miles, but I was in pretty good shape. Not good enough shape, though. PT wasn’t too bad, but the long runs were definitely tough.

RV: What about gelling into a group like that? You made the very prescient comment that you guys had never been together as a group, worked together as a group, so you didn’t really know exactly what to do. What was that like, kind of melding yourselves into this group, this coherent group, or cohesive group?

TV: It was a pretty rough bunch. It was rough doing that. I can remember a couple weeks into the training, or maybe a week or so into the training, had an unfortunate incident where we did [not] know how to form ourselves into a formation and me and another guy bumped into each other. He threw a punch at me, hit me in the stomach. You know, because we bumped into each other. I looked over my left shoulder
and right shoulder and threw one back at him and hit his rifle instead of him and broke aone in my hand, which just made going through training a little bit more difficult.

RV: Did you have to put a cast on?

TV: For a couple of weeks. It didn’t slow me down that much. I think they let
me off of doing a couple exercises. For example, we had to go to an overhead, like a
trapeze bar to get to the mess hall and instead of doing that, I had to do a couple more
low crawls until I got the cast off. But I could handle the rifle and still continued the
training. So I went through a couple or three weeks of training with the cast on.

RV: Okay. How did you do with the military lifestyle that first few weeks of
kind of being told what to do and your life being completely structured by someone else?

TV: I think some of the people were pretty much overwhelmed by it and I just
saw it for what it was and I don’t think I had a particular problem with it. I didn’t like it,
necessarily. It wasn’t my favorite thing to do but I didn’t have a problem with it. I could
see what they were doing. One of the things they did to try to get everybody together
was if somebody screwed up, they would punish the entire group. Then later the group,
if it happened more than once or a bunch of times, the group would take it out on
whoever was screwing up.

RV: How did that happen?

TV: Hm?

RV: How did that happen? How did the group kind of rectify that situation?

TV: I think every training place I ever was, there was always somebody who
wouldn’t take proper hygiene and take a shower and whatnot. A bunch of guys would
just grab him and get some GI (general issue) brushes and give him a scrubbing with
these rough brushes to clean him up.

RV: Was it effective?

TV: It was effective. Yeah, it worked. I mean, the group pressure is—everybody
felt it. You didn’t want to cause the group to get punished so you’d do your best to not
screw up. One of the things I noticed, I guess in retrospect, was the cadre that I had at
Fort Benning, I can’t recall anybody there who had combat experience. All the drill
sergeants, most of the people that I encountered there all had—they wore a patch on their
right shoulder which indicated that they had been in Germany in a division that was
stationed over there. Almost nobody had a Combat Infantryman’s Badge. I can’t
remember any, including officers even, that had combat experience in my basic training
battalion. I got the impression that their job was just to get as many people through as
they could and do another group.

RV: Okay. What kind of things did you learn in basic? What were you taught?

TV: How to march. Of course, basic military courtesy and whatnot, and that’s
important to know how to salute and who to salute. But a lot of time marching. Turns
out I was pretty good at the manual of arms. It was something that came naturally to me.

RV: I’m sorry, naturally what?

TV: The manual of arms on the left shoulder, right shoulder stuff. I don’t know
why I was good at it, but that was one of the things they taught us and something that was
a plus to be good at that.

RV: Did your DIs tell you anything about Vietnam? Had they been there?

TV: No. None of them had been in combat. At least that’s my recollection. I
could be wrong about that, but I don’t remember anybody talking about combat. I don’t
remember anybody that had any ribbons or marks on the uniform that indicated that
they’d been in combat.

RV: I think you probably would have remembered that if that was the case.

That’s interesting, they really—Vietnam was not any kind of focus. It was basic training.

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay. Did your experience as a child, as a youth, handling the .22 and other
things, did that help you?

TV: I think so. I mean I was a good shot with the rifle. In basic they trained us
with an M-14, which nobody in Vietnam, or hardly anybody in Vietnam ever used. But
we trained with a -14 and qualified with it. I was a good shot. You know, I already knew
how to shoot, so that was definitely a plus. I think I qualified sharp shooter. I think I was
close to even qualifying expert. But I did pretty well with a rifle.

RV: Okay. What else about basic? Was it a lot of just basic physical training
and learning the marching, or did you all do anything more elaborate than that?
TV: A lot of physical training, PT every day, running every day. A lot of marching. I think there might have been a—I forget what they call it but, you know, a gas class. You know where they teach you about tear gas and whatnot and they expose you to tear gas. Then we had some of the classic things of the night fire where you have to crawl through a field with live ammo being fired over your head. We had bayonet training, big on bayonet training. You know, “What is the spirit of the bayonet?” “To kill.” They were big on that. Didn’t have a bayonet in Vietnam at all.

RV: Oh, really? (Laughs)

TV: That was a big part of the training. Mainly, the benefit to me was the physical training. I can’t remember much of anything. Well, basic training wasn’t intended to teach the infantry tactics, so it was mainly just to familiarize you with weapons and with the Army and then your individual school was where you’re given the advanced training.

RV: Okay. You mentioned before we got into that discussion about some of the details about your basic training that you did see at Fort Benning, some of the things that you did not like about the Army. What were those things that you saw?

TV: I think some of the cadre that I had to deal with were just putting in their time. Didn’t really care a whit about the trainees, if they learned anything or not. They cared only in the extent that they got through the class or got on and graduated. I think it was really in my mind comparing the basic that I went through to other training, to AIT (advanced infantry training) training that really cemented that in my mind. You know later on I met cadre and drill sergeants and whatnot who really cared. You know, who weren’t just there putting in their time.

RV: Right. How did you all look at the so-called lifers?

TV: I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear what you—

RV: How did you all look at the so-called lifers, the ones that were career Army?

TV: We kind of looked down on them a little bit. My feeling was that, “In less than two years I’ll be back being a real person and you’ll still be a lifer.” We never said that to anybody because it would be rude, but that was going through my mind. Fairly or not, that was the way I felt about it, especially at Benning.
RV: Why was it especially at Benning and not, say, at advanced or even later when you got into the war?

TV: Because of the quality of the people that I was dealing with. I just thought that they—at Benning, again I’m kind of repeating but the people I encountered were—they just didn’t seem to care.

RV: Were these your DIs?

TV: Yes, DIs.

RV: Okay. Well, what was discipline like in your unit there in basic? Did you all have a problem with it or did you all fall in line? Things like that? I guess on another level related to that discipline question is, did you have anybody in your unit, in your platoon there that had been, say, part of the anti-war movement or just not really engaged and not up for anything to do with the US military or serving in Vietnam?

TV: Richard I’m not sure if anybody’s [antics were] anti-war, but there were plenty people in basic training that I just would not want to go into combat with. Even though I hadn’t been in combat, I knew it was coming and I could see serving with some of those folks was just going to be a problem. I’m not sure that I can even articulate why I knew that but there were just some people that were so wrong in the way they dealt with things. You know, the things they did that you knew they were going to be a problem.

RV: Do you remember any specific examples?

TV: One specific example is one night they rousted us all out of our bunks, had us in formation outside in our skivvies because somebody stole a bayonet or didn’t turn one in. The Army took it very seriously and they just started harassing the whole bunch of us all night long. They’d stand us out there a while and then back to bed and five minutes later back out standing outside in the dark for an hour or two until finally whoever the person was—and they never did find out who did it—pitched the bayonet out the window of the barracks and somebody found it and the problem was solved. But anybody stupid enough to steal a bayonet from the Army and then put everybody else through that—I mean, that’s not a good person.

RV: Right. Exercising poor judgment.
TV: Very poor judgment. Never did find out who it was. There were people who were, you know, really exercised at that and would’ve taken it very badly if it had come out who did it. There were some racial problems too.

RV: I was going to ask about that. This was 1968, right at the height of this tension, or one of the high points of tension in the Civil Rights Movement. Tell me about that kind of racial strife that you saw.

TV: I guess what I saw was some blacks from off the farm or off—I mean, I don’t know where they came from, but I guess a new version of person. I never knew that there were people that low, that bad in how they dealt with life and how they did just their day-to-day dealings. Some really bad people and I hesitate to say, it but I remember one just how he dealt in the shower was disgusting.

RV: Do you want to elaborate on that or—?

TV: Nah, not really. He was just fondling himself in the shower in front of a bunch of GIs and that was it. I thought it was the lowest thing I had ever seen in my life. I just couldn’t get over it. I didn’t understand it and didn’t know that people would even act like that. This guy was proud of doing it, just not a good person. But there was some like that.

RV: Was there any black-white tension that was problematic?

TV: There might have been some. I think that fact that the Army and what would happen if somebody really screwed up, stopped things from really becoming problematic. You know, they had a situation where if two guys had an issue they could, on Sunday afternoon, you could break out boxing gloves and beat each other’s brains in to solve the problem. Generally it was white-on-white or black-on-black that did that. Not, you know, not black-white.

RV: Okay. When you look back on Benning, what do you see in your mind’s eye?

TV: A bunch of those lifers that had to deal with me and all the rest of us for eight weeks, or whatever it was, and were just damn glad to get rid of us. Really, that was my opinion of them. Nothing better than that. It was not a positive experience for me.
RV: Okay. Did you feel like you were prepared adequately for moving on to advanced training?

TV: You know, by then I had built up enough where I could handle the runs and handle the PT. So that part of it, yeah. You know, being able to run an extended distance or to walk an extended distance was pretty important and basic did help in that aspect. I had probably lost ten pounds and was in excellent shape by the time I finished.

RV: Right. So for advanced you’re going to Fort Polk. Tell me about the process of getting out of Benning and processing into Fort Polk. How much time did you have between and what were you told about advanced training?

TV: Weren’t told much about the advanced training, you know, what it would entail. Interesting thing, when we all got our orders they just passed out a sheet of paper that had your orders, what school you were going to. I mentioned in the questionnaire, the trooper who was the top trainee. I mean he was a volunteer; he was number one in every aspect of training was ordered to a cook school. He just absolutely fell apart. He just couldn’t believe it and I mean he just fell totally to pieces. People got involved and actually got him new orders within a day, I guess, to go on to MP (military police) school. You know he’s the kind of person that should have been an MP and not a cook, but the fact that he was ordered to cook school just made no sense. A lot of people were volunteers and they were going to what they had signed up for and most of us draftees were just ordered to go to AIT. AIT was at Fort Polk. Basically a day or two after graduation, they provided a bus—or maybe it was a couple of buses. I can’t remember for sure, but we drove straight from Benning to Fort Polk on a bus that the Army provided. Wait a minute—no, I’m pretty sure it was an Army bus.

RV: Okay. So there was really no time in between?

TV: No there was no time at all. Went straight to—I’m hesitating because it might have been that I just caught a Greyhound bus.

RV: Um-hm. But you didn’t have time to go back up to Norfolk or anything?

TV: No. No. The orders were dated and it was just go straight to AIT. I remember at the gate of Fort Polk it was, “Fort Polk: Training the Combat Soldier for Vietnam.”

RV: That’s what it said?
TV: Yeah, it was a motto very similar to that, very close to that.

RV: How did that make you feel when you saw that?

TV: Well, again, I wasn’t surprised. I knew it was coming. I was just resigned to it. Again, I knew all along I was going to be in Vietnam and just went with the flow.

RV: Okay. How had you learned to act in the Army? Was it kind of stay under the radar and go with the flow, or did you see yourself in a leadership role or wanting to be in a leadership role?

TV: At the time before going to Vietnam, it was very much just go with the flow and I didn’t particularly want to be a leader and I didn’t want to cause trouble. I just wanted to go with the flow.

RV: What do you think were your strengths at this point, going through AIT?

TV: Well, I was a pretty good shot and I was in good physical condition. I remember remarking as soon as they assigned us to a company, to a unit and battalion and whatnot, and met with the platoon sergeants and drill sergeants and all that, everybody there was wearing a CIB (Combat Infantryman’s Badge) and everybody had been in combat units in Vietnam. Everybody I saw and it was like night and day to me. You know, I was just starting to understand the Army a little bit, but I knew the patches and I knew what it meant. Sure enough, the people were a whole different quality, you know, the cadre that we had to deal with.

RV: I take it a much better quality.

TV: Much better. They were a pretty rough bunch as far as being tough. I mean, they weren’t easy on us. But I think what you could see was they’d been in combat or at least in-country and they knew we were headed for combat and cared that we learned how to survive and how to deal with things. So there was, I guess, care and concern, where before at Benning was indifference and that was immediately noticeable.

RV: What did that do for you, mentally or as far as morale is concerned?

TV: Big improvement. I was not really happy with the Army at all through basic. But my morale improved drastically in AIT because dealing with better people and, you know they gave a damn. They cared what happened to us.
RV: Tell me about the kind of training you all received. I know that you probably did a lot of classroom as well as out in the field training. What can you tell me about it?

TV: The thrust of the training was on using sleep deprivation and making you work and do things when you are very, very tired. More than just pure physical training. There was plenty of physical things to do but they might keep you up late at night doing something or wake you up very early and have you work very long hours just so you were good and tired. So the idea, I felt like, you know, what I saw was that they wanted to see or make sure that you could deal with not being well rested and still function. One interesting thing is Fort Polk is called Tigerland.

RV: Um-hm, yes.

TV: One of the first things that the drill instructors all wanted was—and it was kind of a gauge or a barometer of how we were feeling—was we all had to growl like tigers every time they told us something. A little bit silly but, by God, if we growled good enough, you know we might skip a morning run and go straight to breakfast.

RV: Huh, wow!

TV: But if we didn’t growl loud enough or strong enough, “Yeah, you need to run.” (Laughs) So—

RV: So that really stands out in your mind that you had to learn how to growl properly?

TV: Doing all that growling. Yup.

RV: Yeah. I’m not going to ask you to do that now. (Laughs) Although I’d like to, but I won’t put you through that.

TV: I don’t think I could do it, not properly.

RV: Right, right. Well, you all, I believe, had to complete the Tigerland course at the end of this. Is that correct? That you all would go through kind of a real live-type situation?

TV: Yes. Two weeks. No, a week, one week out in the field.

RV: Did they tell you this kind of up front, you know, “This is where you’re going, this is what you’re going to have to do?” Or did you all know this going into it?
TV: I think they gave us an outline of what would happen when and so we knew at the end there would be a week in the field. At the end of that would be a very long walk back from where we were out in the field back to the company area. So yeah, we had an idea of a couple weeks of this and a couple weeks of that and then that’s where we would end up.

RV: Okay, okay. Curiously Tim, have you seen the movie *Tigerland*? They’ve actually made a movie of it.

TV: Actually I did and it was—

RV: What did you think?

TV: It was the most ridiculous movie I ever saw in my life!

RV: (Laughs) How so?

TV: I can’t remember even paying attention to it. It just was so different than anything real. I guess I was expecting something, a little trace of reality, and the movie just seemed ridiculous. I’m not sure I even watched the whole thing.

RV: So it missed the mark completely?

TV: It missed the mark completely. It was nothing like the real Tigerland.

RV: Okay, okay. Well, I look forward to hearing about the real Tigerland and what that was like. Tim, why don’t we go ahead and stop for today?

TV: That sounds great.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Timothy P. Vail. Today is October 21, 2005, and it’s approximately 9:10 AM Central Daylight Time. I’m in Lubbock and, Tim, you are again in Roanoke, Virginia. Let’s continue where we left off. We were getting ready to move you into AIT. Before we do that, I wanted to ask you about going back to your experience sailing around the world, basically, on this cruise on the coast survey. We talked about how that impacted you having a world view and I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about that. Who was the person who was responsible for kind of getting you on board for that cruise?

TV: He was the director of the Norfolk office of the Coast and Geodetic Survey. His name is Bill Harrison. He’s the father of a high school friend of mine and his son Dave has been and continues to be a life-long friend. We’re still best of friends right now. That one opportunity to join that ship and make that cruise changed things for me quite a bit, a big impact on my life.

RV: Is there any port that you remember, Tim, that really stands out as unique and interesting? I mean, I know they were probably all interesting in their own way, but any of your stops along this way, you know Monaco or the Suez Canal or Argentina or Ethiopia. What comes to mind when you think about that cruise? What do you see?

TV: I could probably go on and on about each one of them because each one had its own unique experiences and some of them were fun and some of them were a little crazy maybe. But one that comes to mind is when we were going through the Suez Canal in June of ’67. The Suez Canal has a bypass where ships depart from both ends and one group has to go into the bypass to let the other group continue through the canal. It was very hot, we were in the bypass, it was very hot, and the captain or the XO (executive officer) just let us take a swim call. So we lowered a gangway into the water and we’re swimming around the ship and all of a sudden a bunch of jeeps—armored Egyptian jeeps—no tanks or anything, just armored vehicles pulled up with machine guns on them. They didn’t threaten anybody but they were there, I guess, because they knew that the war with Israel was about to break out.
RV: You guys were in the water swimming and they pulled up? They spoke English, I take it, and they were able to communicate with your captain?

TV: Well, we just communicated with sign language back and forth and that’s about it. Really nothing verbal.

RV: Yeah. That’s interesting. What did Egypt look like from the canal?

TV: Sand, just sand.

RV: Really?

TV: From the standpoint of the canal it was very hot. There’s an interesting phenomena, when you are in the bypass, the ships that are—we were southbound—the ships that are northbound go by maybe less than half-a-mile away but you can’t see the water. You just see the ships going through the sand. It’s an interesting viewpoint from there.

RV: It must be very surreal. What was it like to be, or I guess, were you aware of the history of this canal and to be there, did that strike you?

TV: Probably not at the time, no. It did later because there was some sort of American ship that was stranded in the canal. It wasn’t bombed but the canal was closed when they were going through and they ended up spending months and months in there before they could get out. Don’t know the name of the ship, but when I heard about that or heard that news later, that certainly had an impact. It made you think. Lucky we got through it.

RV: What would you say was the most interesting place you were on that cruise, if you can single out one place?

TV: Had to be Australia. Particularly—all of Australia was just a wonderful experience. The people just really liked Americans. They liked us. We had a great time there, kind of a big party. But Sydney, Australia, had to be the best port we made. It was just a good time to be an American sailor, nineteen years old and sailing around the world.

RV: What kind of sailor were you? Were you comfortable on a ship and good with navigation or that kind of thing?

TV: Very much so. I learned to steer the ship, which the ship was 303 feet long, a good-sized ship. It had over a hundred people on it. I was a—my title was ordinary
seaman, a deckhand. We did a lot of painting and upkeep on the ship, but also operated
the ship’s wenches and cranes and stuff to do when we went on station in the ocean to do
ocean research. I was very eager to do good on there. Because of that, I was appointed
an acting leading seaman. At nineteen years old, I had a couple of sailors who were
maybe in their late twenties or early thirties that I gave direction to. This was after I had
been on the ship for six or seven months.

RV: That’s a nice responsibility to have.

TV: If they needed the light bulb changed at the very top of the mast, I would
volunteer. They’d send me in and I’d go up there and change that light bulb.

RV: Now why would you volunteer for that? That’s quite dangerous. I know as
a nineteen year old you’re probably like, “Well, that’s fun.”

TV: It was fun. I loved it. If work needed done over the side, I was quick to
volunteer to do that. It was just exciting.

RV: What kind of animal life did you see while on this cruise?

TV: Lots of whales, porpoises, very often saw porpoises. In fact, the ship had an
observation chamber in the bow. At the bottom of the bow of the ship were portholes.
You would climb down to the bottom and then open up a cover on a port and look out
and see the water.

RV: Is this below water level or above?

TV: At the very bottom of the ship, seventeen or eighteen feet down. Once in a
while, dolphins would swim in front of the ship. I think the pressure of the bow of the
ship is like surfing to them and they can go along without exerting themselves. So they
seemed to do that pretty often, the just get in front of the ship. If you happened to be
down in the bow observation chamber, you could watch them. Very interesting.

RV: Wow. That reminds me of the Nautilus in Jules Vernes’s 20,000 Leagues
Under the Sea, where they could open up the walls of the submarine and look out into the
ocean from underneath. That’s interesting. What was the most hostile place you were?

TV: Had to be Odessa. We referred to it as Russia but it’s actually in the
Ukraine.

RV: This is in the Black Sea?
TV: Um-hm. Go through the Dardanelles, past Istanbul and into the Black Sea.

When we were pulling into the port, the pilot came on and told us, “Do not take any pictures of the port.” Naturally everybody on the ship had their cameras out, sneaking around taking pictures of a perfectly worthless port. (Laughs)

RV: Um-hm. (Laughs) It wasn’t the great Russian bear, Cold War enemy port?

TV: It was just an ugly, old-looking port and nothing of any consequence whatsoever. But they made a point of telling us no pictures, so probably we took more pictures of that port than any other port we were in. They put two guards at the gangway of the ship and I guess they were Russian soldiers. To leave the ship, you had to turn in your ship’s ID and your government ID and accept their ID, then you could go ashore. There was a curfew, be back at a certain time and a lot of rules about where you could exchange money. Some of it was probably good advice and some of it was the Russians wanting to get the best possible return on when you bought rubles. The official return was probably ten rubles to one dollar, but at the place where we had to exchange money it was one for one.

RV: When I asked you why Odessa was hostile, was it because it was the Soviet Union, or did you encounter anything specific there?

TV: Just the people. The people were just—you know, when we opened our mouth to speak the people shied away immediately. They didn’t want to have anything to do with us. I never did get a cab driver to stop. I only went ashore once or twice and it was so unpleasant that I worked the rest of the time in port so that I’d have time off for other ports. But if we hailed a cab and the cab stopped, when we told him where we wanted to go he wouldn’t even take us.

RV: Wow.

TV: We had an officer on the ship who was—I can’t remember his name now, but he was Hungarian and was deathly afraid to go ashore. I think he or his family had been involved in, I guess, the riot and revolution they had there in the late ’50s. He had some experience with that and was not comfortable there and would not go ashore at all. I was glad to get out of there. We didn’t stay long. After one or two trips ashore, what I saw of Odessa was just from the ship.
RV: What was it like going through the Dardanelles, through the Bosporus Straits?

TV: Very exotic. Lots of land, smells, and the scenery is just ancient and gorgeous. Well exotic, not gorgeous. All those minarets and very old buildings. It’s a beautiful city.

RV: During any of you stops, did the topic of the war, the Vietnam War come up? I mean you’re right here in the mid-’60s, ’66, ’67 is when you were doing this and did anything ever come up?

TV: I remember we met a bunch of Australian Marines in Sydney that had been in the war and were home on leave. They were a very hard-drinking bunch and very friendly to us. But to answer your question, I really don’t recall discussing the war much at all. Not amongst ourselves much and I can’t recall any particular experience with someone I would have met in a foreign country.

RV: Well, let’s move, if it’s okay with you, let’s move to your advanced training at Fort Polk.

TV: All righty.

RV: This is, we discussed this. This is where Tigerland is. This is kind of a reputed, a tough course you are going to go through and you described kind of getting there and the signage out front and getting in. Tell me what stands out. What are your memories of advanced training?

TV: I think I mentioned all of the growling we had to do. That was a way of communicating our temperament to the instructors. So if we growled robustly and loud, they knew we were feeling good about things and that made them happy it seemed like. If we were less than robust, then they knew that something was wrong and usually PT would fix it.

RV: So there was a lot of physical training?

TV: Quite a bit. There wasn’t as much marching as there was in basic training. We took some very long runs and it put us in excellent shape. The stress seemed to be more on mental training from what I recall. A lot of times we would be in classes all day long. A lot of folks were very sleepy because we had gotten up early and worked late. Going to sleep in class was definitely a no-no. It was something that all the cadre were
intent on that not happening. Sometimes we would work late at night. I can remember assembling and disassembling my M-16 till very late at night. But I got very good at stripping a weapon. So they seemed to want to keep us awake, to keep us from getting a lot of sleep so that we would be used to functioning without a lot of sleep.

RV: So they’re basically training you on sleep deprivation and performance under those circumstances?

TV: In so many words. Or, yes. I think they wanted us to get used to being tired, to get used to having to work without having a full night’s sleep.

RV: Well, when you said you would work late, tell me what that work was in advanced training. Was there classroom training for you or was it more tactics in the field or what?

TV: Every day there was PT and classroom classes on different things and then a lot of weapons training. But by working late, normally that would be cleaning our personal equipment or cleaning the barracks. They would have us doing that just so that we weren’t being idle at nine or ten o’clock at night. The idea was just to keep us going, I think. So we’d spend a lot of time polishing boots or polishing brass or polishing the center aisle of the barracks, cleaning the latrines. You know, all of the normal stuff of barracks life and we did a lot of it at night.

RV: What kind of classroom training did you receive? If you can remember back that far.

TV: I guess a lot of the military discipline and the history was done in the classroom. A lot of the classroom actually was outside in barracks. I’m sorry, in bleachers where you would sit in a large bleacher and the instructor would demonstrate what he wanted to teach you and then usually there was some sort of hands-on practice of that afterwards. There was—

RV: How did you take to that, Tim? This different kind of education?

TV: Pardon me?

RV: How did you take to this? Was this something that you were comfortable with and that you easily adapted to, this kind of outside education and then the immediate practical application of what you had just been taught?
TV: I didn’t have any trouble with it at all. I felt that the reason for the training was for my own interest, in my own interest. So I strove, I tried to do well, to really pay attention and to learn the things that we had to learn. We practiced with and qualified with a lot of different weapons. The M-16 was the most important one, but we shot the M-60 machine gun, the M-79 grenade launcher. Had classes on hand grenades and threw hand grenades, .45-caliber pistols, and things that were all brand new and important to know about.

RV: How did you do with all that weaponry retrieving?

TV: Not expert, but marksman in most cases. I was a pretty good shot with my 16 and did okay I guess with everything else. Was not a very good shot with a .45 pistol.

RV: What weapon do you feel like you were more comfortable with of all of those, the grenades, the M-60, the M-16?

TV: Oh, the M-16 by far. Far and above. I was very fond of it. I thought it was a good weapon and received a lot of training on how to operate it, how to clean it. They’d have us field-strip it blindfolded and reassemble it blindfolded. We’d do that again and again and again, which is very good training because you might have to do it in the dark some time in combat.

RV: Right, right. By this time they had worked out the kinks of the M-16, is that correct?

TV: I remember that there had been complaints about the weapon. The instructors assured us that the weapon was a good weapon as long as you kept it clean and not to worry about it, just to feel confident and I was. I do recall one very interesting class that we had, that was the escape and evasion course. During the day—there were actually two companies of us in bleachers and getting various instructions and facts on survival. In fact, somebody brought one instructor a live chicken. I think he had pre-arranged with all the platoon sergeants to find the smallest guy in two companies. He was singled out and brought forward and he was asked if he could wring this chicken’s neck and he said, “Sergeant, no problem whatsoever.” He did to the extent that he grabbed a hold of the chicken and slung it around like his arm was a windmill. The body separated from the chicken and went flying up in the air.

RV: Oh, boy.
TV: That stuck with me. I remember that one very well.

RV: The purpose of this was to show you all how to eat in the field?

RV: To survive, yeah. Later on there was hundreds of us and they gave us raw, supermarket chickens whole, supermarket chickens, and we had to figure out a way to cook them on a little fire. We didn’t have to pluck them like that first one, but that was our dinner, was figuring out a way to cook your own chicken. Then that night, we had the escape and evasion course where basically in pairs you’re to cross a large wooded area and avoid the—oh, what was the term for them? There were bad guys out there whose job was to capture you and it was in the middle of the night, late at night, pitch dark. If they caught you they would take you to a POW (prisoner of war) camp that had a fence and barbed-wire around it. It looked like something that the Viet Cong would build and actually a little bit of rough treatment until you gave your commanding officer’s name. They might have you doing PT with a sandbag over your head or maybe tossing a log around or maybe placed in a real uncomfortable position. I heard that mostly everybody who did get captured ultimately gave their CO’s name to stop, except for one fellow. He got the weekend off, a weekend pass—

RV: Oh, really?

TV: —for going through all that.

RV: Did you get caught?

TV: No, I didn’t. An interesting story there, too. I was with a fellow named Newton. I remember Newton and I were particularly—there was a road that ran diagonally through the woods and that was where the bad guys were more likely to be. We spent a great deal of time reconnoitering and when we finally thought it was clear, when it was clear, we ran across to the woods on the other side of the road and started on. I guess we were navigating by just looking at the stars and going from tree to tree. We would stop and make sure we had the right direction and point out a tree and then we’d run to the next tree. At one point I turned—he was right there with me. At one point I said something, you know I whispered something like, “Let’s go there,” and he wasn’t there. I turned around behind me and he was gone. I said his name a time or two and I couldn’t figure out what happened so I just started running and basically ran through the woods to get away from that area. The next day, or later on in the night I found him and
we had stopped right next to an aggressor who was standing on the other side of this
tree—

RV: Wow.

TV: —inches away. It was just so dark that we couldn’t see him. He, the
aggressor, grabbed a hold of Newton and told him not to say a word. He just grabbed
him, I guess, and Newton didn’t say a word and I went on. Of course, if Newton had
hollered or something, we’d have both jumped on the aggressor probably and it might
have been a little bit rough on him. But as it was, Newton was afraid to say anything and
he got caught and I kept on going.

RV: That’s really interesting. It almost sounds like a game of cat-and-mouse or
hide-and-seek almost. Where you’re just—you’re using the skills you’ve been trained
with and also your instincts.

TV: A lot of the training might be—you know, “Here do this operation just like
the last three hundred people who went through the here and did it.” But that particular
training, going through the woods at night, was all new. I mean it was more like the real
deal and, I thought, very valuable training. Just the feel of being out in the woods by
yourself at night and having to evade from the aggressors was kind of fun. It was
certainly good training.

RV: Were you all conscious of the fact that, “Boy, I’d better get this right
because I’m going to be in a war very shortly?”

TV: I think yes. I think I was, anyway. I knew I was going to Vietnam and
being in the woods at night is something that I would have to look forward to one way or
the other. So yeah, it was going through my mind that, “Let’s pay attention to this and do
it right because it might come in handy later on.”

RV: Right. What other kind of training did they implement that was kind of
Vietnam-specific like that? Or really prepared you directly for what you were getting
ready to get into?

TV: Well, at the end of the cycle we spent, I guess, a whole week out in the field.

RV: This was the Tigerland part of the course, is that correct?

TV: Um-hm. Well, the whole place was called Tigerland and I can’t remember if
there was a name for the last week or not. I don’t recall a particular name for being out in
the field for a week. There probably was, but it was basically just operating in the field
more or less like you would in Vietnam. Now a lot of the things that occurred were—you
know, you might walk down a trail that had been walked by everybody else that has ever
been through there. So, yeah, that part was scripted and not as real as it could have been,
not as realistic as it could have been. But being out in the weather and not in the
barracks—it wasn’t really Vietnam-type weather because it was late fall. But
nevertheless, there’s all kinds of critters and things in the Louisiana woods at night or
day. Good training.

RV: Did your instructors talk to you about the war specifically? Were they
veterans of the war?

TV: They were all veterans of the war. A few of them had anecdotes about it but
there wasn’t—I can’t recall that they related their own experiences that much. But very
often it was, you know, “Here’s a good time to pay attention because such-and-such
happened to me.” I guess they did, some of them did once in a while relay their own
experiences. But they might say, “You might want to pay really good, close attention to
this because it helped me.”

RV: Do you remember any of the stories that they told you or in general what
they told you? Were they talking about direct combat or were they saying, “Here’s how
you deal with an officer. This is how you deal with going into Saigon,” or anything like
that?

TV: I can’t recall anything specific there. The classes on booby traps were—it
didn’t take a rocket scientist to say, “This is a good one to pay attention to,” because
everybody knew there were booby traps and stuff in Vietnam. I remember that training
as really paying attention to that. I remember the instructor did a good job at it. There
were booby traps everywhere. I mean, you couldn’t—they were just little small
explosives but everything you did or everywhere you went that day, it seemed like
somebody was setting one off. Then some people didn’t set them off. So that was
excellent training.

RV: That literally prepared you for what you were going to encounter?

TV: Yes. A lot of it didn’t, you know. Knowing how to salute and all that, that
didn’t. Or how to march in formation wasn’t useful in Vietnam. But how to deal with
booby traps or how to walk long distances was. At the end of that one week bivouac, or
that one week in the field, we did walk—I believe it was more than twenty miles back to
the company area. I want to say twenty-five miles. It took from mid-day until late, late
night to get back. Walking that far was excellent training, knowing you could walk that
far because that was reality.

RV: Tell me about the last week, what that course was like.

TV: They would have scenarios where we had to form into platoons or squads
and make patrols, make reconnaissance. It was pretty much scripted. The training
wasn’t totally free-form like it could have been. You knew you were going to get
ambushed, for example.

RV: What was it like? Was it basically that you guys were in a company-size
and you would go out and have to take care of certain objectives? Or what was the actual
setup?

TV: We had a company area and I’m sure we were in pup tents. You know,
Army pup tents, which I never saw one in Vietnam. Didn’t have poncho liners like we
would have in Vietnam. There would be an instruction maybe on something and then a
mission given, “You need to go—” You know, it wasn’t like—they didn’t use maps or
map coordinates like they could have or should have. But you were told to go from here
to there and secure an area perhaps or watch out for aggressors because you were liable to
get ambushed.

RV: Who were the people going against you?

TV: Aggressors were—well, after graduation my orders were to go to OCS
(officer candidate school) instead of Vietnam. I pitched a fit at that because I didn’t want
to be an officer and certainly didn’t want to spend extra time in the service. So I was put
into a holdover barracks and one of the things I did as a holdover was be an aggressor for
an escape and evasion course.

RV: So the aggressors were folks who had been through AIT and for one reason
or the other were there. Were these also people who had been to Vietnam?

TV: Some of them were. You know, some of them were privates like us that had
been through training and then some of them were the cadre from, I guess, other units
that had been in combat.
RV: How did you do in that setting personally? Were you a leader, a follower? Were you kind of mixed in with everyone? Did you feel like you performed well?

TV: I think I did okay. I wasn’t an exceptional student I don’t think. But I recall at the end of that long walk—walking was something that I was very good at. Walking long distances was something that I could handle, and a lot of the folks were really beat. When we got back, I sort of led the—I believe I might’ve led a little bit of the roaring, you know, to get us roaring so that they knew we were okay. You know, a lot of folks were too tired to roar, but we ended up roaring pretty good.

RV: Okay. What else can you say about your advanced training that sticks out in your mind?

TV: There was a camouflage class where they trained us how to camouflage ourselves in the field. You know, I never saw any of the grease paint in Vietnam or never had access to it but they taught us how to camouflage our face with the grease paint and to use natural materials to camouflage ourselves. During this class, there were a number of, probably, trainees from somewhere else who had been concealed in plain sight right in front of us. Until they revealed themselves, we didn’t know that they were standing right there in front. So that made you pay attention and it was another good class.

RV: Okay. When you left there, did you feel ready to go? Or what was your mindset?

TV: My mindset was I knew I was going and I thought I was as ready as I was ever going to be. In retrospect, they should have trained us with helicopters.

RV: So you did not have any helicopter training?

TV: Never even got near one.

RV: Really? Wow. That seems very, very—I would think very hard for you all that you get in-country and all a sudden that’s how you’re going to be transported much of the time out into the field. Did you all speak up about this? Did you all realize this or not?

TV: Never crossed my mind until somebody said, “Get in that helicopter.” I was in Vietnam.

RV: Right. “Wait a minute. They didn’t teach me this.”
TV: The training was very lacking in map reading and I really wish that they had taught us more about map reading. I had an, I think, an inherent understanding of map reading, but the particulars of using the Army map system I had to get trained in the field on in Vietnam, in OJT (on-the-job training), so to speak. Also how to use a radio.

RV: That was not taught to you in AIT?

TV: I think they might have shown us a radio. But as far as actually using it—there might have been a class on some procedure. But as far as actually using the radio or even carrying the radio, no, at least not enough. Even more important would be radio communication to an artillery base or mortar base. How to call fire in is something that really everybody should know and there was just no training on that. It just wasn’t a part of the agenda. I’m sure the instructors realized that but there was an agenda and a limited amount of time, so they had to do what they had to do, I guess. But those things, in retrospect, those things should have been on the list.

RV: What about your knowledge of the war and kind of a larger context of why the United States was there? What was going on and why you would be there? Did this increase—you know, you got off your cruise and you had been isolated around the world out on the ocean. Now you’re in the Army and you’re getting ready to go into war. What did you know at this point?

TV: Richard, I think all the way through basic training and AIT that I was so focused on getting through that that I didn’t really think about it much. I wasn’t exposed to a lot of news still, being in training, but I just don’t think I thought of it. I can’t recall thinking about it that much.

RV: Were you aware of what the US was doing in Vietnam, as far as like why we were even there?

TV: Oh, yes. And aware of the casualties that were being incurred. Knew I was going into a very dangerous situation. I guess I still thought that we were there to stop North Vietnam from invading South Vietnam and to stop communism. It wasn’t like I had a lot of choices. It just felt inevitable. It just felt like it didn’t do any good or any purpose to think about it a lot or to worry about it even because it was just happening.

RV: Right. I mean you were going and that was it.

TV: Yes.
RV: So why question it or why get too into it? Is that what you were—?
TV: Pointless to question it, pointless to fret about it. Then again, who would
you fret to? (Laughs)
RV: Right. What about discussions amongst the guys in your unit?
TV: I think everybody who is going to go into combat is concerned about how
they’re going to perform and how you’re going to be viewed by your associates. I think
there’s so much concern amongst men that they not show fear; that they don’t look stupid
or do something stupid that I think we were pretty cavalier amongst ourselves. As far
as—well, once in a while I think we would even make jokes about maybe going to
Vietnam and getting killed.
RV: Really?
TV: You know, whenever you’re running or marching there’s some little tunes,
Airborne shuffle tunes and whatnot, there’s all kinds of tunes. Some of them were—I’ve
racked my mind but I can’t remember the words of any of them. But some of them were
bawdy. Some of them were fatalistic, you know about, “Send me home in a body bag,”
or something or other. Some of them talked about some guy named Jody taking over for
you with your girlfriend or wife or whatever. (Laughs)
RV: Uh-huh. (Laughs) That’s comforting.
TV: A little bit fatalistic, I think. You know, that was a front, I guess, that all of
us had—or most of us had anyway—to deal with our own mortality.
RV: Uh-huh. Kind of take the edge off?
TV: I think so. Just, you know, I’m scared, concerned about dying, but I don’t
want anyone to know that. So if I can make a joke about it or treat it kind of lightly,
maybe that’s a little better.
RV: Well, do you remember any discussions, like private conversations? Or did
you have private conversations with your buds who were there, I mean the guys that you
were closest to, about going into a combat situation?
TV: I don’t think so. I don’t think I ever had a private conversation about that
with anybody that I trained with. Now that I think about it, I don’t think I ever had that
kind of conversation with anybody. I certainly don’t recall it.
RV: What about communication with home and your parents and talking to them about where you were and where you were going?

TV: I probably sent a few letters home from Fort Polk. I think they knew what was coming. When I didn’t get orders to Vietnam at graduation, when there was a mistake where I was ordered to OCS, they were probably glad about that. Actually, that worked out pretty good because most of the guys in my class went home on leave and were in Vietnam before Christmas. I was held over until just before Christmas and took leave then. So I got to go home for Christmas and it was after the first of the year of ’69 before I had orders to go to Vietnam.

RV: Why did they hold you over? Do you remember the reason?

TV: Waiting for new orders.

RV: Just simply waiting and waiting?

TV: Um-hm. I was there probably five or six weeks. Pulled some details, you know, different kinds of detail. One of them was being an aggressor on the escape and evasion course. I found out why the aggressors were so aggressive. They were told that if they captured a certain number of trainees, or when they captured a certain number of trainees that they could go home and go back to bed. Go back to the barracks and go to bed. Otherwise they’d be there all night, too.

RV: That’s a good motivating factor.

TV: It was. (Laughs)

RV: How did you do with that? How were you as an aggressor?

TV: I was a son-of-a-gun. I was first guarding around the POW camp and I was a couple hundred yards from the camp. The camp was all lit up and I remember seeing somebody escape and he was coming right towards me. We had weapons with blanks, I think they were blanks. Yes, we had weapons with blanks so that we could make noise. I crouched down and let this guy get pretty close before I stood up and told him to halt and fired my weapon and it scared him so bad.

RV: You told him to halt and you shot at him?

TV: No. Shot in the air. (Laughs) A warning shot. I captured him. I should have felt bad about that but he got captured twice, which was two notches for us. The other thing was somebody borrowed a truck, a deuce-and-a-half, and I don’t know who
schemed the idea, but one of the aggressors had this idea and enlisted the help of several of us. He drove this truck down the road through the middle of the course, through the middle of the woods with the lights on, tapping the horn and hollering out the window, “The whole thing is over. Come on in.” We got us a whole truckload.

RV: Oh, wow.

TV: I was in the back with another aggressor and we were passing out some cigarettes to these guys, kind of chilly that night as I recall, and talking about some hot coffee or whatnot, until we got near the POW camp. Then it was, “Put those cigarettes out,” and strong language and, you know, “You’re captured.” Oh, they were some unhappy people. I was glad that very quickly we got some more aggressors to help us with them because they were getting ready to be a really rowdy bunch. But I don’t think that made our mark, you know, our quota but it helped.

RV: How did this prepare you for Vietnam? What you would experience there?

TV: Well (laughs) that was just a detail. It wasn’t intended as any special training for us aggressors. But probably using our own wit to come up with the idea of getting that truck and catching trainees was good training, now that I think about it. You know, nailing that guy who escaped was good training. So it all fit together. One of the other details that I was on that I recall very well was firing squad detail for funerals in the area. In every case it was somebody coming back from Vietnam.

RV: Tell me about that. How did you get selected for that?

TV: I don’t know how I got selected, I really don’t. I was always good with handling the weapon. But there were a bunch of us who were picked and trained and probably a few who were rejected because we trained first doing the firing squad and got pretty good at it. In fact, I’ve seen a lot of funerals were the rifles weren’t together and the riflemen didn’t look very sharp. We practiced and practiced and practiced and got very good at it.

RV: That must have been difficult duty for you?

TV: The very first one that we had to do I was on the firing squad and we had other guys that had to be pallbearers, or got to be pallbearers, whatever. The very first funeral was a fellow who had fallen asleep under a truck in Vietnam and the truck ran over him and killed him. It was in a very small, mostly black town out in the middle of
nowhere in Louisiana. Actually, on that occasion I was a pallbearer and not on the firing
squad because I remember being in the church and the church was just absolutely full of
black folks. They must have a tradition for funerals. They were all very nice to us, but it
was a daunting experience to be amongst that many people with all the shrieking. There
were people in the back whose job was just to wail. I mean they just stood there and
wailed. I think, I mean you could look at them and they weren’t really wailing. They
were just wailing for effect. The experience with a black country preacher was new to
me but we got through it and did a very good job. I didn’t like being a pallbearer, though.
I preferred to be on a firing squad.

RV: Why?

TV: I was better at firing the weapon and didn’t have to go in the church, didn’t
have such intimate contact with the bereaved folks. Several other times I was on the
firing squad and proud to do that service. I guess I had maybe three or four funerals that
we did. Only one really sticks out in my mind, and that was for an officer who had been
at Fort Polk and went to Vietnam in the infantry and was killed in combat. The Army,
rightly so, made a big deal about doing a proper, making sure that the ceremony went
perfectly. There were going to be a lot of high-ranking officers at the funeral. There
were more pains taken for that funeral than any of the others that I had done. In fact, they
put us on a bus with our company first sergeant and took us to the town a day before.
The idea was to make sure that we were there, and there was absolutely no problem with
the bus or any—to make it impossible for things not to go well. I actually got to meet our
first sergeant as a person for the first time. He was a big black guy, very tough. Had a
little stub of a cigar in his mouth most of the time and he was just the epitome of a really
tough guy. Fair, but you didn’t want to cross him. We got to see, I guess, a little bit of
his human side when we got to this town. He had us practice a few more times, made
sure we had our uniforms and everything together. Basically, he just turned us loose in
town, and said, “Just come back here by a certain time and don’t screw up. Don’t get in
trouble.” Actually, I recall we went to the first bar. Eight or nine or ten of us went to the
first bar to get a beer, and we had gone to order a beer and somebody came up. Well, we
were in uniform, of course, and he asked if we were here for the lieutenant’s funeral and
we said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, I’m his brother. Let me buy you a beer.”
TV: We couldn’t buy a beer in that town that night. Everybody in town knew
this lieutenant and they were out drinking hard. We didn’t drink excessively because we
knew we had a lot of eyes on us the next day, and the funeral, you know the ceremony
went off perfectly. We did our job like we were supposed to. I can’t say it’s a good
thing, but it’s something you want to do right and you don’t want to be remembered for
screwing something like that up.

RV: Sounds like you took a lot of pride in that.

TV: Yes, we did. Yes, I did, and I think yes we all did. We had a bugler who
was excellent also, and he would play “Taps.” I’ve see a lot of times where the bugler is
right close but we had our bugler hidden and kind of far off. So it was a muffled “Taps”
and it was a very effective ceremony.

RV: Why was that effective to have a bugler away from everyone?

TV: It just sounds more haunting, I think. I can’t explain why, or why sometimes
it’s done muted like that and sometimes it’s not. But that’s the way they wanted us to do
it and I just thought it was really well done.

RV: How many funerals do you think you worked total?

TV: I think four or maybe five. I remember those two in particular, the one
where the fellow had been killed accidentally and then, of course—I can’t remember the
officer’s name. But there was a lot of pressure on us to do it well, and we did.

RV: I can imagine. Um-hm. So you’re into—this is still the fall of ’68 or are
you into January of ’69?

TV: This is probably December of ’68. Somewhere along the line there before
Christmas I got new orders. The orders were to report to the Republic of Vietnam, which
I knew all along was going to happen. I also got orders to take a leave.

RV: How long?

TV: It was more than two weeks. It must have been seventeen days, eighteen
days or something. Well, I’m not sure exactly. It was before Christmas. I knew I rode a
bus down to New Orleans and got to the airport and couldn’t get a plane. I was standby
and ended up spending the night in the airport and caught a plane the next day. This was
an unregulated airline industry back then and this plane must have stopped five times
before it got to Norfolk, so it took forever. It took all day to get to Norfolk. But I was
glad to be on it and don’t recall anything special about traveling in uniform.

RV: Okay. You read my mind. I was going to ask you that. This was 1968, one
of the most controversial years of the entire war. The anti-war movement is really
picking up, and you’re traveling around among civilians in uniform. So there really
wasn’t anything that happened that you remember?

TV: Not that I remember. Certainly not anything bad. I think probably I might
have noticed the beginning of just being ignored or not being—what’s the right word? I
can’t think of the right word, but—

RV: You felt something?

TV: Yes.

RV: Was it indifference?

TV: Indifference is the word. Indifference on a lot of folks, just like I wasn’t
even there. But nothing bad. It was good to be home. My parents, especially my mom,
was very concerned. There’s not much to do or say. I think it was my job to tell her that
I was her son and knew my way around and was smart enough to keep my head down
and that I was going to make it home.

RV: So you tried to reassure her?

TV: Yes. Probably didn’t work.

RV: What kind of conversations did you have with her and with your father
about going to Vietnam, besides saying, “I’m going to do my best to keep my head down
and protect myself?”

TV: Richard, that was about it.

RV: Really?

TV: Really.

RV: Don’t remember any discussions about—I mean, was it a fatalistic
atmosphere, or was it a hopeful atmosphere, or a, “Well, this is what I have to do,”
atmosphere?

TV: At home, it was duty and this is what I’ve got to do. I always looked at it as
something I had to endure. I just had to get through it and then I knew I would, and I
would go on and then do the things I wanted to do. I don’t remember being—I guess I
don’t remember being that terribly concerned. The idea of going to combat and getting
hurt or getting killed is there, but I think I tried to stay so focused on what I’m doing that
maybe I just put it behind me.

RV: How about any discussions with your friends or any acquaintances in
Norfolk there? Or how were they treating you?

TV: They were still friendly. I had another friend of mine who was in the Army
who was also home on leave.

RV: Had he been overseas or not?

TV: Not yet, no. But he was going also. But I don’t remember any talk about
other than just normal day to day. Sounds pretty boring, I guess, but I just don’t
remember talking about it with family or friends that much.

RV: It sounds matter-of-fact, you know, this is reality.

TV: It was. It’s exactly just that.

RV: Personally, inside you, what were you feeling? I know you said this, “This
is my duty. I’ve been trained,” but beyond that what was the person Tim Vail feeling
about himself?

TV: I was pretty confident in myself and my capabilities. I think I’ve always
been self-confident and I guess I have my dad to thank for that. But I just felt that
whatever they threw at me, I could somehow figure a way to handle. I wasn’t looking
forward to going, by any means. I was concerned and I’m sure I was scared, but I think
the overall feeling was just resignation of, “Let’s get it done and then go on with life.”

RV: Get your year under your belt and be done with it.

TV: Yes.

RV: Did you have any aspirations or any thoughts about staying in the Army
after you finished your year in-country?

TV: By that time, absolutely not.

RV: Why was that?

TV: Actually, I never did. From the get-go and until the very last day I was in,
my goal was do my two years and get out. The idea of the Army just did not appeal to
me in any way, shape, or form. So that one is easy. No, there was no thought of actually
staying in the Army. There were times later on when I thought about reenlisting to get
out of combat and I gave that some careful consideration. That would have meant more
time. But one thing I would have considered if the Army had offered it to me was after I
turned down going to officer school, if they had offered me the NCO school, it was called
“shake’n’bake” school where they took a private and you go to school and finish up a
squad leader, an E5. I would have done that for two reasons. The main reason would
have been to delay going to ‘Nam as long as possible because if I served my year in
Vietnam and had less than 150 days left to go in the Army when I got home, the Army
would let you go, if you had less than 150 days. So the longer I could have delayed
going, and if I lived a whole year, the better chance I would have of having less than 150
days to serve. But the Army didn’t offer that and I didn’t go. If they had said, “Would
you like to go to NCO school?” I would have gone.

RV: Why was that, Tim?

TV: The main reason was to get out early.

RV: Not to further your career, but just to finish what you needed to get done to
get out of the Army?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay.

TV: I think probably I saw myself as a little bit older than a lot of the guys I’d be
serving with, you know, a year or two, and maybe a little more mature. I didn’t want to
be a leader but I felt that I could do that if I needed to. But the main reason by far was to
delay going so that if I went, served a year, and came home and had less than that time
period, I’d be out of the Army. I was focused pretty much on getting out. (Laughs)

RV: It sounds like that. Not an uncommon thing, I guess, at that point.

TV: I don’t think so.

RV: No. So tell me about the process of getting over to South Vietnam. What
was that like?

TV: My last night at home, I spent most of the night out partying with friends and
got back to my folks’ house very early to say goodbye to my mom and sister. My dad
drove and she stayed home. I guess we had talked about that. I would prefer she stay,
just Dad take me to the airport and she stay home. She went along with my wishes on
that. So I said goodbye and my dad took me to the airport and I said goodbye to him and
RV: You were in uniform, correct?
TV: Yes. She was going to try to find her daughter, who was out there in that hippie scene in San Francisco. I can’t recall what she said much about the daughter but she was concerned about her. I don’t know if it was drugs or what, but she was going out there to try to bring her home. We talked a little bit and I talked about going to Vietnam. She seemed very supportive and very nice about that. Then I fell asleep because I was so tired and I ended up sleeping on her shoulder. You know, laying my head on her shoulder and that’s why it stuck in my memory. She was being motherly, I think, and just didn’t want to wake me up. So she endured that until I woke up.

RV: That’s sweet.
TV: It really was. I apologized and she said, “Think nothing of it.” Everybody else had been stepping over my legs in the aisle. Nobody kicked me or stomped on me, so that part of the trip out was positive. She was just a very nice lady and everybody in the airplane seemed real nice. I got to the San Francisco airport. I really didn’t know why I didn’t fly into Oakland. I just don’t have a clue why I didn’t, but I remember I had never been to either place. Correction, I had been to San Francisco. Stopped there on my way driving across country to pick the ship up and spent the night there, spent one evening there partying. Anyway, I flew into San Francisco and got to ride BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) over to Oakland. I think the deal was I had to report the next day. I believe, if my memory is correct, I think I had a ticket for kind of a sleazy downtown hotel. I can’t tell you where I got it or even if that’s for sure the truth, but I feel like I spent the night in a downtown hotel and reported to some address in Oakland the next day. Let me think about that process—somewhere along the line in Oakland, I was issued jungle fatigues. I had never had jungle fatigues before. In training we had, I guess the old-fashioned, regular fatigue jackets. I think we had a duffle bag issued also to carry whatever stuff you had. I can’t remember the timeframe, how long we were at that facility in Oakland. But it seems like it couldn’t have been long. Then we took a bus out
to an Air Force base east of Oakland. I’m not absolutely certain, but I think it’s Travis Air Force Base.

RV: Yes.

TV: They put us on a Seaboard World Airline. It was big, probably a 707, that was chartered to take us over there. There were maybe two-hundred of us in combat fatigues on a civilian flight. I mean every way just a normal civilian flight. We flew first to Honolulu and they let us off the airplane to refuel and just about everybody on the airplane went to the bars.

RV: Really? Did you?

TV: Yes, of course. They started paging for everybody, us in particular, to go back to the airplane, to re-board that airplane, and everybody seemed to just be taking their time. “I’ll have one more drink and then I’ll go.” The pages got increasingly strident, I guess you might say. I don’t know if the plane was held up or not, but sooner or later everybody straggled back onboard the plane and a lot of folks had a buzz going. We took off and a couple things I remember was some of the guys got a little free with the stewardesses because they’d been drinking. A lifer got on the PA system and told everybody to knock it off and calm down, as well they should have. The other thing that I remember is after a while everybody started asking for water and they drank all the water on the airplane. The airplane ran out of water. They were dry-mouthed. We flew on to Guam in the middle of the night and I remember landing there. You’ve heard of a tarmac before, I guess?

RV: Yes.

TV: The phrase used to describe just this vast area. We were parked just on this huge paved area at the airport. There was no buildings. I mean, you could see a building way, way over yonder. We got off and sat down on the pavement and the plane was refueled and we got back on and flew on and landed. I think it took almost twenty-four hours, or over twenty-four hours to get from Travis to Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in Vietnam.

RV: Tim, what do you remember about the mood, the general mood, on your flights? You described what happened between Honolulu and Clark, but what about just
how you were feeling about what you were doing and what people were talking about,

TV: I think everybody was so—most of us were so unsure of what to expect. You know, what was coming. We just didn’t know, and some people are more open about that, I’m sure. There was also some folks on the airplane who were on their second tour or were headed back for something or whatever reason. But they didn’t act any different than we did, I don’t recall, or to say anything any different. Not a whole lot of good history there, Richard. It’s just something else to endure, to get through. In my mind it was just, you know, “What’s going to happen next?” A feeling of uncertainty.

RV: What was it like coming into Saigon into Tan Son Nhut? Was this daytime or nighttime?

TV: Daytime. Very hot. The heat and the humidity was just like a blow in the face when you got off the airplane. Right away you don’t know if this is an area that could become under fire or not. I remember seeing some guys that were going home and they were kind of slinging a few taunts at the new guys.

RV: Like what? Do you remember what they were saying?

TV: You know making phrases like, “Grist for the mill.” I don’t think that anybody even bothered about Jody. At that point it was more, I guess, “You you’re not going to know what you’re going to see,” or something like that. I’m not explaining it well at all.

RV: You’re doing fine. You’re doing fine. This is a long time ago.

TV: It sure was. (Laughs)

RV: You know, and we’re not talking about planting daisies in the springtime. We’re talking about going into a warzone and hearing these veterans talking about “You’re grist for the mill.” That’s got to be disturbing.

TV: It was.

RV: Did you respond to them?

TV: Oh, no. No. Not out of respect, just as a matter of not wanting to cause a problem.

RV: Right. You said it was disturbing?
TV: Yeah, yeah. They were a rough-looking bunch, too. We looked kind of fresh faced and scrubbed, and they looked rough. Which ones had been—didn’t look at them long enough to really identify which ones had really been in combat and which ones were rear-echelon types that were just picking on the new guys. Of course, that happened. But some of them we were surely we knew were genuine combat veterans and probably they didn’t say as much as the ones who might not have seen as much action.

RV: So the heat, the returning veterans—what else do you remember about the Tan Son Nhut Air Base and, you know, kind of coming into a warzone and not knowing exactly what was going to happen?

TV: We had to stand around and wait. They told us there would be a bus that would pick us up and we were going to a replacement battalion they called it. Not much information, not getting much information, just being told to stand over there and wait or sit over there and wait. When the bus pulled up the bus had chain-link fence welded across the windows, you know, about two inches away from the windows, and we knew that that was to stop a missile before it came inside the bus. If a missile hit us it would be real bad news, but it was meant to detonate the missile before it got inside the bus. So we don’t have weapons, we don’t have ammunition. We were basically defenseless at that point and it goes on for the rest of my Army career: lacking information. Not knowing what to expect or what’s going on. Jumped on a bus and I remember it seemed like a tremendous amount of crushed people in mopeds and little cars. The road was very crowded, people everywhere. Army trucks coming and going, civilians on foot. Just a real press of people, which if you were a terrorist it would be a good place to strike. You know, having that many people around was disconcerting. But on the other hand, being around that many people and the fact that they were there sort of told you that this was thought to be a secure area.

RV: Did you have real fears about, “Boy, I don’t feel secure. I’m a little too vulnerable,” or was it more just kinda taking it all in?

TV: I think I would feel better when I had a loaded weapon with me or a weapon I can load. That some of what might happen would be back in my own hands, rather than totally at the mercy of the unknown and an unknown bus driver and whatnot. Not being in control or not being able to defend myself was probably what I was thinking then.
RV: So you all finally arrived at battalion? Is this where you were going to receive your exact orders or which units you would go to?

TV: Uh-huh. The place was called Bien Hoa, I believe. We got off the bus and got into formation and they said the process would be that they would call names out and if you heard your name, you were to report to a certain location for your orders and then go wherever they told you to go. They’d have formations every so often and in between they wanted us to fill sandbags. Pull detail and fill sandbags. So they broke up and we went over and started filling sandbags. I was traveling with a guy named John Wise. John was a guy who was excellent at getting over them. You know, I think he lived his whole life that way. Kind of an odd character. But anyway, after we had filled a few sandbags he said, “This is really hot work. We need to go get us a cold drink.” That’s not the kind of thing that I would normally do because I’m the kind of person that if I go seven miles over the speed limit, I’m going to get nailed. If I do something wrong, I’m going to get caught. I didn’t want to do anything wrong or cause any problems. But it was hot, so I went with John and we found somebody selling cold drinks and nobody missed us. (Laughs) We just had ourselves a nice cold drink and later on there was a formation and they called both of our names and we knew we were assigned to the Americal Division and had to travel to a place called Chu Lai up in I Corps, up in the northern part of South Vietnam.

RV: So Wise was also Americal?

TV: Uh-huh. Somewhere along the line they issued us some gear. I can’t remember specifically what; probably like a canteen, and some web gear, and maybe a poncho, and a liner, just some gear. I’m trying to think of—anyway, we had that plus our regular duffle bag and I guess they took us on that bus back—you know, told us to board a certain bus and went back to Tan Son Nhut Airport. We got on a two-propeller prop plane. Don’t know what kind it was. I don’t even know whose it was, to be honest with you. It was a dark green, probably Air Force airplane, but only two props. It wasn’t very big and there was no seats in it. You just sat on the cargo. We took off, it was very loud and just headed on north. I remember every now and then getting up and looking out the porthole and the countryside was mountainous and beautiful but pocked everywhere,
RV: Um-hm, how did that strike you?

TV: Been a hell of a lot of bombardment going on and over a tremendous wide area, I mean for miles and miles, literally hundreds of miles. The landscape was scarred everywhere.

RV: Was this when you first started feeling that you were actually in a war, or did it occur before this? Or I guess I should ask when did you start really getting this feeling, this thing sinking in?

TV: Well, I think seeing those craters, bomb craters and artillery craters, whatever caused them, that convinced me that we were right smack in the middle of a big war. It wasn’t just a little war but a very extensive war. I guess, you know, seeing that the whole country was involved like that stunned me a little bit. We got to Chu Lai really without incident. I think the flight might have been—I’m not sure about this, Richard, but maybe four or five hours. Pretty long flight. It was hurry-up-and-wait and go here and go here. I remember the first thing we did was turn in the gear they had given us at Binh Hoa and then later on they gave us different gear. But, you know, we had—I can’t explain it exactly, but we had been given gear in Binh Hoa, carried it all the way to Chu Lai and then turned it back in. It seemed like we were playing a game with somebody’s supply chain there. It didn’t make sense. Still doesn’t.

RV: Right. What is that in the fact that you could kind of walk off from your sandbag duty and grab a couple cold drinks? What did that tell you about the US Army in Vietnam? Or did it? Did you think, “Wow, this is really not what I expected,” or, “This is really lax,” or what?

TV: I think I thought that John Wise was a pretty shrewd character. I ascribe the ability to go get that cold drink to him, not to the Army. I mean, you could see that there was really nobody there as far as filling the sandbags, you know, counting heads or whatnot. There was just a lot of people and a lot of activity and a lot of coming and going, for the most part pretty disorganized. But being able to go get that drink, that was all John Wise. He was a character.

RV: So up in Chu Lai you turned the equipment back in and what happens then?

TV: We were assigned to the Americal Division Combat School. Which was about, I want to say, seven to ten days. Maybe seven days, I think seven days. I arrived
in Vietnam on January eighteenth, I believe. It was probably just twenty-four hours later when I was in Chu Lai. It might have been two days. But as soon as we got there we were assigned to a barracks and told that the next day we would start the combat school.

RV: Okay. Did they tell you what that was?

TV: Pardon me?

RV: Did they tell you what that was? What that combat school was?

TV: Refresher training and specific in-country training. I’m trying to think if it started immediately or if it was a day or two delay. I can’t remember.

RV: What were your barracks like?

TV: Wooden structures, been hacked together. There were big shutters over huge screen windows and the shutters were hinged at the top and pulled all the way open to let as much airflow in as possible. The training area was, we were told, behind three perimeters. So it was pretty secure and lots of people walking around without weapons or anything. One of the things that’s noticeable about any military camp in—or military, I guess camp is the right word—in Vietnam was smoky fires dotted here and there and just everywhere. Those fires were outhouse material being burned and it was a constant process anywhere where there were GIs in large quantities. There was a huge fifty-five gallon drum, maybe two or three of them, welded together underneath the outhouses. There was basically two sets of those drums. One set was in use and one set was being burned, like with kerosene. It was just dragged off and just made a stink and smoke all the time. So any Army base had that going on.

RV: What did that smell like?

TV: A terrible, terrible odor. It becomes part of the day-to-day experience of being in a camp that was having that smell, probably, from time to time during the day, depending on how the wind is blowing or whatnot, or how close you have to get to a latrine. I remember before the training had started my parents had given me a cassette tape deck. They knew I wasn’t too good at letter writing. I must have had a break. I think we had to wait a day or two before the class actually started. There was people coming in all the time and I remember being on the beach, helicopters flying everywhere, and trying to think of things to say to my folks back home. Of course, years later my dad broke that tape out and I sounded just as boring as I possibly could because I didn’t have
anything to say and kept talking about the helicopters flying over and that I was getting ready to do some in-country training. But I would stop that tape and then try to think of something to say and start talking about the helicopters again because the helicopters were a new experience.

RV: Um-hm. Could you hear the helicopter noise on the tape?

TV: Uh-huh. Sometimes that’s all you heard (laughs) was just the helicopter noise, and me talking about the beach. It was really a pretty beach but no opportunity to swim.

RV: Was it a regular mode of communication with home, using the audio cassettes?

TV: There was one and only one cassette. The cassette deck itself was way too heavy for me to take with me when I went into the field. So along with the dress uniforms and whatnot, it stayed back in the rear. So I made exactly one tape to send home and that was it. I don’t know if they ever sent me a tape. I don’t recall receiving one. They might have but I wouldn’t have been able to listen to it. That just didn’t work out. It was a portable cassette but still, any extra weight in the field wouldn’t work, wouldn’t do. One of the things that I remember about the training was it was American Division policy to only load eighteen rounds into a magazine.

RV: Did they tell you why?

TV: The said that the weapon would never, ever jam if you only put eighteen rounds in. They said that sometimes even a clean weapon might jam if it had twenty rounds or if the magazine had stayed loaded for an extended period of time. But anyway, the rule was to only put eighteen rounds in a magazine and that’s what I did.

RV: Did that hold true, as far as the jamming?

TV: My weapon never jammed, never once.

RV: Okay. How many people were in the combat school? Was it just Charlie Company or were you even in Charlie Company at this point?

TV: No I wasn’t assigned to a unit yet. I want to say there was probably fifty or sixty of us. But that’s a guess on my part, Richard. That’s just a guess. It was a pretty good-sized group. I remember I had to wait a day or two. There may have been twelve
or so that came from Bien Hoa in my group. There were some already there and some
more joined us, so it was probably fifty or sixty in the class.

RV: What were the facilities like? Was this a large barracks area?

TV: There were some classrooms. Some of the classes were actually in a
classroom. There was a rifle range where we’d have to—actually yeah, there was a rifle
range where we were issued our weapons.

RV: Finally? I mean this is your personal weapon you finally got?

TV: Real weapon and mine was a used one. It had seen some use but I didn’t
mind that at all. It was in good shape. We got to practice, and target practice. Well,
first, zero our weapons. It was a process of shooting at a target at like twenty meters that
would—if you hit it at the right place it would zero the weapon for a hundred meters.
Then we went to another range and made sure that they were zeroed.

RV: Why do you want to zero a weapon? Can you explain that to folks who
don’t really know what that means?

TV: That means that the sights of the weapon and your eyesight are lined up so
that at a certain range, and if you zero for a hundred meters, if you aim it at a point, the
bullet will strike where you aim. A weapon that is zeroed for a hundred meters will
probably shoot a little high if you’re shooting at fifty meters and if you aim two hundred
meters out the bullet is going to land low probably. But the idea is to have it perfectly
zeroed to strike perfectly where you aim it, or as close as possible where you aim it at the
zeroing range. So if you wanted to you could zero your weapon, if there was a need to
you could zero it for three-hundred meters. Where if you aimed at three-hundred meters
it would strike close, but if you were firing at something closer you’d probably be high.

RV: Right, right. Tim, why don’t we stop for today for time purposes?

TV: Okay.

RV: We’ll pick up again in our next session.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Tim Vail. Today is October 28, 2005. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, again and Tim is again in Roanoke, Virginia. Tim we had left off last time with your arrival in Vietnam. You came in January 18, 1969, to Saigon and made your way to Chu Lai, getting ready to be assigned to your unit. But you first went through the combat school, the Americal Combat School, and I want to hear a little bit about that. Let me ask you something first. You’re coming in in 1969 in Vietnam. A lot has happened in Vietnam, obviously, and we’re really on the tail end of the war. You guys didn’t know it for sure then, but we’re four years from being gone from Vietnam. The United States, that is. What did you hear about things like the Tet Offensive and the history of Americal in Vietnam before you got there or actually when you got there? What was the scuttlebutt? What were people talking about?

TV: Interesting question. As far as the history of the war, I knew about the war, knew in general what was going on, but had been away from the media so much that I didn’t have the details. Didn’t sit in front of the TV every night watching Walter Cronkite or that sort of thing like a lot of folks did. You know, when I was home on leave I got some of that. But again, my perspective was kind of an overview of what was going on. It was something I had to do, just as simple as that.

RV: Right. What about when you got there? What were people saying?

TV: I had never heard of the Americal Division.

RV: Really? Okay.

TV: Just something that never came on my radar screen and down in Bien Hoa when I was assigned there I heard somebody say that it had been formed in Vietnam and was the largest division in the Army at the time. But it didn’t have any history or significance to me one way or the other. I wasn’t familiar with the brigades that composed it. I’d heard of the 1st Cav and some of those other divisions, 101st. But I had never heard of Americal. It was just something new to me. I do recall that I had to spend a couple days waiting for the class to form at the combat center and had gotten a rifle and...
zeroed it in. We talked about that in the last session. I remember I pulled guard duty one
day and one night on the bunkers. The bunkers near the combat center were, I guess, the
third perimeter line. There were two other perimeters in front of that, so it was basically
a rear area. The thing that struck me most was that they didn’t give us any ammunition.
If something had happened, we had to fend for ammunition. So it was really more of, I
guess, a little practice of standing guard than having a real guard. A guard without ammo
just blew me away.

RV: That doesn’t really make sense though, does it?
TV: No. (laughs)
RV: You’re going to scare them by, I guess, just looking at them really strongly
and scare them away.
TV: Oh holler.
RV: Right.
TV: Sometimes the Army doesn’t make sense.
RV: Yeah.
TV: One other detail I do recall was that I had mentioned that any base in
Vietnam that had a lot of GIs there would be these fires of latrines, near latrines. The
technical term for that is burning shit.
RV: Um-hm.
TV: One day another fellow and I were assigned to that detail, so I did have one
go at that while I was in Vietnam. But that was my one and only time that I got that
assignment.
RV: Right. Let me ask you another question before you continue with the
combat school description. What did the—well, you just described what it smelled like
basically, but overall was this what you expected? What did a war look like? What does
a warzone look like when you arrive in Saigon and you get up to Chu Lai? What is the
feeling in the air for you personally?
TV: It’s so hard to describe. The base is very bleak. You know it’s a safe, secure
area, but every now and then a rocket will come flying in overhead and land somewhere.
That was a possibility. You could see, I guess, in a few places on the base at Chu Lai
where a rocket might have landed at some time. Other than that, there wasn’t really
much of the war, wasn’t much evidence of the war in that area. It was just a bleak, hot, dusty base.

RV: Well, tell me about combat school. What did they try to teach you? What do you teach a young man like yourself, you know, how to go to war in Vietnam?

TV: It was supposed to be a refresher course on all the things that we had learned in advanced infantry training. Some things halfway were specialized towards Vietnam. You know, there was a booby trap class in AIT. Well, there was an even much better booby trap class in the combat school. That was the one that I do recall.

RV: Do you remember what kind of booby traps they were teaching you about?

TV: Mostly ones that were tripwire types. But also the contact types and command det types, homemade booby traps, big booby traps. I mean they told us that they were large and small. They told us about the Bouncing Betty, which was a landmine-type booby trap. It is activated by touching one of three little prongs that stick up just barely above the level of the earth. Touch one of those prongs, it sets off a small charge that blows the mine up around chest high with a delayed fuse of half a second or so and when the mine is up chest or face high it goes off. They didn’t demonstrate that but they told us about that. They had punji stick traps, which were sharpened wooden stakes buried in holes and then camouflaged so that hopefully a GI would walk into the pit and get stabbed by the wooden stake. Homemade explosives made out of bamboo, they had samples of that they showed us and talked about. Ways of rigging up their hand grenades with a tripwire or something that could be very lethal.

RV: Is this stuff scaring you when you’re hearing it or are you going, “Okay, alright, good. I have this information.” How are you reacting?

TV: I think I saw it as just important information to know about. The more bad things you know how to avoid, the better prepared you are to deal with it. It was kind of scary but it’s also—it’s information, it’s knowledge, and that gives you a little more power.

RV: Okay, what else besides the booby traps? What do you remember?

TV: We got to throw a grenade, a hand grenade.

RV: How were you with that?
TV: A hand grenade is a scary thing, but in class it’s very structured. The instructors are more scared than the trainees, or the pupils, because it’s kind of dangerous work being around somebody who might get nervous and do something stupid with a hand grenade. But they have a concrete bunker that you’re in, so if the grenade gets pitched just a little bit outside and everybody’s down it’s relatively safe. It’s done in a structured manner where you prepare the grenade by pulling the pin and let go of the clasp and throw it, by the numbers. So in a class it’s not a big deal. But using a hand grenade in the field or in combat can be a scary situation because it’s so dangerous. I remember being trained about malaria pills. In our area we took and were taking at that time, a Monday pill which was a large malaria pill, and then a daily pill. Also trained on purifying water with Halazone tablets.

RV: Did they do it for you and were you able to taste it there?
TV: Yes.

RV: Do you remember what it tasted like?
TV: Iodine, very strong of iodine. It just makes the water taste terrible. I learned from people there that artificially-sweetened Kool-Aid was a good thing to have because it made the water palatable. So I guess that’s the first time I knew to ask for a care package from home to include presweetened Kool-Aid because it made purified water a little more palatable. There was classes on the reasons for purifying the water and what kind of diseases and things you could get from drinking unpurified water. We were told that basically all the water in the country was impure.

RV: Um-hm, okay. What else about combat school? Did they talk to you about how to deal with the civilian population?
TV: No. Oh, um, no, not the civilian population at all. No actually in the combat school there wasn’t even any familiarization on how to deal with the Viet Cong or rules of engagement, when you could fire your weapon or not.

RV: They did cover that or did not?
TV: No they did not cover that. That was covered by the company when we actually got assigned to a company. But yeah, that wasn’t brought up that I recall.

RV: Um-hm, okay. What about Vietnamese culture just in general?
TV: Nothing. No training on that at all, no familiarization.
RV: Do you think that would have been helpful? You know, “Here’s who these people are. Here’s how we need to look at them or treat them. Here’s how it’s gone so far in this war with the civilian population.” Anything like that, do you think that would have been helpful?

TV: I think it would have been very helpful.

RV: Why?

TV: Well, standing back at arm’s length, I think there was a tendency to dehumanize the local people and the enemy. The Vietnamese were referred to as gooks or dinks. Generally gooks were civilians and dinks were combatants. But, you know, that wasn’t a strict interpretation. I think the people that I talked to about the South Vietnamese military had a very low opinion of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). There were also popular forces that were like militia. Everybody called them Ruff Puffs (Vietnamese Regional Forces/Popular Forces) and they were dangerous.

RV: Why did they say they were dangerous?

TV: They would start shooting their weapons in a disorganized or just—I can’t think of the exact words, but just loose cannons, just liable to start shooting and not realize how far the bullets might travel. If you weren’t aware of where they might be and the fact of how wild they were or how dangerous they were, you might get hurt. There wasn’t any class on that. That was just, I think, in conversations with some of the folks who’d been around. But I think some sort of training on the Vietnamese culture would have been beneficial. But as I recall it didn’t happen. A couple of days in the school also helped acclimate us to the climate. We didn’t really do much physical. We didn’t have to do PT or run or anything, but just being in the heat helped you get used to it. In January it was dry and very hot.

RV: How hard was it for you to adjust to the climate?

TV: In the combat center it was no problem at all. It was just hot. I grew up in Virginia Beach here in the Norfolk area and it was hot there, too, in the summertime. But once I strapped on a rucksack and loaded up with gear and water, that was a different thing. That was a much tougher thing to deal with. That didn’t happen until I got to the field.
RV: Right, right. Okay so the combat school lasts, what, you said two or three
days or so? Or was it a week?
TV: I think it was three or four days. I really don’t have much recollection of it.
I think three or four days is what it was. At the end I remember being assigned to a
Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 46th Regiment, 198th Light Infantry Brigade was the full
mailing designation of where I’d be.
RV: What did that mean to you at the time? I guess it meant very little.
TV: Nothing at all. But—
RV: Did you know what your MOS (military occupational specialty) was? Did
you know that you were going to be going out in the field for an infantryman?
TV: Perfectly, yeah. The whole time, yeah.
RV: Okay. So they just hand you the orders, or how did that work? Then how
did you get out to the unit?
TV: Don’t recall written orders. I think the orders were just verbal. Well, there
must have been a piece of paper. There had to have been a piece of paper. I remember I
was assigned with John Wise and basically we were told to walk to a helicopter pad and
catch a helicopter at a certain time and they would take us out to LZ Baldy (landing zone)
and we would join up with Charlie Company. John Wise, being the person he was, we
basically missed the chopper.
RV: (Laughs) So it’s his fault?
TV: It was done on purpose.
RV: Okay.
TV: It was—
RV: Tell me about that. Why? What happened?
TV: It was just another way to get back at the Army in John’s mind, and probably
mine, too, because I certainly went along with it. We just missed being there at the right
time. Got there just five minutes after the helicopter left, we showed up and went back to
the combat school area and told the sergeant there, I guess he was a first sergeant, that we
had gotten there late. So the next day he drove us in a jeep. We were there in plenty of
time and said goodbye and flew out to LZ Baldy.
RV: Tell me about that flight. Tell me about meeting your new unit and how you were treated and what your impressions were.

TV: The flight wasn’t very long. LZ Baldy wasn’t too far from Chu Lai. Landed on a pad and asked somebody where our unit was and got directions, and found that the headquarters for Charlie Company was in a tent and gave the orders to—you know, met a clerk or somebody and he went and got the first sergeant and introduced himself. I remember we reported to the company commander. You know, when you are in the Army and you report, you walk up, salute, give your name and your rank, “PFC Vail reporting, sir.” That’s how you report to somebody. He returned the salute, shook hands, and told us that we wouldn’t be doing much saluting, especially in the field. He said that we would both be—I can’t remember if there were more than John and I or not. But John and I both got assigned to the 2nd Platoon of Charlie Company. They took our papers and whatnot. We still had our duffle bags.

RV: Were you assigned a weapon at this point?

TV: I got a weapon in the combat school and zeroed it there and still had that -16; didn’t have any ammo yet.

RV: Did this surprise you?

TV: Yeah, yeah it did. But they showed us where Charlie Company was. The area was large tents, large Army-type tents that were—

RV: This is out at LZ Baldy?

TV: Uh-huh.

RV: Okay, that’s B-a-l-d-y?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay.

TV: It’s a huge, huge base. They were basically tents with no sides where the sides are rolled up and sandbags up around four feet around the perimeter and then open area open above that. I’m thinking, did they have mosquito netting or—I’m pretty sure they were open. But we met the platoon leader and he assigned us to a squad and met my squad leader. Then went about getting us ammunition and making sure we had the right gear, canteens. Finally got ammunition there, but unless we went to the perimeter the weapons weren’t loaded.
RV: Tell me about your squad leader, Tim. What was he like? Who was he?

TV: His name is Lee Kaywork. He was a Yankee with a New York-sounding accent and he had been to buck-sergeant school. He seemed bright and the people seemed to—he had an outgoing personality and seemed like a very friendly guy.

RV: So he was friendly? He was helpful to you?

TV: Oh, yeah. Very much so.

RV: Okay.

TV: The 2nd platoon was pulling details pretty much—or a series of details. Each day they would have a different task that they had to do that came along. I remember the very next day my squad was assigned to provide security for some Marine engineers who were sweeping mines out on the main highway. I guess they did this every day. The way that was done, there was one or two minesweepers on the road with some security behind them, and a whole bunch of Vietnamese cars—not cars, but mopeds and maybe even some trucks behind that proceeding at a walking pace. Then in the rice paddy on either side of the road there was a Marine engineer dragging a hook through the rice paddies looking for wires that might come from the woodline up to the road. There were some GIs, a squad of GIs with each one of those engineers that was dragging the hook and I was one of them. I'd stand at the very back and—this was my first day now.

RV: Right.

TV: I remember the engineer, the Marine could tell that, you know—they were kind of disdainful of GIs in general, but especially one with brand-new fatigues and just probably making comments that were just intended to intimidate a little bit, I think.

RV: Do you remember what they were saying?

TV: No I can’t. But just, you know, very—a lot of bravado on his part. Anyway, there was maybe five or six of us in this rice paddy behind him and I was at the back of the line. We were in water in a rice paddy that was just about waist deep, and I look and there was a snake in the water right next to my hip about a foot away.

RV: Really? What kind of snake was it?

TV: I have no idea.

RV: How did you feel about that?
TV: I was terrified. You know, encountering a snake, not knowing and not
having time to even try to identify it. I didn’t try to identify it. I just slipped my weapon
on automatic and fired the whole magazine into the snake right by my hip.

RV: This is your first day?

TV: First day.

RV: Did you have—I guess you had authority to do that, to fire at close range
like that to everyone around you? Did everybody see this?

TV: Well, more than that. The fire caused them to bite the dust. Only we were
standing in waist deep water. So basically I’m the only one that was left standing.
Everybody else hit the ground or the water and I wasn’t too popular at the moment. But I
think anybody else would have done the same thing, too.

RV: Did you get the snake?

TV: I sure did. I chopped him up into snake burger. Never did figure out what
kind of snake it was, other than it was very close. As far as the authority, I don’t think
anybody even talked about what to do other than just do what everybody else did and
keep your eyes open. We all had weapons that were locked and loaded and safeties on.
So I think my reaction was just instinct. I think anybody would have done the same
thing, too. They were pretty unhappy about getting wet, but they got over it.

RV: So I take it you found no mines that morning?

TV: No mines at all. No mines on the road and no wires going to the road.

RV: How many days did you do this?

TV: Just one day. The very next day we had bunker duty and basically went out
to the perimeter and manned a bunker. I think I remember discussing with the older guys
in the bunker that every now and then there might be a rocket attack or a mortar attack
but there hadn’t been any sort of actual ground attack in anybody’s memory. I guess they
had been at Baldy only a short period of time, maybe only a month or so and then before
that they had been someplace else. I do recall some kids came up to the wire and had
things like a dud mortar round, an empty M-16 magazine, I can’t remember—other
military-type things that they wanted to trade for cigarettes or C-rations. Certainly
getting a mortar round out of circulation seemed like a good idea, so I recall that we did
give them some cigarettes and they gave us this dud mortar round, which we put on the
ground and walked away from, and that other stuff was worthless. It seemed like a good
trade to reward them for turning that stuff in. I’m pretty sure we called back to the
company to ask for an explosive ordnance type of person to come get that mortar round.

RV: What kind of procedure did they tell you about bunker duty? Or did they
say, “Here’s what you do, Tim,” and “This is what you’re looking for,” and “This is how
long you’re going to be out here.” Or were you left to figure all that out?

TV: The detail was like twenty-four hours. During the day we just sort of hung
around, just had to be there. I remember somebody had a portable radio and I guess
every hour we would make a call back to the company to let them know we were still
alive. It’s called a situation report or SITREP. At night or once it got dark, the ranking
person there decided—well, he would figure out how many hours we would be sleeping
and divide that time up so that you might sleep for two hours, stand guard for an hour,
and then sleep the rest of the night. You know, depending on how many people we had
and how many people were supposed to be awake. The threat level we were at there was
basically one person had to be awake.

RV: How far away from the main part of the base camp were you?

TV: There was a road just inside the bunker perimeter that circled the entire base,
but the base was huge. It would have taken forever to walk around it. Several miles, I’m
sure, around. Maybe several miles across, would just make it even bigger around. There
was nothing strategic close. Woods behind us is what I recall. Not too far in front of us,
though, there was a village.

RV: Okay.

TV: I remember seeing the hooches and huts out there and whatnot. Another
incident that I remember that very night—this would be my second day in Charlie
Company—we heard on the radio that somebody had some hamburger in the motor pool
area and was having a cookout and there was plenty of meat if we wanted to come get it.
So being the new guy, I was assigned to find that motor pool, hike to that motor pool and
get some hamburgers if I could. I remember getting on the road, it was pitch dark, but I
had gotten instructions or directions of where this place was. I walked maybe about a
mile and turned into the perimeter and found it. Sure enough, there were guys with a big
grill cooking hamburgers and I asked if we could have some and they said, “Sure.” So I
made some hamburgers up. My hands were not clean, but formed some hamburgers up and cooked them. Then I can’t remember what I found to carry them in or on, it was probably a piece of board or something or a piece of a crate. I stacked basically one hamburger for each of us on this piece of wood and headed back to the bunker. I remember I got to where the bunker was and was walking from the road toward the bunker and tripped and fell and the burgers went in the dust. Somebody came out with a flashlight and we policed them up and took them back to the bunker and washed them off with canteen water and ate them. I wasn’t too popular again for dumping the hamburgers. I think they realized—well, everybody liked the hamburger. That was, I guess a treat for them. The rest of that guard just passed without any sort of incident whatsoever. The next day we were told that we would be going on a RAT patrol, roving ambush team was what it was called. It was basically we would hang around and rest during the day and then that night we would go out as a squad and set up an ambush for a while. Then at a certain time, move to another pre-designated area and set there and ambush for a while, and then move three or four times during the night was how it was explained to me. We were—

RV: So you actually got instructions before this would happen?

TV: Yeah, you know, we sat down and they told us what we would be doing. Map coordinates didn’t mean much to me, but being outside the base at night I understood very well. The way this thing went down was pretty interesting for a brand-new guy. We were headed towards the gate on the perimeter to go outside and all the older, experienced guys were asking the squad leader, “Sarge, we’re not really going to go out there, are we?” He said, “No, I don’t guess we will.” So we got near the gate and instead of turning to go outside the gate, we turned inside the perimeter of the base and found a place to set up and basically held our ambush there. I found out the reason for that was being outside in the dark and moving sounds like an aggressive and good thing to do. But moving in the dark is a pretty dangerous thing to do, and especially moving repeatedly, as far as ourselves getting ambushed. The other thing was the company commander had a penchant for calling artillery in on our position after we had moved from it. In other words, we would go to point A and set up for two hours and then at midnight move. At 12:05 or 12:10 or sometime after we had moved, he would call
artillery in on the area that we had stopped in hoping that maybe somebody was behind
us or something. But that whole deal was looked at as dangerous and foolish, at least by
my squad leader and the guys that had been there. Nobody thought it was good practice.
So basically we set up an ambush, it wasn’t really an ambush at all, but set up a little
squad perimeter inside the base and called in basically phony situation reports that we
were at point A and everything was fine and moved and had gone to point B. I recall
sometime in the middle of the night we could smell CS gas. That’s tear gas, basically.
Very strong smell of tear gas and all the sudden, the bunker [line] opened up. I mean all
the bunkers on our side of the perimeter started firing out away from the, outside the
perimeter. Machine guns, all kinds of weapons were firing and basically that’s where we
were supposed be is out there.

RV: Was this surprising to you at the time?

TV: I was dumbfounded. It made my squad leader seem like a genius. I mean,
he was concerned that we were supposed to be out there being killed and weren’t getting
killed, and worried about getting caught in our little ruse. I’m thinking this is the
smartest thing that’s ever happened because otherwise we might be getting killed.

RV: So you didn’t have a problem at all not performing your duty?

TV: Not at all, no. Especially not a stupid duty.

RV: Right. The duty was defined as stupid by the squad leader saying, “Listen,
we’re not going to put ourselves in this situation. I’m not going to do this to me or us.”

TV: Exactly. That made him a good squad leader, I think, because this deal of
calling in our artillery after we moved was very, very dangerous and foolhardy. Actually
moving around outside in Indian country in the dark doesn’t make any sense whatsoever.
Being set up and staying in one place for an ambush does make sense and I wouldn’t
have had any trouble with that, I don’t think any of us would. But moving constantly just
seemed foolhardy. I don’t know if anybody actually did go on those. I’m sure somebody
had done it, but I have a feeling that a lot of the RAT patrols that were supposed to
happen never did happen. Oh, and it turned out the CS gas came from a couple of drunks
somewhere. A couple of guys got drunk and threw CS grenades at each others’ feet.
This was inside the base somewhere. (Laughs)

RV: Right. Okay this is an interesting introduction to the war.
TV: Very much so.

RV: You’re sweeping mines and shooting snakes, and then you have your basic guard duty, bunker duty. Then you go out on this kind of fake ambush, and it works.

TV: It did.

RV: Was this what you had in mind for the war or what? Or did you not have, really, any expectations or ideas about what it was going to be like?

TV: I actually thought that the things would be more—I don’t know how to say it, stupider. In other words, if somebody got a stupid order, that people would want to obey it. Usually that was not the case. There weren’t too many stupid orders given. Once in a while something would come along, but logic and good sense usually prevails in those cases.

RV: Okay. So this went on all night?

TV: Um-hm. I remember before the CS gas, a couple of us new guys were assigned to make a patrol to a PX (post exchange) to buy some Cokes. We did that in the dark and I guess it was good training for moving around in the dark. Two or three of us went to—found a PX somewhere that was still open and bought some cokes, this was early in the evening. Brought them back and late in the evening is when the gas hit and the perimeter opened up. But then things calmed down and we finished our RAT patrol. Don’t really know if the CO (commanding officer) or anybody was calling in our artillery behind us, because there was intermittent artillery being fired all the time.

RV: Was this your first real sounds of what the war was like, what it sounded like?

TV: Exactly. Yes, it was.

RV: How did that affect you?

TV: The firepower that was on that perimeter was a good thing to know. It was a good feeling, except for the fact that we were supposed to be out there in front of it and that was a bad feeling. The firepower that we could put out from that perimeter just from those bunkers was stunning. Yeah, that was a good thing to know. It was impressive.

RV: Okay. So you finish this night and you come back and you’re still at the base camp. Were you going to go out, like was Charlie Company going to go out on regular, more lengthy patrols, or were you going to be at Baldy now for your tour?
TV: Actually, when we came back in from our RAT patrol, we got to take the
day off. We were told, I think, the next day or right away we would be leaving, making a
combat assault, they called it a CA, out in the field, just out in Indian country.

RV: Right. How much sleep had you had?

TV: Actually plenty of sleep. We took turns once the gas went away. It was just
nice having a day off and spent most of it sleeping. The next morning we were supposed
to leave right at dawn. We were supposed to be on helicopters at dawn, so we had to get
up very early and we were packing up our—well, let me back up a bit. Somewhere along
the line, I guess when I first got to the company area we turned in our duffle bags with
uniforms and I remember that tape player was in there, tape recorder and player, probably
dress shoes. You know, a few things in that duffle bag. I was down to just basically my
rucksack and my rifle. Anyway, the morning of our first combat assault we got up early
and somebody had a fire going in a barrel, like a trash fire. It was for light and maybe a
little warmth because it was cool that evening. But we were making sure we had water in
our canteens and the right amount of ammunition, and checking our gear, and getting
everything together, and getting our rucksacks packed, and somebody threw a wooden
crate that had held hand grenades in it in the fire. Unfortunately, there was a live hand
grenade in that crate. That was just a mistake, just an accident. But we were there in the
dark packing up and a hand grenade went off and it wounded, I think, four people. Three
or four people—a couple of them standing right next to me. I didn’t get a scratch. But
we had to get those folks MEDEVAC’ed and that showed me how dangerous things were
and how careless people could be and, I guess, put me more on my guard than ever.

RV: This is your fourth day out with the company?

TV: Yes. We walked to the helipad area, and there were just a ton of Huey
helicopters lined up. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many helicopters. It was kind of just
like you see in Vietnam War movies now. We were assigned a helicopter and got on. I
remember riding in the door. There was either no door, or the door was open. I rode in
the door with my legs hanging out and that’s what we all did. Took off. It was a stunning
sight, that many helicopters, and all that noise, and racket, and off we went. There’s a
pucker factor that’s talked about and that starts the adrenaline going and it’s just a
daunting thing to go through. Especially, this was about the third time I had been on a
helicopter. But the first time it had had doors and we sat inside and here I was sitting in
the door with my legs hanging out. We were told that we didn’t know if the LZ would be
hot or not, so it was going to be prepped right before we landed. By that, there were
gunships that came in and were shooting rockets and mini guns, a tremendous amount of
firepower being shot into the area that we were going to land in, and then landed in
batches. I remember the LZ was cold. But basically, that was my first day out on the
field and from there we just started humping as a company. We would stretch out over a
tremendous amount of area because it was critically important to keep as large an interval
as possible between you and the guy in the front and the guy behind you. The Viet Cong
were opportunistic. They knew as soon as they fired a shot that there was going to be a
tremendous response from all of us at once. Then if that didn’t do it, then there would be
artillery and gun ships coming after them. So it took a brave person for them to stand up
and snipe at us. But if they saw a couple people close together they would have a better
chance, better odds of hitting one or all of them. So walking close together—it was kind
of drummed into our heads that walking close together was not the thing to do, very
dangerous, and would get somebody hurt. So we would move, especially if we were in
the hills, with a pretty good distance between ourselves. I guess this was my first time
humping the rucksack, probably a fully loaded. I would guess it weight maybe sixty-five
or seventy pounds.

RV: Wow. What’s the weather like? What’s the temperature here?

TV: It was very hot and sunny.

RV: How did you make out with the weight and all this other extreme physical
exertion?

TV: It is extreme. You sweat tremendously. Well, I’ll tell you about the
rucksack. It’s like a backpack and I carried four-hundred rounds of M-16 ammunition in
bandoliers around my chest.

RV: Did you volunteer this? Was this yours? How did that work?

TV: That’s what we were all supposed to carry. There was probably a minimum
amount. But the people that were schooling me probably suggested that four-hundred
rounds was a good thing to have. That was twenty magazines. Actually, I had a few
extra magazines on a belt around my hip so that I would always have some magazines
even if I laid my bandoliers down. I’ll start again. I had a web belt with magazines on one side and a canteen on the other, then four-hundred rounds of ammunition in bandoliers, and then the rucksack. In the rucksack is three-hundred rounds of M-60 ammunition. Basically everybody who was a rifleman that didn’t carry the machine gun or carry a radio or carry an M-79 grenade launcher did carry extra ammunition for the gunners. Also regular hand grenades, smoke grenades, probably eight quarts of water.

RV: Where would you put those? Or, I’m assuming canteens, but where would you carry that water?

TV: In canteens hooked on the outside of the rucksack. I used a one-quart canteen, one or two on my belt and then the rest is a two quart canteen hooked on the outside of the rucksack, or inside the rucksack, either one. Several days’ worth of C-rations which were just cans, either an entrenching tool, or a machete, plus anything personal you might have.

RV: What did you carry personal? What were the things that you brought with you in the field?

TV: Writing paper, a pen, cigarettes. I had a pocketknife that I kept in my pant leg pocket. It was a folding knife. What else? Later on I palled up with a buddy of mine—somebody had left the company and gave me his little transistor radio and my buddy would carry a piece of the battery. We had picked the battery of the radio apart enough to get twelve volts, or nine volts, I guess it was, for the radio. Under certain conditions we might play radio and play the Armed Forces Radio station.

RV: Um-hm. Where there rules about when you could and couldn’t listen to that?

TV: More common sense than rules. The rules were sort of self-imposed. If it was the wrong place to do it and you did it, everybody would let you know immediately.

RV: How so?

TV: With as much vigor as it took to correct the situation. In other words—

RV: That’s a very nice way to say it, Tim.

TV: Nearly everything that happened was—you know, all the rules that were imposed were self-imposed. If somebody was doing something stupid, they’d be asked to stop. Then if they continued, they would be made to stop no matter what. There was
certainly the implication of the ultimate force to stop somebody if they were really doing something stupid and putting people’s lives in danger, no matter who it was, whether it was an officer or just one of us. It wasn’t something that was put on the line everyday and made a big deal of. It was just the way we lived.

RV: What else were you carrying?
TV: I think that was it. Well, plus my rifle.
RV: Of course, right.

TV: Oh, and I had a, oh, what else? I had a poncho, a poncho liner, an air mattress. Oh, there’s probably more. Oh, boy. Oh, and a gas mask. Somebody suggested that I really needed this gas mask. Or actually, they issued me one. I think probably a few days into being in the field, I probably noticed that most people didn’t have one and asked if I could send it in or whatnot and there was no way to do that. So I took an entrenching tool and chopped it up into pieces and then buried it. So that was some weight I didn’t have to carry. I wasn’t concerned about needing one later because I think I was pretty much assured by anybody that if there was any CS or any gas, it would be from our own side because the enemy didn’t use that. The enemy was pretty much, that we were looking for were Viet Cong-type people.

RV: Tell me what you had been told about the enemy. This is from your perspective. I’m going to ask you this question again, but this is from your perspective your first few weeks there and what the guys were telling you, if anything.

TV: Well, what we were told was that there would more likely be Viet Cong soldiers or Viet Cong insurgents, I guess. Just VC is what we called them, we didn’t call them insurgents or anything. But rather than—I mean there was very little likelihood of encountering an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldier. That just wasn’t going to happen.

RV: You were specifically told that?
TV: Yes.
RV: Okay.

TV: The area we were in had plenty of people and we had been explained the rules of engagement. I know that the company had to go through a—you know, in order to call artillery or to call an air strike in, there was a delay that the company would
encounter or that anybody doing it would encounter because of the couple layers of
bureaucracy that had to be encountered before whoever was doing the authorizing would
authorize the artillery. That was because there was ARVN around and other friendly
forces around, or could be around. So there had to be some coordination, whenever a
unit like ours wanted support would’ve also meant a delay. Now we were also told that if
we encountered somebody, if they shot at us, we could return fire immediately. But if we
saw somebody and suspected them of being an enemy, whether or not they had a weapon,
we were supposed to holler “dung lai” to stop. If they stopped and put their hands up,
you know we weren’t supposed to fire. If they ran, we were authorized to shoot. But we
were supposed to stop and holler at them first.
RV: That’s blanket, kind of, that’s anyone? Any Vietnamese you encounter?
TV: Yes. Basically that was the rules of engagement in that area.
RV: Okay, so you’re going to encounter VC. You’re told exactly how to
confront them if you upon them. I assume you were told about the booby traps that you
may or may not run into. I mean this is separate, obviously, from combat school, but
were they talking about the nature of the warfare that the enemy that you were going to
encounter would impose upon you? I guess that’s what I’m trying to ask.
TV: Well, there was a period of OJT where basically if the whole company is
moving, the strength of the company was probably more than a hundred people. So you
might be right in the middle of that and so there were fifty guys in front of you and fifty
guys behind you. Really not much to be concerned about other than getting sniped at
from the side. You basically walked in a single file and didn’t stray much from wherever
the person in front of you walked. As you got more experienced, sooner or later a
rifleman would be expected to walk point. But there was a time period there of learning
what to do, learning how to handle yourself, learning how to read a map, learning how to
communicate about the terrain with each other. So, you know, nobody was thrust into
that role immediately.
RV: So you had a chance to kind of walk, I guess, in the middle of the pack and
learn all of this stuff?
TV: Um-hm. If we broke up into platoon-sized units—in other words, if the platoon split off from company—the new guys sort of stayed in the middle, didn’t pull slack necessarily and didn’t have to walk point.

RV: So you’re operating initially in a company size?

TV: Um-hm.

RV: Okay. You’re in Charlie Company, so are you literally the third? Alpha, Bravo, Charlie?

TV: There’s Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta—four rifle companies. Then the recon company.

RV: So are you walking third in line? Is Charlie Company’s position third or did it rotate?

TV: Charlie Company was by ourselves. I don’t know where the rest of them were.

RV: Oh, okay, so you didn’t—okay, I see, I see. So you would go out just with Charlie Company and inside that where would you walk with your platoon? Where was your platoon? As part of, I guess, a normal search-and-destroy?

TV: Well, the platoons would rotate from point to the middle to slack, and then the squads in the platoon would rotate from point to middle to slack. A point-man in the first squad of 2nd Platoon would probably expect to end up on point something like every ten days or something. I’m not sure exactly, but it never worked out right for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes if we had to cut through jungle to get where you were going, you might use ten point-men in a day because hacking, cutting a trail would wear the point-man out.

RV: So how long did it take you to pick up on the map reading, kind of how to function in the bush? Was this a matter of days or weeks?

TV: Learning how to read a map and understand the map once I was entrusted to look at it, probably just a few days. It was a pretty—it just came to me, I guess is all I could say.

RV: Okay, what about how to function out in the bush in this kind of environment? You know what to do, what not to do?
TV: Yeah, that what to do, what not to do was provided by somebody who had experience. Maybe another PFC or a Spec-4 that you sort of buddied with. There would be in a squad probably three groups of people who would form positions at night, three foxholes, or three positions at night of maybe three groups of four people each. Of that group, they would try to mix up people that had experience with the new guy, so that there wasn’t a whole group of new guys together. You know, so there wasn’t a whole group of new guys just by themselves. That kind of information about how to act and what to do, learning the language of Vietnam, was done by those people that had experience. It was passed along as you learned day by day. Typical day in that period may be that we might move as a company to a day laager position. I believe the word is spelled l-a-a-g-e-r and it means to set up in a circle. So wherever we spent the night, we might move to a day laager and then from there send out a search-and-destroy patrols for a few hours or all day long, perhaps. Then generally move to a position at night, a night laager, different from that.

RV: Who selected this route? Who selected where you would be going and where you would stop and set up?

TV: I guess the company commander. Maybe he was even acting under orders of where to go and whatnot, but he would give the platoon leader of the point platoon their objective. In other words, “Here we are. Get us here.” The platoon leader would go down—that information would come down the chain of command to the squad leader, and then the squad leader would inform the point-man. If they needed to plan or discuss how they needed to do that, they might. Then basically the point-man would take us there, would lead us there. I remember at one point of that first CA (combat assault) we were going to search a village that had a lot of people in it right at dawn.

RV: Um-hm. Now had you received instruction on how to search a village? Or were you just going to kind of follow and observe?

TV: Just do what everybody else did. No, there was no instruction on how to search a village. Probably cautioned about, “Don’t kill anybody you don’t have to,” that kind of thing. Also, one of the things that I carried with me was an intense desire to survive. With that, if I survived, I wanted to be able to look at my face in the mirror when I got home.
RV: You were conscious of this then?

TV: Yes, of not doing something stupid. Not doing something really wrong.

RV: How did you define what was something really stupid or really wrong?

TV: I mean killing an innocent person would be a bad thing to do, or having an accident and killing another GI. There’s a million things you could do wrong and I know I was conscious from the beginning of wanting to avoid those kinds of things, make sure that I didn’t do that. I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. But that was a big motivating factor for me was not necessarily to please the Army or anything along those lines, but to make sure that I could live with myself when I got home.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians?

TV: The civilians, they were Stone Age people. You could tell all they wanted was just to do their farming and be let alone. They didn’t want us there, but they also didn’t want the NVA, or they didn’t want to be invaded. They just wanted to be left alone. They were invaded. They were brutalized by the NVA invaders and by the Viet Cong and that sort of thing. So they didn’t like that and they appreciated our help, I think, to stop that, but they also didn’t like us being there. They really just wanted to be left alone.

RV: How did you figure that out? What gave you that impression?

TV: That’s just an impression. It was never communicated to me. It was just I guess an impression I formed over seeing them trying to live their lives.

RV: Okay. So tell me about this morning report as you’re going into the village and what happens.

TV: Well, we got up early in the dark and moved to the edge of the village just as the sun was coming up and formed into squad files, the whole company, because it was a big village. Went through the village just as it was getting [light]. Got a lot of people out of bed, dogs started barking and carrying on. It was tense, and it was very scary.

RV: In what way?

TV: I mean you could look into a hut, a hooch, see some people there, they might smile at you, give them a candy bar and keep going, and then they might shoot you in the back. That was reality. As it was, nothing happened. We didn’t find any VC. It was inconsequential. But I remember there was even a pagoda and most of the village was
hooches, but there were also some actual buildings. First time I had seen anything like that in the field.

RV: How long did it take you all to search?

TV: Oh, probably just an hour or so. Then we just formed back into a company and walked on.

RV: If you would, tell me a little bit about going into this village and the civilians’ reactions to you, eye contact. Are they coming out? You said they were asleep, they’re resting, but what happens in interactions between yourselves, the US Army, and the civilians in a situation like that?

TV: The civilians are scared. They are really terrified. Probably for a good reason and they’re probably guilty of something. They’ve probably been forced to help the Viet Cong or to help the enemy. Probably not by choice, but by coercion. But if we find proof of their helping them, they know it is going to be difficult for them. For example, they’ve got to have rice there but if we find a large—I mean to eat. But if we find a lot of rice, a big stash of rice, we’re probably going to confiscate it or destroy it. It can be used to support the enemy. If we found weapons, that would certainly cause a big problem to them. Basically in a situation like that, we would probably almost place them under arrest. In other words, they would be detained and then flown back into their own people to be interrogated and whatnot. That thought probably terrified them as much as anything. I mean the way to learn how to search a village was just watching the guys in front of you. It was important not to have your weapon off safe unless you were ready to shoot, unless you wanted to shoot something. So that’s a part of it for me was to make sure that I had my weapon under control and try to keep myself under control and just keep my eyes and ears open. I mentioned earlier there was, I guess, a fear or a thought of—you know I might give a piece of candy to a kid or some C-rations to a kid or something and take a few steps and get shot in the back. Didn’t happen, but the thought of that is there and that makes you very, very cautious. But it turns out this particular day that there was no incident whatsoever. We didn’t find any bad people, didn’t find any contraband. We didn’t have to hurt anybody and didn’t have to destroy any of their property.
RV: Do you actually go into each of the hooches and kind of turn things over or just look around?

TV: I was probably too concerned for my own safety to get really involved in something like that. So my approach would have been, you know, I had to certainly go in the hooch, look at the people, make sure there was no holes or no obvious places where somebody could be hiding. If there was a basket, I might use the muzzle of my rifle to open the lid of the basket to look inside. But not aggressive enough—I guess that’s the right word—to spend a whole lot of time rooting through their stuff because I thought it would be dangerous to do that. To get that involved in searching a hooch. To get that involved in it, you might lose track of who’s standing right behind you or what’s happening right behind you. I was more interested in what was happening right behind me than I was to really get—I can’t think of the words—to spend too much time or effort searching. The idea really wasn’t to search. I mean, the thought was that if there’s Viet Cong in the village they’re going to let you know pretty quick, either by running or shooting at you. Finding contraband or a cache of rice or weapons was possible, but not real likely because they were pretty smart about hiding it.

RV: Um-hm. Can you describe exactly where—or as much as you can remember where Baldy is? Then where you guys went out on operations?

TV: Baldy is right on Highway 1, right beside Highway 1, which I think is just inland from Chu Lai. Actually probably Highway or Route 1, or whatever it is, probably touches part of Chu Lai, too. So I think it’s maybe a little bit north of Chu Lai. Where we went on that first operation had to have been north. I’ll explain that in a little while. But I didn’t really know where we were geographically. Most of the time, even if you knew where you were on the map, you didn’t know where you were as it related to the rest of the country.

RV: How important was it for you? I mean did you even think about this?

TV: Not much, no. No, it just didn’t matter. Later on when I was walking point and things, knowing where I was on the map was very important. As far as conducting this first operation, that wasn’t even on my mind at all.

RV: So after this village search—this is your first thing you do on this particular operation—are they telling you, Tim, “We’re looking for the enemy,” or, “We’ve had
contact and we're going to move toward that area?” Or are you just simply out walking
these trails, you know, seeing what you bump into?

TV: This area wasn’t really trails so much as it was farmland and rice paddies. I
got the impression that we were just out looking to see what we bumped into at that point.
Just a short time later we broke up into our platoon-sized units. I don’t know where the
other platoons went, but my platoon went to this area that was a stretch of a road. It
wasn’t Route 1. It was just a road that had a lot of civilian traffic on it all day long and
we worked very close to the road in positions that had been occupied again and again by
Americans. Really foolish the way that we operated with that.

RV: Why?

TV: Because it would have been easy—well, first off, if it’s Tuesday, the
Americans must be here at Position A. It was predictable where we might be, I think.
And open, very visible, very open. I guess we operated like that because there wasn’t
much contact. There wasn’t much chance of making contact.

RV: Did that hold true for your tour?

TV: Oh, no.

RV: Right. This is initially.

TV: This was in a populated area, a “pacified” area they called it. It had its
dangers. I guess after we had been in this area for a day or two, my squad was assigned
to get up on this little hill, a little mound, and overlook a bridge one night and make sure
that nobody had mined the bridge during the night. Basically, we had one guy awake and
everybody else sleeping. But where we were was very exposed and had been used by
GI’s before. Even the grass had worn off this place it had been used so much. The Viet
Cong knew we were there and got as close as he dared, I guess, and opened up with his
AK-47 rifle, emptied the whole magazine at us. But he fired high and didn’t hit a soul.

RV: This was how soon after the village operation? This was a few days, you
said?

TV: This was probably a week into the CA. It was in February. It was probably
just about Tet of ’69. You know, this guy fired at us and missed, but my squad leader
remarked that I had just earned my CIB, my Combat Infantryman’s Badge, by taking fire
and surviving it, presumably.
RV: Right, right. This is the first time you had come under fire.
TV: The first time, yeah.
RV: What did that feel like?
TV: It felt unbelievably stupid to up there in the open like that at night and getting shot at. It just felt like—well, I guess it was in retrospect more whenever I realized we didn’t have to be so stupid. That why we were operating the way we did, it just didn’t make sense. I remember I got permission one day to—we were on the road just standing around and there were kids and there was a little bridge over a stream full of fish and I asked permission to discharge my rifle. So I shot down into the water and killed or stunned maybe twenty, thirty, or forty fish. All those kids went charging down there grabbing up those fish. They were tickled with that.
RV: Wow.
TV: I also remember encountering what was called “soda girls.” This was another almost surrealistic thing in my mind, but we might be patrolling around looking for VC and here would come generally a female, a young, teenage or pre-teen Vietnamese girl carrying a tray with a shoulder strap and this tray would be full of Cokes and beer on ice.
RV: Kind of sounds like a golf course beer girl.
TV: Yeah, exactly so.
RV: You’re in the middle of a war, you’re out on patrol, and here comes a rest stop for you, basically?
TV: Exactly. The stuff was probably black market. I think the going price for a beer or a Coke was two dollars, which back in 1969 was pretty high. But I don’t think anybody thought to rip anybody off because it was a nice way to get a cold beer or get a cold Coke and paying the few dollars was great. But you’d see them routinely out there.
RV: That’s very, very interesting.
TV: That was stunning in my mind. But then one day—I’m not sure how long we were here, maybe a week altogether in this one area, guarding this road and some bridges and things. I remember one day we were told to start looking for IDs. We set up like a roadblock and made everybody that was coming through stop and show us an ID. They didn’t teach us how to read the IDs.
RV: I was going to say, what did you know you were looking for?

TV: Didn’t have a clue, other than the absence of an ID. If somebody didn’t have an ID, I’m sure we would have detained them or called for somebody or whatnot. But in this area, people were supposed to have IDs and I guess they all did.

RV: So no one, didn’t really have any incident or anything like that?

TV: No. I think it was the same time though, that a South Vietnamese military, maybe an ARVN, it was a military convoy of trucks that came down this road and came through our area and we just stood back and they went on. I can’t recall now if they were South Vietnamese or American, but they went just a half-a-mile past us or so. The first truck was called a deuce-and-a-half. It’s a good-sized Army truck, rolled over a command detonated mine that had been planted in the road. It was like one of those ones on Route 1 that was swept everyday that we were trying to find. This was a big mine, buried in the road, with a wire going off somewhere that when the bad guy saw the truck, he waited until it was right over the top of it and set it off. It blew the truck to smithereens. I remember at that moment, a helicopter was flying low over the convoy and the door of the truck hit the skid of the helicopter.

RV: Wow.

TV: I remember seeing that and I actually sort of doubted my memory on that incident. But not too long ago I got to meet Lee Kaywork and we had a lot of things we don’t agree on or don’t have the same memories of, but seeing that door hit that skid of that helicopter we both recalled. It didn’t down the helicopter, but it sure could have.

RV: Um-hm. Oh, yeah.

TV: Actually if it had missed the skid by a little bit, it would have gone up into the rotor and probably taken the helicopter down. As it was, the rest of the truck, or what was left of it, veered off the road into a bunch of civilians that happened to have been a funeral party. People were carrying a coffin or casket with somebody who had passed away in there and it smashed the casket open.

RV: Wow.

TV: I do recall that this wasn’t one of our better days, but some of the guys were kind of pissed at having seen that because it was so close to us and took it out on some of
the civilians. Not by shooting them but by roughing them up a little bit as they were
going through our little checkpoint.

RV: When did this happen in the tour, Tim?
TV: Oh, maybe ten days into the first CA.
RV: Wow. That’s got to have a very, very strong impression on you.
TV: The people who were doing the roughing up were some of the black soldiers,
and that did impress me.
RV: Impress you? Or left an impression?
TV: It left an impression. It didn’t impress me at all. I thought it was entirely the
wrong thing to do. I mean if I wanted to punish—my thoughts are, if you’re going to
punish somebody, shoot them. Kill them. But make sure it is the right person and make
sure it is the guilty party. Just losing your temper and beating up people that happen to
be going by is just stupid, counterproductive, and probably in the long run dangerous.
Probably made an enemy there.
RV: What exactly did they do?
TV: Punched them, hit them with a weapon, pushed them around, hollered at
them, called them names.
RV: Is this part of the funeral party?
TV: No, this is just more civilians that were coming down the road. Just because
the—I guess they would call that an IED (improvised explosive device) today, but we
didn’t call it that then—just because there was a mine and people were hurt and I guess
they felt frustrated by it.
RV: Did the body come out of the coffin?
TV: The coffin was just smashed, yeah. I mean we went up there and set up
some security around the area. I’m sure we hunted for whoever set the mine off; didn’t
find anybody. It must have been Americans because there was a Dustoff, the people that
had been in the truck. I remember we got into one of our little well used laagers on one
of these nights, and this probably was the first day of Tet. There were firefights
happening in three or four places around us and you could hear a lot of firing going on
and see a lot of tracers, but far off. I didn’t know who it was and still don’t know if it
was bases or if it was maybe some of our other platoons. A couple of nights there was a lot of action happening.

RV: It’s a lot right there in your first two weeks.

TV: Well, one day in there, maybe the next day, right at the same time period, because we were still operating just as a platoon and operating in that area right next to the road, we were getting ready to have dinner, you know have supper, just sort of bunking down for the night. I remember my squad leader came over and asked me if I had all my stuff together. I said, “Oh, yes. I’ve already got everything right here,” and at that moment a sniper jumped up from somewhere and fired into us. What he was shooting at mainly was our platoon leader. Four or five people in the CP (command post) were playing cards and so they were grouped together. The platoon leader got shot in the arm, he was the only one that was hit.

RV: He’s standing right there beside you?

TV: Oh no, he was pretty farther off. I was on the perimeter of this little area. This was an area that had been used so many times that the grass was wore off, and the foxholes were used and reused again and again. It would be easy for somebody to put a booby trap or something in a foxhole and just leave it there. The first time anybody used it, something bad would happen. That didn’t happen, but we did get that sniper that shot our platoon leader. Anyway I jumped in my foxhole and my squad leader didn’t have his weapon with him and his foxhole was in the other side of the perimeter. So he sort of had to low crawl over to his. But four or five people jumped into this little foxhole with me. It was not meant to hold that many people, but everybody wanted to get down and below the ground level. So there was like four of us crammed into this foxhole. But I was the only one that had a weapon. So I started returning fire, just suppression fire. I knew about where the sniper was and was just trying to make him get down by shooting back at him. When I had to reload, I made one of the other guys in the foxhole stick his head up a little bit so that there wasn’t somebody sneaking up on us. So I’d shoot and then scoot down and reload my rifle and make somebody look. I was reloading at one point and felt this warm—and we weren’t taking fire, by the way.

RV: You were?
TV: We weren’t. There was a first burst, and after that there was no return fire. But I had fired maybe two magazines and was reloading, and I felt this warm wetness on the top of my head and running down the back of my neck. I wasn’t sure if somehow I was hit, or somebody above me was hit. I thought it was blood. I put my hand on it and it was oily. I couldn’t figure out what it was. I said, “What the hell?” One of the guys that was in the foxhole with me said that he’d poured some holy oil on my head.

RV: Really?

TV: What it was, was his momma—it was a black guy—had blessed this oil for him and he somehow or another put it in a canteen and kept it with him the whole time. I was stunned. I just couldn’t believe anybody would do that. I couldn’t believe he would dump this crap on my head.

RV: In the middle of a firefight.

TV: In the middle of a firefight. But his thinking, I think, was I was the only one with the weapon and I was doing the shooting so maybe that would protect me or something. I think his motives were pure. It just absolutely stunned me and it aggravated me a little bit.

RV: What did you say to him?

TV: I said, “Thanks, but don’t ever do that again without asking.” I mean I appreciated the fact that he was trying to protect me in his way but—

RV: That’s fascinating. Did you know him? Were you all close?

TV: He was in my squad.

RV: This was still within your first month?

TV: Oh, yeah. First two weeks.

RV: First two weeks.

TV: You know that’s the kind of thing that you never forget. That just left an impression. But he was just a guy who was there and he was doing what he had to do, if he didn’t have to do it, he didn’t do it. He was just doing his thing. But I just couldn’t believe that he had carried that around that whole time. I presume he carried it his whole tour.

RV: Did that ever happen again?

TV: With the oil? No.
RV: Okay.

TV: What did happen, though, was we got in a gunship who shot up the area, and then a MEDEVAC helicopter for our platoon leader. I can’t remember his name even. But he was a real likeable fellow, you know, very much one of the guys. That’s I guess why he was playing cards. Everybody thought the world of him. But I always thought that we were operating under a total lack of caution, that we were just too lax. Sure enough, they proved us right. They proved that right, that we were too lax.

RV: Was that par for the course, or was that kind of an exception that you were being lax? Or in your mind would you say?

TV: I didn’t know. I mean, that’s all I had to go on was what we were doing. You know, some of these guys were very cavalier about stuff. They had been out for a long time and some of them were afraid of a shadow. But, I mean, it was a full gamut amongst the people. I guess part of it is hindsight and later in my tour there’s things like reusing a laager that you just would never do. Or to set up in broad daylight, just some things like that that even when you’re only facing the VC was probably foolish to do. It got people hurt.

RV: What else happened in these very eventful two weeks?

TV: What I remember is joining back up with the entire company and doing a lot of humping, a lot of patrolling. We ended up somewhere close to Da Nang. I don’t know what distance that is, but we ended up where we could see the coastline, and in the distance was Da Nang, I was told. In this area we spotted a hill that was just covered with Viet Cong. I mean we could see Viet Cong soldiers running around opposite this hill from us and there was bunches of them. I remember seeing the hill, and seeing the people, and I didn’t really know what was going on but we called in fire from the battleship New Jersey. It was over the horizon, you couldn’t see the ship at all. But somebody called it in and I remember hearing it coming and then seeing what that fire from those big guns did to that hill.

RV: These are 16-inch shells, I think.

TV: Huge. I mean they’re as big as a car or something. They’re huge and tremendous high explosives. It was one of the most impressive things I’ve ever seen in my entire life was seeing the devastation that we did to that hill. Knowing we killed a lot
of enemy, but I don’t recall that we went and actually verified. To this day I don’t know
why, when I think about it. Normally when we’d call in artillery we’d go and assess the
damage, you know see what we did. But there were enemy soldiers or Viet Cong soldiers
for sure and tremendous, tremendous damage to that hill. I think there was a complex of
tunnels and things is basically what we were looking at.

RV: What did it sound like?

TV: You could hear the round coming, and then—

RV: You couldn’t hear it fired, could you? But you could hear it coming in?

TV: Couldn’t hear it fired at all. I don’t think we ever heard it fired. No, but you
could hear it coming, and then you could see it explode, and then feel it in the ground,
and then hear it in that order. The ground would shake. You could see it and the ground
would shake before you could hear it. It would actually shake the earth. There’s a
surprisingly loud crack to the explosion.

RV: Really?

TV: You’d think it might be just a—it’s a sharp crack at the beginning, is the
sound it makes.

RV: How long did it take basically? Or how many shells does it take to destroy
the hillside? Are we talking twenty-five shells, or two or three?

TV: Good question. I’m going to guess probably a dozen, would be my guess. It
came in like probably four salvos. I don’t recall—sometimes when you call artillery in,
you call it in and adjust it and whatnot. Then again, I wasn’t doing the calling I was just
looking.

RV: You were observing.

TV: I don’t think it took a lot of—it seems to me the first salvo hit right in the
right area and maybe there was adjustment each time. But it just hit and a few minutes
lull, and then it hit again, a few minutes lull, then it hit again. I’d say about a dozen as a
guess.

RV: How does that make you feel when you know that your unit, your side, has
that kind of firepower behind you?

TV: Oh, it’s awesome. It’s wonderful. Never thought that we’d be using the
Navy or especially a battleship to help us. Didn’t have a whole lot of contact on this first
CA, but a couple times we called artillery for recon. In other words, if we had to walk through an area that we thought looked dangerous we might call artillery on it. If they weren’t busy, they might provide it for us. But artillery was quite a bit different than that naval artillery.

RV: Can you describe that difference?

TV: Just the sheer size of the explosions. Just the volume of the big 16-inch guns. That was the only time I ever saw naval artillery, too.

RV: Anything else of note these first few weeks? Or these first two weeks, I should say.

TV: Well, altogether, that first combat assault lasted probably until the end of February. We got back to LZ Baldy by walking.

RV: How far? Or how many days, I guess?

TV: Well, we walked and patrolled and walked and patrolled probably just in the general direction. I don’t really know. But one day somebody said, “Well, we’re going back to Baldy.” Probably a day or two after that we were back on Route 1 and walked back into Baldy.

RV: I assume you were happy to get back to base camp?

TV: Oh, yeah. Got to take a shower. That was shower number one. I think it was all cold water but there was a facility there and we’d been out probably close to a month. You get pretty funky about that time, so that shower felt real good. In the field once in a while we would get a hot meal, we called them “hot A’s.” Most of the time we ate C-rations but every now and then the company would fly out a hot meal. But they were never really hot and never really very satisfying. We got to go into a mess hall on Baldy and get better food. Mainly that shower, though. Getting that shower was very special.

RV: Didn’t matter that it was cold water?

TV: Didn’t matter at all. It felt great.

RV: Okay. Looking back now, Tim, at these first few weeks out in the field, your first CA, you were exposed to so much. So many different things. What did you learn from all that? Do you remember kind of coming back and going, “Okay, this is different and this is what’s happening,” or “Wow! What in the world’s going to happen
What did you think to yourself when you came back, got your shower, got some food, and you were able to maybe reflect a little bit versus being out in the field and having to deal with it in your face?

TV: I think personally I was resolved to not let anybody’s laxness get me hurt. I think the most important thing I learned was to be on the lookout for that and to not fall into that. If everybody else was going to be lax, I wouldn’t be lax. Lessons learned?

The thing was, as soon as we got back to Baldy and had that shower and a meal and whatnot, they told us we were moving to LZ Professional. It was west, out in the jungle, on the other side of the mountain out in the jungle, and a free-fire zone, and a very dangerous area, in totally a different situation.

RV: What did you know about free-fire zones? Did you know exactly what that terminology meant? You kind of touched on that before, but—

TV: They told us that all the people had been removed from the area, all the civilians, and that the only people that we would encounter there would be enemy soldiers. That wasn’t true, but that’s what they told us. They also told us that the requirement to holler “stop” in Vietnamese was no longer a requirement. That anybody we saw was theoretically an enemy soldier and we could use force on them or kill them without saying a word.

RV: What did you think about that?

TV: I was glad to be away from so many civilians. I just thought that was tremendously dangerous to have people that might not be friendly standing right behind you. I didn’t like that idea at all. I didn’t like dealing with civilians. I didn’t like being around them. I wasn’t looking forward to going to Professional, but a more clearly-defined way of engaging the enemy, it eased my mind a bit. But as it turns out, there was a lot of civilians in the area. Or not a lot, but some. The area had been cleaned out of people, but some people just wouldn’t leave and they were there trying to farm and it was dangerous for them.

RV: Um-hm. What kind of bond or relationship had you formed with your company? I guess more specifically, the guys in your squad and platoon?
TV: Had a fellow that I am kicking myself today because I can’t remember his
name. He was from North Carolina. He was a tall, kinda gangly fellow and his last name
starts with a B.

RV: With a B as in boy?

TV: B as in boy. But I can’t remember his name. The fact that I’m having such
trouble remembering the names of the people I served with and the fact that I didn’t keep
a journal and didn’t write anything down, I’ve kicked myself many, many times. But this
one fellow in particular was helpful to the new guys, to me, and gave advice and he did it
in a way that was very helpful. I mean, you can tell he was going out of the way to be
helpful. No sarcasm. Just a good guy. Just an easygoing fellow, a good friend.

RV: But you don’t remember who he was?

TV: I sure don’t. [But I have since learned this. His name is John Brennan.]

RV: Did you guys hang the rest of the time, or were you able to develop that
relationship?

TV: He got wounded a few weeks after we moved to Professional. He got
MEDEVAC’ed and never saw him again.

RV: What did he do for you there the first two weeks though? What was his role
for you?

TV: He was just a rifleman. He talked to me about walking point a little bit.
Mainly which C-ration was good and how to prepare them and how to conserve your
water. Just little things of how to get by day to day, things to look for as far as
identifying the enemy or whatnot. Just the OJT of learning how to handle it, and he was
a good teacher.

RV: Do you remember the kind of things—how he would tell you this? Would
he say, “Hey, Vail! You need to do this,” or would it be more personal like, “Tim, come
here and let me show you something?”

TV: No, it would probably be, “Hey, Vail. You need to do this.” Or Tim, either
one. But probably Vail. More important, though, is if I had a question, “How do I do
this,” or “What do I do now?” He was there with the answer. I’m having a hard time
coming up with specific examples.

RV: No, that’s okay.
TV: But it was just the little day-to-day things. Plus he was a trustworthy person.

It felt good to—there were people who were not trustworthy, who were totally
untrustworthy, you didn’t like being around. Had to deal with them sometimes, but
you’d much rather deal with somebody who you can trust, that you could look to to cover
your back.

RV: Um-hm. How long did that kind of bond take to form? You know, that you
know the people to each side of you or behind you, in front of you will have your back?

TV: I think for me it probably took the best part of that first CA. In other words,
about three or four weeks to really know who was who, and who was trustworthy, who
wasn’t trustworthy. For those friendships and bonds to form, probably a couple or three
or four weeks, I’d say.

RV: Then did it last the rest of the tour? You’ve got people coming in and out of
your unit, though. How does it work?

TV: Our first CA we didn’t have anybody killed. We had some guys wounded in
firefights and things. We had guys who were finishing their tour, or guys who got a
different assignment, got a job in the rear. Guys also who were heat casualties or got
sick, maybe come down with malaria or something. It was a constant change of people,
people coming and going all the time. Sometimes they would leave and not come back
for whatever reason. That aspect of it was difficult.

RV: What? Moving and losing people you’ve formed a bond with and then
having a new person come in to replace and then having to start all over?

TV: Yes, exactly. Then after a while, I might be the teacher. That takes a little
while.

RV: How long did it take for you?

TV: Probably after that first CA. Probably by then I was pretty well seasoned
and regarded as knowing what I was doing. Hadn’t walked point yet, but if we got some
new guys in I would have been helping them along, telling them what to do and how to
do it.

RV: Well, Tim, why don’t we go ahead and stop for today?

TV: Alright. That sounds good.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Timothy P. Vail. I am in Lubbock again and Tim is in Roanoke, Virginia. Today is October 31, 2005, and it is 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time and just after 1:00 PM Central Daylight Time. Tim, we got you through your first two weeks in the field and you came back to LZ Professional and I’m wondering what you were feeling and thinking about what you had witnessed, what you had seen, and the experience that you now have under your belt. Could you reflect upon that?

TV: I’ll try. Actually, it was about thirty days altogether and walked back first to Baldy, to LZ Baldy. Then from there, we spent a couple days getting cleaned up and re-supplied and headed on to [LZ] Professional, which is about thirty miles inland.

RV: Right. And you described the first thing, as I remember, as that incredible shower you had at Baldy.

TV: It was cold, but it was refreshing and great to have. Didn’t really have a whole lot of time to reflect to be honest with you. I don’t know, Richard, that I’m really that much of a reflection-type person. But the talk was about this new area we were going to and so really rather than think back on what we had just been through, which was—nobody got hurt bad. I think there was a whole lot of concern about going from a relatively tame, pacified area to a free-fire zone. So the reflection was about that.

RV: Right. What’s going to be upcoming.

TV: What is upcoming and it’s certainly going to be different. A lot of concern there, I’m sure.

RV: Right. What about the relationship that you had forged with your unit by this time? What was that like?

TV: I think by that time, I was probably considered one of the guys. I hoped I was and I had formed some, you know, a good working relationship with my squad leader and had a best friend by then. He was just about as new as I was. He had been in-country only a week or two longer than me. His name was John Bernard. John and I were very close buddies and watched each other’s back.
RV: Where was John from?
TV: From Huntsville, Alabama. I’ve actually done locator searches for him and haven’t been able to find him yet.
RV: Really? So he made it out, but yet you guys have not been able to hook up since?
TV: Well, one of the things that I did was I looked on the Wall and he’s not on the Wall. So that means that he got home. That was a good thing.
RV: Yes. Well, I’m assuming that eventually you all were separated, then and, you know, physically separated. Either he got wounded or you got wounded and we’ll talk about that when the time comes. Tell me about how did you become a best friend with one of the individual soldiers there so quickly?
TV: It doesn’t take long. How did that happen?
RV: There might not be some great answer for that. It might have just been there.
TV: I think it’s just some people you just get along with and some people you become attached to. I think mainly it’s people you trust enough to do the right thing if the situation gets dangerous or things go bad.
RV: What had John done for you that kind of enabled him to get that close to you, to become one of your really close friends?
TV: Nothing special. Nothing spectacular. Just he always had a smile and he was a pretty upbeat fellow and he just held up his end of the load always.
RV: Well, tell me about the upcoming mission. You guys are getting ready to go into this free-fire zone. How much briefing did you get on where you were going and what your mission would be?
TV: Very little briefing, very little knowledge, very little information about the area, other than it was in the mountains and a free-fire zone. The whole battalion was going out there. The battalion we were going to replace had received a lot of casualties and was reduced in strength from being out there and fighting NVA soldiers. So we knew we had a much tougher mission to deal with out there.
RV: Was that a problem not getting lots of information or did you just, knew you had to be the infantryman and do what your officers told you?
TV: The lack of information is probably not a good way to run an organization, but it’s the way things were back then. Probably GIs could get too much information and that would be detrimental to making things run smoothly. But generally there was just a dearth of information, just nothing. You might know where you were or you might not know where you were. Most of the time out in the field, we didn’t have a clue where we were or where we were in relation to other units, or the rest of battalion even, or the rest of the division.

RV: So you weren’t even clear as to where your support or the closest American units would be?

TV: Well, we tried to stay within range of the firebase, and the firebases were interlocked so that with long-range artillery they could support each other. Of course, there’s always gunships and air support, so getting support was generally not a problem.

RV: So tell me about where you went and what kind of mission you were in.

TV: Well, we flew out to LZ Professional on, they’re called Chinook helicopters. They’re large troop carrier helicopters. I’m not sure how many choppers it took to take the whole company out there, but ultimately they were taking the whole battalion out there and bringing the battalion that had worked there, the 1st of the 52nd, back probably to LZ Baldy for stand-down.

RV: Did you guys cross paths? Did you see them?

TV: Don’t remember seeing them. There was somebody already on the bunkers whenever we got there and I don’t remember seeing—interesting question, now that you think about it. I don’t remember seeing a bunch of guys on the pad getting back on the choppers, either. I’m not sure how that happened.

RV: Tell me what it was like being on a Chinook. Was this your first time on one of those large ‘copters?

TV: Yes. My concern was if the enemy had a machine gun, we weren’t flying very high and the Chinook is not armored. It has door gunners, but if they had an anti-aircraft machine gun or something, it would be a very unpleasant ride. But it was an uneventful ride.

RV: You described the Huey and the door is open and you got the air coming in. What about the Chinook? Is it more of a seated ride with closed, I guess, fuselage?
TV: It’s enclosed fuselage. You get on and off by a ramp that lowers at the back of the aircraft. I can’t remember sitting on seats. It seems to me you just pile in and sit down on the floor. I don’t believe there’s any seats on it.

RV: So when you get up to Professional, what did that camp look like? What was there and then how did it differ from LZ Baldy?

TV: LZ Professional is a very small base. It’s a forward fire base, is what it was called. It’s big enough to house an artillery unit. I’m not really sure what the designation is, but there’s a 105-mm artillery group that was stationed there, and also four-deuce mortars. I’m not sure if the four-deuce mortars were separate from the 1st of the 46th or if they were part of the recon company. But basically, LZ Professional, or LZ Pro, was two small hills sitting side by side. The lower one was the helo pad, and the upper one had a ring of bunkers almost around the top. At that point there was no mess hall or much in the way of facilities. There were the usual latrines and fires going.

RV: So the usual smell then?

TV: Usual smell, yep. The headquarters company of the battalion, part of that group was stationed there. There were communication folks and probably the battalion commanding officer was there some of the time, and his staff. Generally the way we operated is one of the four rifle companies of the battalion would be stationed on the bunkers, protecting headquarters folks and the artillery folks from a ground attack. Then the other companies would be out operating in the area around LZ Professional. The area that we worked in was called an AO, area of operations. Whenever we got there we got off the Chinooks. I can’t remember if anybody got back on or not, it just escapes me. But I recall that we stood there looking around for a few minutes, and then picked our rucksacks up, and as a company walked off the hill. It was a very steep-sided hill. I remember getting into some tall razor grass or elephant grass it was sometimes called. It was the kind of grass that if it brushed up against your skin would give you like a paper cut. Nasty stuff.

RV: Tim, this might be a good time to talk about what Vietnam looked like, the terrain. Could you describe that? I know you saw obviously different parts, the beach, the jungle. But could you talk about in general what Vietnam looked like?
TV: LZ Professional was a very steep-sided hill. I think it might have been three-hundred meters tall [It was actually about 185 meters tall.], which was small compared to the surrounding mountains. But it was situated in a valley that we called either Death Valley or Dragon Valley for some reason. All around the perimeter of the valley were large mountains. I would guess four-hundred, three-hundred to four-hundred meters tall. No, must be taller than that even.

RV: Whereabouts was this, Tim? This was in the Central Highlands, right?

TV: Yes. In I Corps Central Highlands, Quang Tin Province, I believe it’s called. The valley had a trail going right through the middle of it that you could see from LZ Professional. It was a footpath, and it was called the Burlington Trail. I don’t really know why. But in the floor of the valley there were rice paddies but most of them weren’t being worked anymore, but they had been worked. Some of the mountains or some of the hills were terraced with rice paddies. Then all the mountains were covered with heavy jungle.

RV: What was the jungle like?

TV: Most of the time it was what we called triple-canopy jungle where there were very tall trees and the trees were so tall, in fact, that generally the floor of the ground doesn’t receive sunlight. It stays in shadow because the trees are so tall.

RV: Okay. What else? I mean on the floor of this triple canopy jungle, did you have tree stumps or trees rising out of the ground? What kind of vegetation? How thick was it down there?

TV: It could go from vegetation that you could push your way through if you weren’t on a trail to vegetation so thick that you had to hack your way through with a machete. Don’t really know what types of trees they were. They didn’t look that much different than our trees, but they weren’t the same trees that we had back home. They stayed green all year round and some of them very, very tall. Down in the valleys, on the floor of the valley, there were in some places rice still growing in the rice paddies. The remains of banana trees sometimes and in one area of the AO was a rubber plantation. There were rubber trees or latex trees growing.

RV: Okay. What kind of wildlife did you see?
TV: Bugs mainly. Every kind of bug imaginable. Mosquitoes and leeches were the two main ones.

RV: How problematic were they?

TV: Constantly a problem. We had what we called bug juice, insect repellent, Army-issued insect repellent that would keep the mosquitoes off if you were pretty well wetted down with it. But you would tend to sweat it off and if you didn’t reapply it, pretty soon you would be attacked by the mosquitoes. The leeches would get into your clothing, anywhere on your body. Sometimes you could feel them crawling on your skin and pull them off right way, but sometimes they would get attached and if you don’t check and find them, you’ll have a very fat leech engorged with your own blood. A couple drops of bug juice or you could touch it with the lit end of a cigarette and they’d drop off. But they left a wound that sometimes took a long time to heal, sometimes would never heal. It would just turn into what’s called jungle rot.

RV: Was that because you couldn’t get an antibiotic on it or treatment for it?

TV: I think it’s just because of the filth and dirt and just the conditions. It’s just very dirty and there’s a lot of bacteria. I would try to treat my jungle rot sores generally every day, but I kept them. They stayed open until I left the field. You know I’ve still got scars on my arm from them.

RV: Do you really?

TV: A couple.

RV: Did you have to walk through water to get leeches on you, or would they just get on you period?

TV: Walking through water made it worse.

RV: Why, because they were just floating around in the water?

TV: Um-hm. But they could come off just vegetation. You could just see them sometimes in the leaves and stuff on the ground. But if we walked through a river or a rice paddy, if we had time and it was safe, you’d generally stop and check yourself to make sure they weren’t attached. But sometimes you didn’t have time to do that. As far as wildlife, there were also every now and then snakes. I didn’t have any more personal close encounters with snakes.

RV: After your mine sweeping incident?
TV: Exactly. But the guys right next to me killed a bamboo viper one day.

RV: Wow. How did they do that? Do you remember what happened?

TV: They just saw it crawling next to them, and somebody took a machete and just whacked it in two. But it looked like the little green snakes back home, but it was a deadly venomous snake. Small, but its nickname was “Old Two-Step” or sometimes “Three-Step,” depending on who you talked to. But the rumor was that if it bit you, you wouldn’t last long.

RV: That’s right. Was that your only close encounter with a snake then, besides the first time? Or did you see them?

TV: I saw snakes once or twice.

RV: Where were they? Were they hanging from trees or on the ground?

TV: Just on the ground. Just as I was walking along, I’d see them slithering off somewhere.

RV: What did that do mentally to you? For those people that have phobias against snakes—and I don’t know if you do or not—but it can’t be very pleasant to be in a warzone and going through such a rough terrain as a triple-canopy jungle and then you’re seeing snakes slithering away from you.

TV: Personally, I was worried about other things. Snakes weren’t my biggest fear. But there were people who were deathly afraid of snakes. In fact, we had one guy who had a terrible fear of leeches. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen The African Queen?

RV: Yes, I have.

TV: Humphrey Bogart gets all nervous and fidgety and he’s shaking when he’s got leeches on him. This one fellow who was in my squad—actually, he didn’t come with us until later in my tour—but he was terribly, terribly frightened of leeches. He just hated them. Of course, he found the biggest leech any of us had ever seen one day after crossing the river. He pulled his pant leg up and the leech must have been four or five inches long. The average leech was an inch and he had this super leech on him. (Laughs) It paralyzed him. Of course, three or four of us were pretending we were sword playing and we took our squeeze bottles of bug juice and sprayed the leech on his leg and made a little fun of him.

RV: So he made it through that?
TV: He made it through it. Also saw very, very small deer. Deer about the size of a Jack Russell terrier, maybe. Only saw them once or twice and very fleetingly. But you could tell that they were a deer. I’ve heard stories of tigers, but never saw anything personally. I did see a monkey. Actually, I saw large monkeys at a distance during the day one time. Then one night—this is actually an interesting story—it was very, very dark. We were in thick jungle, but not triple-canopy and it had been raining. Whenever it rained, generally, you’d rig up your poncho as a hooch, a little tent to keep the rain off of you so you could sleep halfway dry. It was my turn for guard and I heard something landing on my hooch and I couldn’t figure out what it was. Something coming out of the trees and it wasn’t water. I glanced up a time or two, and I guess about the third or fourth time I looked up in the air, I saw a four-legged person-looking thing jump from one tree to another. My mind registered that this could be a man and he could be jumping down on me. I almost swallowed my heart for a second. But it turns out it was just a monkey up in this tree was eating something up in the tree and throwing the pits down and they were hitting my hooch.

RV: On purpose they’re throwing them at you?

TV: No, I don’t think so. I think he was just eating them and dropping them. But when I looked up into the sky and saw this silhouetted body of this rather long-armed creature jumping from one tree to another, I thought he was jumping right on top of me. I basically ended up scaring myself on that one.

RV: So anything else besides the snakes and the monkeys and the leeches and the mosquitoes?

TV: Sometimes there were just bugs that didn’t particularly cause any harm. Just strange-looking insects and huge spiders sometimes that you could see. You’d encounter them and they would cause you any grief, but there were bugs that were maybe two-and-a-half or three inches long—huge bugs. Don’t have any idea what they were. Just tried to stay away from them.

RV: Um-hm. Okay. Did you operate mainly kind of in this kind of jungle terrain, or did you go elsewhere?
TV: The terrain was generally either on the floor of the valley where it was scrub
brush and rice paddies, or up and down the mountains where it was jungle and sometimes
thick jungle.

RV: Tell me about the valleys. You said they were scrub brush and is it
relatively open? Do you have a wide view of things?

TV: Sometimes you do, yes. Of course, the disadvantage of being in the valley is
that if you are in the open then everybody in the hills can see you very well. So it’s better
to operate in the—well, I liked to operate in the jungles where we weren’t as visible from
a long range. We might observe somebody else or observe the NVA if they were
crossing a rice paddy. The jungles were also a little cooler. There was more shade there
and if you were working up high, anyway, it wasn’t quite as hot as it was down in the
floor of the valley.

RV: So tell me about this next mission. You get to LZ Professional and you guys
walk off relatively quickly out to do something. What is it that you all were doing?

TV: Well, we’re making a combat assault.

RV: By helicopter?

TV: No, by foot. It was a slow combat assault. For us, generally, that was the
way we did it. We got to ride helicopters once in a while, but certainly not every time.
Basically, it’s continuous search-and-destroy day after day after day. We probably had a
mission. Sometimes we were even working with other companies. Sometimes we knew
it and sometimes we didn’t. But I think we definitely had a mission to go to a certain
area of our AO and conduct patrols because that’s what we ended up doing. I remember
basically after we had been out maybe a week or so, we went through a rainy spell where
it rains constantly, very low clouds, and we had trouble with re-supply. We didn’t get re-
supplied for a couple days and almost ran out of food. I remember a bunch of guys in my
squad—everybody chipped in what food they had left to make what we called the “last
supper.” We were just going to mix up like a stew in a canteen cup and somebody had a
can of mackerel, captured mackerel. I don’t know if it was used by the ARVN [or the
NVA], but they had this damn thing as a souvenir, I guess, in the bottom of the rucksack
and asked if we wanted to add it and everybody approved because we were so short on
food. Actually, we must have mixed this in a helmet. But we added that mackerel to the
stew that we were making and it made it almost inedible, it was so fishy. I mean it was just terribly, terribly fishy, and everybody was bitching and raising hell but we did eat it. I remember getting to an area where there was a maneuver that was called “hammer-and-anvil” on the battalion commander’s map or drawing board, where he would set one company up as a blocking force, and then the other companies would drive the enemy toward the blocking force. We’d be set up there to ambush them. We tried that a couple times I recall, and didn’t have much success. Had the same situation there. But what we did do was run out of water because we were set up for a couple of days in one area and didn’t move.

RV: How far along had you guys been here off of Professional?

TV: We were probably two weeks into it. So it was probably mid-March and probably two weeks into that CA. I remember that we got a replacement in our squad, a new guy who came out and happened to be a black fellow. But he had just a full supply of water and we told him that he might not want to give his water away, but we were short on water. He gave us some water, which was a good thing because we were really, really dry. A couple of us decided to put this guy under our wing a little bit. You know, try to give him some pointers and help him along until he got his feet on the ground. The first thing that he said was that he didn’t come out there to be scared, he came out there to kill gooks. So we knew we had a problem. I mean, we knew this guy was going to be trouble.

RV: Why did that alert you?

TV: That attitude, instead of accepting our help and advice and coming back with that kind of response. In the first place, it’s bullshit, and it’s just a silly thing to do.

RV: Too much of a cavalier attitude?

TV: Yes.

RV: Would that endanger you all? Is that what you were thinking?

TV: Yes it did. So we were very much on guard around this guy after that. I can’t remember his name, but he proved to be as worthless as several of us anticipated right from the beginning. I mean he did give us water. He didn’t have to and I was appreciative of that. But coming back with that attitude wasn’t a good thing and we
knew there was going to be problems. But he was in our squad, so we had to deal with
him. Sometimes that happens.

RV: How did you all try to contain him? Or did you? What would you do?

TV: Mainly just keep an eye on him. There really was no way for us to contain
him, other than just to keep an eye on him, to keep an eye on the safety of his weapon, to
pay attention to him. People you don’t trust you’re not going to turn your back on much.
Basically, that’s how that situation was.

RV: Was it easy to pick up on these kinds of people that you couldn’t trust? How
long would that take?

TV: Didn’t take long at all. Some people it probably did that you weren’t sure of
for a while, but I think most people or most new guys or most guys that came along you
could tell in just a day or two if they were going to work out or not. That’s probably not
universally true, but I can remember replacements coming along that you just knew, just
felt were going to work out and be a part of the group and there were others every now
and then there was one—they were rare—but every now and then you’d get someone
who was going to be a problem.

RV: How often did this water and food problem come about? Was this a one-
time occurrence?

TV: Water would be a constant problem. Just constant. I mean, sometimes you
would run out of water and just be out and have to deal with it.

RV: What would you do? I mean how long would you have to go?

TV: Well, there’s a limited number of time where you could actually survive
without in the heat. Sometimes what you had to do was slow down your intake of water
so that you would never run out. But if you slowed down your intake of water you also
had to slow down your intake of salt tablets. If I had lots of water, I might take twenty
salt tablets a day.

RV: What was the purpose of the salt tablets? I mean, I know what they were,
but tell me about that for people who don’t know why you guys are doing that.

TV: It replaces electrolytes in your body because of all the sweat. On a good hot
day, I had an olive drab towel around my neck and part of it would be underneath the
straps on my rucksack to take a little of the pressure of the straps off my shoulder. But
the ends of it, I would use to mop my face and my neck. Every so often, maybe if you stopped for a break or whatnot, you’d take that towel off and wring it out, maybe wring a quart of sweat out of it. Sometimes your uniform would be wringing wet, and not a drop of rain or not a drop of water, just sweat. When you sweat, you’re losing electrolytes, sodium, I guess. If you replenish it and you have enough water, you’ll feel strong and can function. If you take salt and don’t have water, that makes your thirst even worse and could be fatal or could hurt you. If you started running low on water, you had to stop taking salt and just make do with what you had. So taking care of your water supply, making sure you had a chance to get water whether it was from a stream or from a rice paddy. You know, the Army would send blivets of water out also. That was a big rubberized container, huge rubberized container. They would bring it out in a helicopter and we would get water out of it, freshwater out of that.

RV: How would that be delivered to you? How would you physically get it?

TV: A supply helicopter would bring it in, slung in underneath it, and just drop it on the ground. Then we would drain all the water out of it and when the chopper came back, they would haul it away for us. Didn’t get that kind of re-supply very often. Most of the time, you know most of the water we drank was from a river or a stream or even from a rice paddy.

RV: How much water was over there, like on the ground? I guess it depended on terrain. Were creeks and streams really common in where you were operating?

TV: In our area, there were a lot of streams, a couple small rivers, even, in the area. There was plenty of water. Especially—the water was fresher and safer to use if you were up in the mountains and it was a mountain stream. The water from the rice paddy area was very polluted.

RV: So going back to this initial operation off of LZ Professional, it’s a combat assault. Are you guys really kind of search-destroy?

TV: Yes.

RV: You’re looking to make contact and kill the enemy or capture the enemy?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay. You said you didn’t have a whole lot of information, but did your leaders that you were aware of, have any knowledge of, “Yeah, there are some enemy
units in this area? I mean it’s a free-fire zone, so they’re out there and we’re going to go
find them.” Or were you just randomly looking in this area? Do you see what I’m trying
to get at? You know what information did you have? What did you guys know? The
basic infantrymen, what did you know about what you were doing and why you were
doing it and what maybe to expect?

TV: I think probably if you’re in the headquarters group near an officer with a
radio and all of that sort of thing, probably you would have a lot more knowledge.
Probably there was some intelligence information that they got. But other than by a little
bit of trickledown, the grunts never heard that in most cases. Once in a while we would
be told that we’re going to attack this area or assault this area because they think there’s
enemy there. That happened actually just a little bit later on. I remember being told one
day that we had to cross this river, and on the hill opposite the river they expected to find
an NVA base camp. Actually, we crossed the river and it was very wide open and very
exposed if there really were enemy on a hill on the other side. But we got across and set
up a little CP without incident. On this day the 3rd Platoon had point, and they headed on
up this hill and made contact with the NVA and actually started a tremendous firefight.

RV: Tell me about that. What happened?

TV: Third platoon had two people killed just pretty quickly. One of them was a
black fellow nicknamed “Elvis.”

RV: How did he get that nickname?

TV: His last name was Presley.

RV: Okay.

TV: I didn’t know him personally, but had said hello to him or something. He
was a machine gunner and a real likeable fellow. Generally you didn’t know anybody in
another platoon, but I remembered him and remember joking with him about his
nickname.

RV: Do you know what happened to him?

TV: We were walking up right onto an enemy base camp. I think they were
trying to retreat but they left a rear guard and that’s what we were encountering.
RV: How common was that, did you find, that they would get out of there when they knew you all were coming, but they would leave somebody back behind to disrupt? I guess the question is, would they stay and fight?

TV: Oh, definitely. I had the impression that when an NVA soldier was assigned to a spider hole—and they might assign them one here and one three-hundred meters down the trail and another one three-hundred more meters down. I had the impression that they were just there. That they didn’t leave until we got them out. But this was a base camp with bunkers. Ultimately it was, but we weren’t to the bunkers yet. But we brought in artillery, probably, and definitely gunship support. Second platoon was told to flank the hill around to the left and come up the left side of the hill. It just worked out that my platoon sergeant, I guess—his name was Pete Gonzales. He was Sgt. Pete Gonzales. We called him Sergeant G. He was a career NCO and just a hell of a good guy, and a good soldier, and a great teacher. I think it was his efforts that kept the whole lot of us alive.

RV: Tell me about why he was good. What made him good?

TV: He just—what made him good? He was very knowledgeable. He was decisive. He was fair. He communicated well. All the things you’d want in a manager on a factory floor, or an office, or a staff, or on a battlefield. Just the same qualities and characteristics work just about everywhere I think. He had them. But on this day, he told me it was my turn to walk point.

RV: This was your first time?

TV: This was my first time.

RV: What were you thinking and feeling?

TV: I’m thinking, “What in the world do I do?”

RV: Had you not talked to some people who had walked point, or is it just a totally different thing when it’s you?

TV: It’s a totally different thing when it’s finally you. I had talked to people and I had watched them. I had paid—I knew that was going to be my job. I knew that was why I was there.

RV: What do you mean? To walk point?

TV: To walk point. Yeah, I expected it.
RV: But not every day. Just occasionally, right? Or was it really you all the
time? What do you mean by this is your job, you were brought there to walk point?

TV: My position was a rifleman, and you could be a grenadier, or a radioman, or
a gunner, or a rifleman, or an officer, or an NCO. All those other folks didn’t walk point.
But in Charlie Company, riflemen walked point.

RV: How many riflemen were there in Charlie Company would you estimate?

TV: I have no idea. Maybe a fourth of the people were eligible to walk point.
Then some didn’t walk point much. Some walked point much more than their share.

RV: Tim, let me ask why would people walk more than their fair share? Was it
punishment or because they were really good?

TV: No, they were good at it. Personally, I bitched every time I walked point. I
raised hell.

RV: What did you say?

TV: Well, just fuzzed. But I also walked point more than my share. I
volunteered to walk point many times.

RV: Why?

TV: Because after awhile I felt like I got pretty good at it. Not Superman or not
anything special, but I just felt I had a good feel for it. I think the pace that the point-man
sets is as important as anything else to the people behind.

RV: The actual tempo that you are walking?

TV: Yeah, if it’s a lot of start and stop, that’s really hard on everybody that’s
behind. If the point-man starts and stops it causes a chain reaction in the back where
people would almost have to run to keep up and then they’d get bunched up and have to
stop to become un-bunched up. I don’t know, maybe it was the thrill of it also. I
probably think that was part of it to me, too.

RV: Can you describe how you go about walking point, exactly? What do you
do?

TV: Well, on this day in late March, I asked this fellow in my squad if it was a—
I remember he was a tall black fellow, a grenadier, had real bad teeth and I think his
name was Crane. But he was absolutely fearless and he was very well regarded as having
his stuff together. He said, “Put it on automatic.” I don’t remember who I had as slack
even, but he just told me what to do. The first thing is to keep your eyes open for what’s
in front of you. Pick your terrain and where you’re going to walk. Then as you go along,
you’ve got to keep your eyes on the ground in front of you to make sure that you don’t
end up walking over something that you don’t want to walk on top of, like a booby trap.
Around an NVA base camp, I think my concern was more of encountering enemy
soldiers than it would be booby traps. But nevertheless you have all of those things going
through your mind at once.

RV: When you said you don’t remember who you had as slack, what do you
mean by that?

TV: The slack is the second guy who walks behind you. It was just a name for
that position. It was the point-man and the slack man. The slack man was there to help if
the point-man got into trouble or needed his help, but also communicate back to the rest
of the people by sign language or whatever the point-man communicated back to him. So
if I wanted everybody to stop, I wouldn’t turn around and look. I would just raise my
hand and close the fist and I would know that, or hope anyway, that the slack man saw
that and told everybody to stop.

RV: So you’re staying very alert, all your senses. What are you looking for on the
ground as far as trip wires or booby traps? What exactly is it that you can see? Is it
literally a wire across the ground or are you—?

TV: Well, a trip wire is just that. It’s a wire or it could be a vine even that would
have been rigged artificially by a man across an area. Generally, trails might be booby-
trapped and for the most part we avoided trails when we could. Also there were places
where punji sticks might have been—a hole dug and punji sticks put in the ground and a
false ground, you know, a cover over the hole that was supposed to look like the ground,
but obviously not real.

RV: How do you see that? How do you spot that?

TV: I never found a punji stick. I did spot a booby trap once or twice and I think
it was just luck. Just luck that I spotted it. But there were no booby traps this day. The
real concern was that we knew there were NVA up on that hill, and the 3rd Platoon was in
contact with them. My job was to bring the 2nd Platoon around to the flank on the left
side of that hill. Got to it okay. Got us around there with really no incident. I think once
I just made that first fifteen, twenty minutes on point, the extreme nervousness went away. Sergeant G. then had us form into squad files and basically assault the hill as individual squads. So I was still on point for my squad, but I had people on either side of me, maybe twenty meters away on either side. We kept on trying to stay on line now, but also looking for the enemy, looking for booby traps. We walked up apparently to a bunker and somebody opened up on the point-man to my right, who got shot through the shoulder. I was at that time standing in very tall grass, maybe thirty yards from the tree line. The tree line is where the enemy bunker was. Down on the ground and didn’t have any cover, so I just held my fire. I knew if I fired, I would probably give my position away. The guys from the squad to my right got the GI who was shot in the shoulder and took him back to the CP and I remember Sergeant G. gathering up a couple of guys and he told me just to hold my own right there, but not to fire.

RV: Why, because it would give away your position?

TV: No because he was going to sneak up on them. He was going to flank that bunker with these two other guys and he did. He got close enough where they pitched a grenade into the bunker and killed a soldier in there. We were able to get up and continue on then. It was a very brave thing that they did and the fact that he did that—he didn’t actually throw the grenade. He just led the two guys around there, and pointed and told them what to do. But that kind of leadership is good to have on your side. He’s a great guy.

RV: Have you seen him since?

TV: No, I haven’t.

RV: Okay. Tell me then, Tim, you’ve got that problem taken care of. Do you continue then leading that company around?

TV: Well, we were still in squad files and I basically rounded up my squad and that’s when I found this replacement new guy curled up in the fetal position.

RV: Really?

TV: I mean he was just totally tied up in a ball and didn’t want to get up. We got him going. I guess the squad leader might’ve booted him in the ass. But he wanted to lay there. But we got going and got through the first line of bunkers and stopped and basically just held our ground there. I think we must’ve known that we had overrun that
part of the camp. There was only one enemy soldier in that area and he was eliminated.

But the 3rd Platoon was still in contact off to our right and I don’t know what the 1st
Platoon was doing that day at all. Actually, I remember we called artillery in on the
bunker first, and it was pretty close and they walked the artillery in pretty close. I
remember getting hit with a piece of shrapnel about four inches long, very hot. I was
laying on my belly, facing forward, and it landed on the back of my leg. Didn’t break the
skin or anything, but it was heavy and hot and it was the first time I’d seen shrapnel.

RV: So what did you, just knock it off basically?

TV: Yeah, just knocked it off my leg.

RV: This is your first contact after going to LZ Professional, is that right? On
this kind of long combat assault?

TV: I can’t remember if we—I think we had probably had other contact. This
was my first personal contact. But I think other days that we had probably encountered
an NVA soldier who was infiltrating. I was trying to think of the word, sorry. Yeah, they
infiltrated in ones or twos and every now and then during the day we would have
ambushes set up. Never did trip one at night, but every now and then one would come by
and our ambush would be successful. Sometimes the point-man would just encounter a
lone NVA soldier or two. I think we had had some contact, but this was the first personal
contact for me.

RV: What did it feel like, this first contact? How would you describe it?

TV: Well there’s elation that you’re not hurt. You know, when you get through it
and haven’t been hurt. There’s also knowing that two guys were killed. So there is
probably a little guilt mixed in with everything else, survivor’s guilt, where I’m alive and
they’re not. That makes you feel good, but feeling good about that makes you feel guilty.
If that makes any sense.

RV: It does. I’ve heard that before. Do you remember what you were thinking
then, feeling then? I mean, when it first happens, do you react according to your
training? Or you, Tim, did Tim react like, “Oh, my God. I’ve got to get down, I’ve got to
protect my buddies?” What is it that goes through your mind or went through your mind
that day? I know it’s a long time ago.
TV: Well, I think, again, I was concerned about not doing the wrong thing, not looking bad, and not being a coward.
RV: You’re talking about in the eyes of your squad and your platoon and your company?
TV: Yes. Definitely. I mean I never wanted to be seen as any kind of hero, far from it, in fact. But to be seen as a coward or as totally inept, that would have been terrible. I think my concern was to do what I had to do to not be seen as somebody who couldn’t hack it, you know couldn’t be trusted. Because you’re in it together with your buddies out there, and you have to trust each other and there’s a segment that you don’t trust, but most of them you trust with your life everyday again and again.
RV: Like Sergeant G.?
TV: Like Sergeant G.
RV: And your buddy, John?
TV: John Bernard. Had this one case of—who was a problem.
RV: Um-hm. What about the fact that the first day you’re walking point, you actually come into contact? Just coincidence or bad luck?
TV: Just bad luck. Just coincidence. Just both. It’s coincidental, but it’s bad coincidence. One thing that did happen that day was a bunch of us up at the front were pinned down for quite a long time and back at our little CP near the river, they brought in water and new C-rations and whatnot. A lot of folks got water but there was a group of us that didn’t get water. That’s the kind of thing that causes you to use your water up and it probably was low to begin with. So the next morning, I remember being very low on water. There were a number of us that just needed water and there was no water handy and we needed to go find a stream or something. The platoon leader, I recall him advising against it but he knew we were going to go for water. So he said while we were out in front of our position, we might as well see if we could link up with 3rd Platoon. He gave us something to give to the 3rd Platoon leader and I don’t know if it was a message or what it was, but we knew that the 3rd Platoon was off to our right and it was just a patrol of maybe six or eight of us with our canteens and we went off and found the 3rd Platoon and they told us where a stream was. We found the stream and by this time we were all very, very thirsty, you know, intent on just getting rehydrated. I remember I
filled the first canteen and was drinking it and filling the second canteen and I looked and there was a spider hole just a few feet away from where I was.

RV: Gosh!

TV: In fact, there were several holes in this area that we had basically ignored because we were so intent on getting water. They were empty, but that taught me a valuable lesson, I guess, that even if I was thirsty that I needed to be more careful where I was walking and where I was going. But we got resupplied with water and got back to the 2nd Platoon and went on from there.

RV: So this is still around that hill that you had led your platoon around?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay. Are you still on point this second day?

TV: Second day? No, somebody else would have walked point that day.

RV: So you didn’t walk point usually two days in a row?

TV: Generally not.

RV: Would you walk it three or four hours? Or was it like one hour on, one hour off?

TV: It depended on what the mission was. There was a cycle. I can’t really explain it. Theoretically you would have to walk every so many days, but sometimes the platoon would operate separately or even a squad might operate as a patrol. If my squad was told to make a patrol, then the odds are that I would be on point because there were probably only two or three of us in the squad that had been around long enough to walk point. I don’t remember who walked point the next day or how long it was before I walked point again, but I don’t think I had that feeling of panic set in the next time I had to walk point. Of course, we probably weren’t in contact and I’d had a little bit under my belt.

RV: Um-hm, right. So that first day you do come in contact and the situation is taken care of. Did you basically stay there the rest of the evening and the next day go get water, or did you all kind of reconvene and then dig in? How did you spend the night?

TV: We formed a platoon laager right in the middle of that enemy base camp and dug foxholes and spent the night there. We did a lot of patrolling and searching the area the next day after we got water.
RV: Um-hm, right. Did you find anything?
TV: Found some propaganda leaflets, found several bunkers. I don’t remember finding anything particularly of worth other than those propaganda leaflets.
RV: What do you do with those? Do you turn them into your lieutenant or captain or do you guys just hold onto them?
TV: I just grabbed a few for myself and everybody else did, too.
RV: These were American propaganda against the VC or NVA, or were these North Vietnamese/VC propaganda against you all?
TV: North Vietnamese propaganda fliers against us. One of them was aimed at everybody.
RV: What did it say?
TV: Something like, “Nobody cares what you are doing. Put down your arms and go home! You’re not wanted here. You’re not liked here.” There was the communist—you know the wording that the communists always used in the flier, poorly translated. The other one was aimed at the black soldiers, and basically telling them not to fight this white man’s war.
RV: Do you remember how those black soldiers reacted to that?
TV: That’s an excellent question. I sure don’t. I’m sure that we discussed it, at least briefly. I don’t think there was any concern that anybody was going to throw their weapon down or do something like that. It might’ve psychologically put a bug in somebody’s ear, but I kind of doubt it.
RV: I’d like to ask you about a couple of different things. How does someone who, I guess doesn’t have the gumption for firefight or when contact is made, when you see these people kind of fold, or they’re lacking courage or whatever it is, how does that affect the whole platoon and the whole, I guess the squad then the platoon and the company? What happens to you all?
TV: That’s an excellent question. People acting that badly doesn’t happen very often, but it—maybe I can answer that question with an example.
RV: Okay, great.
TV: The person, the new guy who was in the fetal position and all that sort of thing, a couple of days later we were just moving from point A to point B and we had to
cross a huge rice paddy. It’s a very dangerous thing to do and I think we’ve even talked
about this before, how important it is to maintain an interval between the guy in front of
you and for the guy behind you to keep that same interval.

RV: That is because of—tell me why.

TV: The enemy knows that if they stand up and shoot they are only going to get
one shot because they are going to get a tremendous response from us. If need be then
we will bring artillery and air power down on them. But they know if they are going to
shoot, they’re going to spring an ambush on us, they need to make it the most effective
that they can. They need to use the biggest bang for the buck. The way to do that would
be to shoot at a group. In other words, if the GIs are grouped up that’s where they are
going to shoot. That’s something that most of us spent a lot of time on everyday was
making sure that we weren’t grouped up, bunched up. Any time there was a chance
where we were visible, where we were subject to ambush, it was just—we spent a lot of
time reminding each other and talking to each other about keeping intervals. Anyway,
this fellow was walking right behind me, and by right behind, I mean maybe two feet
behind me as we started across the rice paddy.

RV: This was the FNG (fucking new guy)?

TV: Yes. That’s a good name for that.

RV: Did you all use that term?

TV: Oh, yeah. But most of them outgrew it. Most of them outgrew it right away.

Probably would have caused a fistfight or something or maybe worse with this guy’s
attitude. But that’s what he was and he stayed that way. He never got any better.

Anyway we’re crossing that rice paddy and he’s right behind me, and I told him maybe
twice to get back, and he would for a minute but then he was right on my heels again. I
turned and took my weapon off [safety,] put it on automatic and stuck it under his chin
and told him I was going to blow his head off, basically, if he ever did it again.

RV: Were you serious?

TV: I was deadly serious. Very, very serious and he knew it. Then I made him
walk in front of me and told him I’d shoot him if he walked up on the person in front of
him.

RV: How did he do?
TV: He kept his interval. It was very, very serious at least in my mind and I’m pretty sure I communicated to him that I was very serious.

RV: Did the other guys have any problem with you doing that?

TV: No. They would have done the same thing. I think any of us would have.

RV: Because that invites a target, doesn’t it? You’ve got two people close together, so you could take out two instead of one?

TV: Yep. That’s the thought. If I was an NVA soldier or a Viet Cong soldier and knew I was going to get this tremendous firepower back at me if I fired my weapon, I’d want to get the very best chance I could to kill the most enemy. Anyway, we got across the rice paddy without incident. He stayed away from me the rest of the day, but a bunch of us went straight to Sergeant G. and told him exactly what happened, told him exactly what I did. I don’t know what Sergeant G. did or said, but I’m going to think like the next bird that came in, he was on it.

RV: Really?

TV: Never saw him again. He never came back to the field. I don’t know—I never did ask Sergeant G., or if I did I don’t remember asking him. Probably didn’t have time to even think about it. But he was gone and never came back.

RV: What does that do for you guys? Does that make it, “Wow, that’s a very, very good thing. Sergeant G. has got our back?”

TV: That’s a great thing. That’s one huge worry that we don’t have to worry about, especially when he took care of problems like that. We had another guy who was also I guess in my squad. His name was Charlie and he was seen as a little bit crazy maybe. He had been around awhile and had a lot of experience.

RV: What would make him a little crazy? Just the fact that he had been around a long time?

TV: Some of the things he did were just a little off kilter.

RV: Can you give me an example?

TV: It’s a real long story, but—

RV: Well, is it appropriate to take it up another time, or is now a good time?

TV: Maybe another time. I remember one time he shot at a water buffalo. Just wanted to kill the water buffalo but he didn’t kill the water buffalo and the water buffalo
charged him and us, and the machine gunners took the water buffalo down. But just
shooting at a water buffalo with an M-16 was just seen as kind of silly.

RV: Okay. I’m making a note to ask you about the long story on Charlie.
TV: Actually, we are out of kilter here. Maybe I should just go ahead with that.
RV: Sure, go ahead.
TV: Well, what happened was that we were getting into a laager one evening, it
was still daylight, up on a hill surrounded by a sea of rice paddies, as I recall. We looked
out maybe a thousand meters away and there were three enemy soldiers walking across
the rice paddy in plain sight. We picked up our rifles and the gunners picked up their
machine guns and everybody fired at it and knocked one of them down and the other two
escaped. They turned around and ran back into the wood line. I remember we brought
artillery in on them that was anti-personnel artillery that I’d never seen before. It
exploded in the air above the ground and dropped thousands of little bomblets in the
woods. But it was pretty far away and it was getting dark. My squad, since we had done
all the shooting, was asked to go out and set up an ambush over the body. Same kind of
deal in that if I was an enemy commander, I might want to set up an ambush over the
body looking for Americans to come to set off their ambush. What we did is we set up
our ambush in front of our own position. We didn’t go very far from the company’s
laager, in other words. But then in the morning the CO called and said, “Go strip the
body.” It was getting light, but they wanted us to go search the body, which was a
mighty fearful thing to do if there was an ambush out there. But we had to go through the
wood line and out into the rice paddy and found the body. It was an NVA payroll officer.
Had a pack on full of money.
 RV: What kind of money? Was it Vietnamese?
TV: Piasters maybe. I’m not sure, but it was North Vietnamese money. I can’t
recall.
 RV: Piasters could be exactly right.
TV: I think I took a small handful of them, but I don’t think I have any more.
But I have no idea what I did with them. I remember I had some as a souvenir, but I
don’t think I have it now. But anyway, the officer was wearing a ring, a nice gold ring,
and Charlie took his knife and cut his finger off to get the ring. I thought that just wasn’t
the right thing to do. There was no cause for that. I kept my eye on Charlie after that just
because that was just something that the rest of us wouldn’t do. We also got an NVA
flag out of his pack and my squad leader has that flag today, the fellow who was the
squad leader then. So farther on along, one night somebody noticed that Charlie was
returning the pin to a hand grenade at the end of his guard at night. We would take turns
being awake and at guard every night, and somebody asked him why he had had a frag
ready to throw and had he heard something or whatnot. He said no, that he had just
pulled the pin out of the grenade to keep himself awake. Sergeant G. worked his exact
same magic the exact same way. We were terrified when we found out that Charlie was
doing this. I mean if he was worried about falling asleep—to fall asleep with a hand
grenade that would go off if he let it go was a bad thing. One way or another Charlie
wasn’t going to last long. Either we’d have taken care of it, or as it worked out Sergeant
G. did. But we went to Sergeant G., I recall, right away that Charlie was on the next
bird. I think I was told that he re-enlisted for a job in the post office, the Army post
office in Chu Lai. In other words, three more years in the Army but he was out of the
field. But he wasn’t given a choice at that. I think Sergeant G. told him that’s what he
was going to do and that’s what he did. So he’s another case of he was out of the field
and never came back and good riddance.

RV: Um-hm. So these unsafe individuals, there are ways to deal with them?
TV: Yes.

RV: Did you always usually turn to your sergeant or why not turn to your
lieutenant?

TV: Sergeant G. just solved problems quick and easy. Whatever kind of problem
we had, whether it was supply or we needed ammo, he just solved problems and he
basically ran the platoon. The platoon leader interfaces with the company commander
and probably with the other platoon leaders, but the NCO platoon sergeant runs the
platoon. He’s the go-to guy for everything.

RV: Tell me about your lieutenant. What was he like? Did you keep the same
one? And if not, what were they like?

TV: He was a good guy. He was a reserve officer, as I recall. I think he was—
what was his name? Brownlee. His name was Walt Brownlee. I’ve never met him since
the war, but I did write him a letter but I never got a response. I never did understand
that. That was one of life’s bigger disappointments. I got his name and address from
another veteran who knows him and wrote him a letter and didn’t get a response and
don’t know why. But he seemed like a very effective officer. He was well liked and did
a good job. Well thought of, as far as officers went I guess. (Laughs)
RV: What do you mean by that?
TV: When things got—again, when we needed something to happen we’d go to
Sergeant G. If we were in contact and there was anybody to go to for direction, we
would go to Sergeant G. just because he had the most experience and was the coolest
under fire.
RV: What did you learn from him, watching him under fire?
TV: That if you wanted to, you could spend your whole tour in Vietnam and
never fire your weapon. I’m sure he never did, which I thought was a remarkable and
wonderful thing. He was busy looking after the troops rather than shooting. I guess
that’s the most remarkable thing that I learned from him as a leader. As a doer, I’m
expected to fire my weapon. But as a leader, he never found it necessary to.
RV: That’s pretty incredible.
TV: He’s an incredible guy. He was also very good at finding and laying out our
night positions. He was a good teacher, as far as choosing terrain. As a point-man I’d
confer with him sometimes, sometimes with the platoon leader. I would get directions
from the platoon leader but I would get suggestions and ideas and ways to do things
better from Sergeant G. The officer might say, “We’re here, take us there.” Sergeant G.
might say, “Stay out of this low ground here,” or talk about the importance of a steady
gait to avoid stopping and starting an accordion effect. He was good at what he did.
RV: Sounds like he was good at these little small things that maybe you would
not pick up on.
TV: Definitely, small and large. But the small things sometimes mattered more
than anything.
RV: So, Tim, getting back to that operation, did you all assault this mountain?
Did you move around it? Did you make any more contact with the enemy?
TV: We went all the way across it and I’m sure we found bodies from all the artillery and gunship fire that we had gotten. I know that we had somebody killed a couple of days later and it just astounds me that I can’t recall the details of that. But he wasn’t in the 2nd Platoon. Sometimes things happened that I was just too far away to see, and so I’ve either lost what I was told about it or really didn’t know much about it. We lost another person a couple days later, probably pursuing NVA. But I don’t recall that much contact in the days—we did receive sniper fire from a small little village a couple of days later. I remember we fired into the village with the M-79 grenades and set the hooches on fire. I remember the civilians were in there also. We rescued some civilians from the burning hooches, they were afraid to come out.

RV: Did you personally go in and do that?

TV: Yeah, I pulled a couple of old mama-sans out of the hooch. It was a very scary thing to do because I had to set my rifle down for a minute. Just turning loose your rifle for a second was a little bit scary but we had other guys that went right into the hooches and carried some kids out and medics tended to them, the ones that were hurt.

RV: What do you mean you took sniper fire from the village? Is this you all are walking through it or beside it?

TV: We were walking beside it and somebody took his one chance and stood up and fired a burst at us. Didn’t hit anybody as I recall, but we returned fire and part of the fire was into those hooches and caught them on fire. We fired a lot of rounds, but the civilians were down in their bomb shelters. They had little dugout areas underneath the floor of the hooch was how they survived that. But we didn’t find the guy with the rifle.

RV: How often would that happen? You’re going by a village and you guys take fire? Is this still in the free-fire zone or not?

TV: Yeah, it is still in the free-fire zone and there’s really not many villages. Every now and then there’s a hooch. If it’s a hooch and nobody is there, we usually almost always burned it down. If it was a hooch and there were civilians there, probably most of the time we wouldn’t. It wasn’t a common occurrence, but when you’re around what used to be a village where there’s people around, it seemed like there was more likelihood of making some sort of contact.
RV: Right. So how long were you out in the field during this particular combat assault?

TV: We walked back to LZ Professional probably about the end of March, so about a month.

RV: Wow. That’s a long time to be out.

TV: It is. It takes a toll on you.

RV: What else happened on that search-and-destroy mission that we didn’t talk about?

TV: That’s about it that I recall.

RV: So you really only had one significant contact and then the village incident?

TV: Yeah, there were probably some small things that happened that I just—and one big problem that I have in my recollection is the chronology of things. If there’s an error in what I’m saying here, that’s probably—you know, somebody else would probably have a different or a better recollection probably because I’ve got things out of line chronologically.

RV: Well, Tim, that’s certainly understandable. It’s been a long time since these things happened and it’s hard for a lot of us just to remember what we did say a year ago on a particular day even if it was an eventful experience.

TV: I’ve always kicked myself for not keeping a journal.

RV: Did you see a lot of that? Were guys doing that in the field?

TV: Yes. Some guys did. Not many, not even more than a few, but some guys did.

RV: Did you talk to them about why they were doing it?

TV: No. I would’ve thought it was just a foolish distraction from what was at hand is how I would have looked at it. It’s something to distract me from what I really need to be doing, which was looking out for myself. But in retrospect I’ve thought I could have done both and wished I had.

RV: What about when you got back to LZ Professional after this first long search-and-destroy mission? How long were you back there and what did you guys do?

TV: We got back on the hill and I believe went straight to stand-down.

RV: Which means what?
TV: They had helicopters, probably Chinooks, that picked us up and took us back to Chu Lai to a stand-down area. It was somewhere—I don’t know the base at all, but it was an area where they held stand-down and you could lock up your rifle and your rucksack and whatnot and then get showers and cleaned up and clean uniforms. I remember getting a haircut from a Vietnamese barber, who—every customer at the end got a little, it’s hard to describe, but he would do a little back massage with his hands cupped so it made a little kind of funny noise. But it would only last about ten seconds. Every customer got a haircut, which everybody looked alike. Everybody looked a little bit Vietnamese and then a ten-second back massage. You paid him whatever it was and the next guy sat down in the chair. But it was nice to get clean again. The stand-down was three days altogether. I’ve heard of people who had USO (United Service Organizations) shows, Filipino dancing girls, and bands and whatnot. I can’t recall seeing anything like that on our stand-down. We had hot food and tons of beer and everybody just sat around and got rip-roaring drunk.

RV: What kind of food did you have?
TV: Just regular Army food. The third day we had steak and eggs, I remember that. Funny how you remember something just out of the clear blue.

RV: It must’ve had an impression on you.
TV: It was tough steak and the eggs were from powdered eggs, but still it was good. It was, I guess, the Army’s way of trying to be good to everybody. You know, steak and eggs. Wow. Then back to LZ Professional again. When we got back there, we had a memorial service for the three KIAs (killed in action) we had on that last CA.

RV: How long did the stand-down last?
TV: Three days.

RV: Were you guys drinking pretty heavily all three days and just kind of letting loose?
TV: Actually, two days. The third day was getting our stuff together and getting resupplied and then going back to the field. But basically the first two days after the haircuts and all and some food, it was mainly drinking.

RV: Did you guys do this in the clubs or in some barracks, or where?
TV: Seems to me it was in the barracks. Because again, I don’t recall a show or any sort of entertainment. We might have had music or something, though. It might have been in a club. I can’t remember.

RV: Okay, okay.

TV: It sure was nice to get shower number two. That was the second shower. I counted them.

RV: Yeah, it sounds like it.

TV: Actually, as far as my tour went that was it, shower-wise.

RV: Really? Just two showers?

TV: Two showers.

RV: Wow. Okay, so tell me about two things. You go back and you have the memorial service. Tell me about that. Do you remember that?

TV: There was three helmets lined up and three rifles with bayonets lined up. I guess the bayonets were stuck in the ground. I can’t recall if the helmets were on top of the rifles or on the ground in front of them. I just can’t remember that. But there was a chaplain who said some nice words, and I remember the battalion commander got up and spoke. His name was Underhill, Colonel Underhill. Knew more about him later on too, but I remember he said something about all of us who survived had passed the trial of combat and survived it. Words to that effect and how proud of us he was and whatnot.

These folks that had gotten killed, I didn’t know any of them because they weren’t in my platoon, but I knew of them and felt the loss deeply.

RV: Because they were a member of your unit?

TV: Yes. Like brothers.

RV: What do you mean you felt the loss deeply? Is that an emotional loss? Is it a friendship?

TV: It’s an emotional loss. I think more to the point that it could have been me. I think that’s really being truthful. I think that’s really what the loss that’s felt, that one feels. But some of the people knew those guys very closely and were grieving a lot more than, say, I was who didn’t know them personally. So we felt bad for them too, for those folks, the folks who were grieving personally.
RV: How do you move forward after that? What do you do to yourself internally?

TV: Just focus on what you’ve got to do.

RV: Um-hm. How soon thereafter did you all go back out?

TV: I think probably we spent a few days, maybe a week, maybe four or five days on bunker duty. We stayed on LZ Professional for a few days, I think. That would have been, as long as you weren’t being mortar attacked, that would have been a lot better than having to hump. It gives you a little respite from having to carry that rucksack and all that exhaustion of humping out in the boonies. There’s a certain exposure walking around on top of a skinny little mountaintop [waiting for the first mortar round hit or for the base to come] under fire. But at that time I don’t recall receiving any fire at all.

RV: Can you tell me about mortar attacks? What is that like to undergo one of those out there in the bunkers on bunker duty?

TV: I don’t think I ever got mortar attacked. I can’t recall being mortar attacked when I was on Professional. It was hit by mortars a lot of times. We got mortared or attacked with mortars in the field a time or two. But mortars are unnerving because they are perfectly silent and the very first round is the biggest concern because until you hear the first explosion, you’re exposed, standing up. After the first round hits everybody would take cover if possible. But I was never on the LZ Pro when it was mortar attacked.

RV: So you guys are there for a couple of days and then you go back out?

TV: Walk back out. (Laughs)

RV: Is this the same thing over again?

TV: Same thing over again. Probably went a different direction. I can’t recall where we went, but I’m certain we just walked off the hill again.

RV: How does it feel? I mean how do you do that? Go right back out into something that was so stressful and, you know, took an emotional toll, you’re out there for a long time and could get killed?

TV: Well, we’ve got probably replacements now. I’ve gotten a few turns of point under my belt, so I probably have a little bit of—beginning to take on a little bit of
responsibility for training the new guys. Probably thinking about whether it’s my turn to
walk point or not. Probably spent a lot of time thinking about that.

RV: Tell me about the replacements. Not necessary these individuals
themselves, unless you can remember them, but how do you all treat and deal with
replacements? Especially when they are taking the place of your fallen comrades?

TV: Well, you’re probably leery of them at first until you see how they are going
to react and see how they’re going to deal with the situation. You’re probably a little bit
leery. But then again, they’re not expected to do much. Just don’t be stupid. You know,
don’t do something stupid. I do recall one new guy who—we were on a patrol at one
point and he was probably eighth or ninth in line. It was probably a squad patrol or it
would have been a big squad. He was probably eighth or ninth in line and tripped and his
M-16 went off and basically it was on automatic and he fired his entire magazine, all
eighteen rounds up beside everybody that was in front of him.

RV: Anybody get hurt?

TV: No. Nobody got hurt, but there were several people who really wanted to
brain him for it.

RV: What do you mean?

TV: I mean they wanted to physically punch him out, beat him up. Knowing that
wouldn’t serve any purpose, probably several of us might’ve cautioned against that. I’m
sure we did. But that’s the kind of thing that you had to worry about with the new guy
was being careless with a weapon. We spent a lot of time talking about or checking their
weapons to remind them to keep their weapon on safe.

RV: So tell me about this next mission. What do you remember from it?

TV: This must have been early April. I guess we started off doing the same
thing. Just patrolling, search-and-destroy missions, patrols, trying to find and trying to
encounter the enemy. I guess I recall a series of events that happened. I remember our
artillery forward observer was an officer, a first lieutenant. He was a really squared-away
guy and everybody liked him a lot. Pretty early, we broke into platoon-sized units and
we’re working and made contact with some enemy and having a firefight. He was trying
to call artillery in—probably exposed himself because he cared about what he did and
was shot and killed. I remember being very close physically when that happened, and the
medic said he was dead. We called in a MEDEVAC helicopter to take his body out. I was amazed that the chopper came in. Remember the fellow with the holy oil?

RV: Um-hm, yes.

TV: He and I carried the lieutenant’s body to the chopper. I remember somebody opened up on the chopper and some bullets were hitting the chopper and he dropped him. But then he came and got him and we got him on the bird and the bird waited, thankfully, until we got him on there and he took off. That obviously left a big impression on me because I remember it very well. I’m not sure about the chronology, though, whether it was early on or when it happened. But that was a big day.

RV: You don’t remember a whole lot about the incident itself or just remember carrying his body?

TV: It was just contact with a few soldiers. It wasn’t a large group, but enough to—we got down and had a firefight and exchanged fire. Generally whenever we’d get into a firefight we’d try to maneuver and call in artillery.

RV: When you maneuver, what do you mean? Go toward the enemy or around?

TV: Around them. Engage them from where we are and then send other people around to one side or the other.

RV: Flank them?

TV: Um-hm and definitely called artillery on them. That was a rough day.

RV: What do you do when you lose your lieutenant? I mean that’s—

TV: His position was he was an artillery officer. He wasn’t a member of Charlie Company. I wish I could remember his name, I just can’t remember it.

RV: How well did you all know him?

TV: I would have just said hello or maybe just shoot the shit and maybe swap a can of C-rations or something. He was an officer and I didn’t fraternize with officers, but I knew him well enough to know that he was—I liked him and he was well liked by everybody. He was good at calling artillery. He was actually assigned to the artillery unit and traveled with us and had a radio operator with him. He spoke the lingo to the artillery units very well and was trained very well in calling artillery, so we would get fast accurate artillery response from him. Charlie Company had broken up into platoons, like I said, and he came with us for some reason. I have no idea why. I’ve pondered that.
Wondered why he was with us instead of one of the other platoons or with the
headquarters group, but he was with us. The medic who tended to him told me that he
thought the lieutenant was killed by a BAR, fire from an enemy BAR, a Browning
Automatic Rifle.

RV: One of our old World War II types.

TV: Um-hm. I don’t know why he would think that, but this particular medic has
a fantastic memory and that’s what he thinks. So it probably is true. But I don’t recall
that. But I just remember the firefight and the fact he got hit trying to call artillery in
on us—in for us.

RV: Right. Tell me about your medic.

TV: His name is—wait a minute. Why would he have been with us? No, I just
contradicted myself. The medic who said that the fire was from a BAR was with the 3rd
Platoon, so he wasn’t with us that day. I remember several medics. All of them were
very, very brave. They had to expose themselves to help people. That didn’t happen
every day, but what did happen every day was they carried the pills for us, carried
hydrogen peroxide for us, bandages, and band-aids and stuff, humped foot powder.
Something as simple as that, but they’d carry all that crap and we didn’t have to carry it
and that was a big deal. Vitamins even—most of our medics had multi-vitamins of some
sort that they’d pass out just about every day. It just seemed like a good thing to have.
Now that I think about it, I’m curious about—the fellow from the 3rd Platoon, his name is
But I’m curious as to why he thinks it was BAR fire and I don’t believe he was there.

RV: You mentioned the bravery of the medics. Can you explain that? Was this
different from say, your bravery or someone else’s?

TV: No, no. I guess I saw it as being very brave because if we were in a
firefight, my attention, my focus was on trying to kill the enemy. But their attention was
on trying to, if somebody was hit, trying to help them. That was much more selfless in
my mind than just merely doing your duty. Yeah, they were important to us and we did
our best to look out for them.

RV: Would the enemy respect the fact that they were medics or marked as
medics? Would they still get shot at regularly?
TV: Oh, they get shot at quick as anybody.

RV: So the enemy didn’t care, didn’t regard that as far as your experience was concerned.

TV: Definitely not. I mean the medics on the ground weren’t marked in any way. Some of them didn’t carry rifles. Some of them were conscientious objectors, I think, and didn’t carry a weapon. Some did carry a weapon. The MEDEVAC helicopters, you know, the ones that were marked that were marked with a red cross and whatnot made a dandy target. The NVA or the VC would shoot at them as quick as any other helicopter. Somehow or another I know that the enemy placed a high value on downing a chopper. Anybody who downed a chopper was automatic hero of the nation and probably got a big medal. I know that there was no distinction between unarmed MEDEVAC helicopters and fully-armed troop helicopters or gunships.

RV: Tell me about the Dust-offs, the MEDEVAC helicopters. What were your experiences? What do you remember about that?

TV: Very often they came in when we were still in contact with the enemy. So they were very skillful pilots I think because they would come in and bounce that thing on the ground very hard. In other words, come in very hot. If things were hot enough, if there was enough fire, of course, they wouldn’t risk the helicopter and themselves. But if the risk was deemed acceptable and they were only getting sporadic fire, they might come in. Getting our wounded out was, I can’t think of the right word, but from the standpoint of your morale, I mean that was a wonderful thing to know that if you were hit you could be in a hospital back in Chu Lai very quickly. The fact that they would come in sometime when you were under fire and take a wounded or even a dead GI out was a very comforting thing. Sometimes, a supply chopper or the battalion commander’s C&C (command and control) chopper would also—both of those are armed helicopters—would act as MEDEVAC also if it could be there faster and quicker. So there were a number of different ways to get choppered off the battlefield.

RV: The most common was which?

TV: The most common was calling in a MEDEVAC and an actual helicopter with a medic on it would come in with a specific mission of picking that wounded person up and taking him back to the hospital.
RV: Tim, tell me about your fire support. You’ve mentioned this already, just
discussing your first major operation with the artillery and all that. Just talk to me about
what the Americans had going for them as far as fire support and then what you
experienced personally.

TV: The first level of fire support was artillery. On LZ Professional we had 105-
mm howitzers and also four-deuce mortars. We were almost always within range of
those and could get fire from them very quickly. There was also a larger artillery piece. I
just lost the name of it, 155-mm.

RV: Um-hm. That’s it.

TV: A bigger, heavier round at other bases. Probably there was a base at Tien
Phuoc and I think there was a 155 base near Tam Ky. Sometimes we would call and get
155 fire. We also had Huey gunships, which were Huey helicopters that had mini-guns
and rockets and sometimes automatic grenade launchers. All of which is just tremendous
firepower. The mini-gun especially is an awesome thing to see. The rockets can work in
very close, as can the automated M-79 launchers. The next step up was Cobra gunships.
They were a wonderful sight to see, very fast. They were armored so they could come in
screaming hot close and deliver mini-gun and rocket fire. Always loved to see and hear
the Cobras.

RV: It was a distinctive sound?

TV: The Huey has a distinctive sound, and the Cobra has an even more
distinctive sound. There was also a prop-driven gunship. If it came at night we called it
Puff the Magic Dragon. I never saw it used in the daytime, but if it was used in the
daytime it was called Spooky, I think.

RV: Um-hm. That’s right.

TV: But it was either a C-47 or a C-131. I think there was two versions.
Mounted with mini-guns on the left-hand side of the airplane and they would circle the
battlefield. Having been told where the enemy was, they would circle it like a NASCAR
driver does and just deliver tremendously withering fire on the battlefield.

RV: Did you all ever call those in? Did you see this?

TV: Oh, yeah.

RV: Can you describe it? I’ve heard it before, but I want to get your take on that.
TV: I always saw it at night and you could never see the airplane. Sometimes you could hear it a little bit. I mean you could hear it. You could hear the props, actually. The mini-guns would open up—I think there was probably three at once that would fire—and it would make a tremendous loud noise. From the distance we were from the aircraft it looked like just a tongue of fire that would come down and touch the ground and stay there for four or five seconds, or as long as they fired. Then it would stop at the airplane and you could watch the last tracers go to the ground, knowing that the tracers were every four rounds or so. For how many tracers you were seeing they were actually firing four times that many rounds. It was a tremendous high rate of bullets that they were shooting out. On one occasion, got a perspective of the mini-guns from Puff coming in, in front of us and I could see the bullets. From the side it looks like it’s all a nice straight line of bullets. But from the perspective of it coming more toward you, the bullets are going all kinds of directions. I guess the barrels are bore and the bullets are tumbling and going everywhere. I mean there’s a huge dispersal of those bullets where I thought they would be more focused in one area, they’re dispersed over a large area of ground. It’s very impressive.

RV: Sounds like it.

TV: I guess the top of the food chain for support was the Phantom. Probably other areas might have had different aircraft for support other than helicopters and the gunships, but the only jets I saw were Phantoms. I guess they were F-105s.

RV: What was it like for them to come in? I mean could you hear them coming, or they just would appear and go by?

TV: Well, first you would see a spotter. That was that little twin-tailed—we called them Felix I think, or Helix or something. There was a nickname for them. He would fly around and buzz around a little bit and probably being directed by us, he would fire a marker round where the enemy was suspected in the daytime. At night he would drop a string of parachute flares. Then at night it was really probably a tricky maneuver for those jets to come in that close. But in the daytime they would mark the targets and then get out of the way, and then the jets would come in usually in pairs and drop whatever ordnance they had. Well, I saw drag bombs, saw just regular high explosives bombs, probably thousand-pounders, maybe two-thousand-pounders. Tremendous effect.
Then the jets would also, in support of us, fly in with the 20-mm cannon. It was a large-bore mini-gun that fired an explosive round that when it hit the ground, or when it hit anything, it exploded. Very, very effective.

RV: That’s a hell of a lot of fire to have behind you.

TV: It truly is. Also napalm. Napalm when it’s on your side is some wonderful stuff. Back home, they were going after DuPont and picketing and carrying on, you know. I’d have been buying stock and patting them on the back because the napalm was very important to us. Actually, there is one more step up the food chain and that’s a B-52 strike.

RV: Right. I was going to ask you about that. Tell me what you saw and how these guys would operate.

TV: I only saw one B-52 strike. Saw the evidence of other strikes, I think where a huge area would just be obliterated. What had been thick jungle was just craters and dust and splinters of trees and stuff. But at some point during this CA that we’re on now, we were in an area where we were making contact, and we were told to clear out of this area by forced march.

RV: This was on the second combat assault off of Professional?

TV: Um-hm. Which would have been sometime in April. Again my chronologies are just a mess, but—

RV: That’s okay, Tim. You’re doing well and just do the best you can with this.

TV: We were in an area where we were making a lot of contact and seeing a lot of signs, I think. I think actually we had walked into a large NVA hospital area [that was part of an NVA base camp] that had been abandoned. It was a real spooky area, I recall. They built this thing in between steep-sided hills, at the base of two steep-sided hills, which made it hard to get artillery or bombs on it. It made it a shadowy dark area because the sun didn’t get to it. But we were in that area at that time and told that we had to very quickly get out of the area, had to move at least five kilometers. It was a tremendously hot day. I remember we had a number of heat casualties where guys just got too hot, crapped out, and had to be MEDEVAC’ed. It might’ve been more than five kilometers but that’s the number that comes to mind. We didn’t get there to that five kilometers until pretty well after dark. We were all just exhausted, just really wore out by
the heat and having to move so far so fast. I remember we got our positions assigned. It was dark so we didn’t necessarily dig a foxhole. We just ate our supper, blew up my air mattress, determined what the guard sequence would be and went to sleep. I remember being awakened by the ground moving underneath my air mattress. I opened my eyes and looked and there were all these flashes of light where we had been five kilometers on the other side of the mountain. It lit the whole sky up and I could feel the ground shaking and then you could hear the explosions last. To have been on the receiving end of that would be the most terrifying thing you can imagine.

RV: What did it sound like, and feel like, and what did you see?

TV: Knowing that you were all those miles away and still feeling the ground shake, I mean, feeling the ground move under your air mattress, it’s got to demoralize the enemy. Also the concussion of the bombs, the HE, high explosive bombs either from a Phantom or from a B-52, if you happened to be in a spider hole and don’t get blown up by it, the concussion and being down under the ground can kill you just as well as a direct hit. We’d find dead NVA soldiers from time to time that were just bleeding out their ears. Not a scratch on them and not hole in them or anything, just dead from the concussion. So knowing that they didn’t have that and we did was, damn, that was a good feeling. I can’t say I felt sorry for the enemy then.

RV: Um-hm, right. Let me ask you something that came to mind just a minute ago when you mentioned having to move those five klicks over so that the B-52s can hit. How does word come down the line to actually move out like that? Is it just passed man-to-man or platoon-to-platoon via radio and then to squad level? How does that happen when you’re out there in the field?

TV: I’m not a hundred percent certain, to be honest with you. But I think what happened in the case of this is the company commander gets the message and he calls his platoon leaders together and tells them if they are all together. If he has to radio them, he radios them and then they just pass the word down to the platoon sergeants and to the squad leaders. But we were probably working as a company, so they probably had a platoon leaders’ meeting where the platoon leaders all got together for a few minutes and he gave them the plan of, “Here’s where we’re going to go, this platoon is going to walk point, and here’s the order of march.” Then that’s disseminated on down. The platoon
leaders go back and talk to the platoon sergeants and then it goes to the squad leaders and
troops. By the time it gets to us it’s, “We’re moving out and we’ve got to go five klicks
and we’ve got to go in a hurry,” and that was basically it.

RV: How much bitching and moaning would there be? Or would there really be
none?

TV: None. No, none.

RV: You would just go?

TV: Knowing there was a B-52 strike coming.

RV: Sure. (Laughs) What about in general otherwise? Would you turn to
Sergeant G. and go, “Oh, come on, you’ve got to be kidding me. We’re going to go do
this?” Or would you all be, “Okay, let’s do it?” Or somewhere in between?

TV: Somewhere in between probably. Once in a while—I remember one day
somebody sent some ice out and I hadn’t seen ice in forever. We each had a chunk of
ice, and I was sitting down enjoying my ice and somebody come along, I don’t know who
it was, and said, “All right, we got to go on patrol.” Just a squad patrol or—yeah I think
it was just a squad but yeah, I’d be bitching. I had to leave my ice. Most of the time it
was—especially in the case of us getting out of the way of the B-52 strike. Which by the
way at night, that’s called Arc Light.

RV: That’s right. That’s what you saw and felt.

TV: Yes. That’s what it kind of looks like. Just like a welder. A giant, huge
welder way off in the distance.

RV: That’s an interesting description. What do you think the effect was on the
civilian population who were subject to these or were around these? You know, like you
were, kind of off in the distance? I mean pure civilians, the people who were not really
on the enemy’s side and not on the American side, just there farming and doing their
thing.

TV: Well, if it was real close to them, I mean, it would be terrifying. If it was on
their farmlands or whatnot where they were trying to cultivate, they would never grow
crops there again. But I think things like B-52 strikes were very selectively done. They
weren’t just done haphazardly. They were done where there was suspected to be a large
concentration of enemy. I only saw the one in my tour. But to see it, here you are a
Stone Age person and knowing that the good guys, as for whatever your perspective is—the Americans anyway have that kind of power has got to be daunting. Terrifying also.

For an enemy soldier, if they were underneath that or near that anywhere, that’s got to be just the most demoralizing thing that there is. Because they infiltrated all the way down from North Vietnam and got together as a group and maybe had a mission or something and then for that kind of fire to come at you is just—I don’t see how they did it. They were some very tough fighters.

RV: I do want to ask you to tell me about the enemy in detail and all of your impressions. Let me ask this first, how would you characterize Tim Vail’s attitude in the field at the time you were there?

TV: My attitude?

RV: Um-hm, yes. If someone was watching you, what would they see, do you think? This is looking back in 2005, looking back to 1969. What do you think they saw?

TV: I think they’d say, “He was a pretty good point-man.” I don’t know that they would see it or not, but the point-man’s determination, you know, my determination was that if I thought I’m for sure going to make contact going this way and I might not make contact going that way, we went that way every time. In other words, if we had to be aggressive and fight, we’d fight pretty damn hard. But my goal in life wasn’t to make contact with the enemy. My goal was more to survive. So if I could honorably avoid contact even, I’m sure I would.

RV: You said, honorably avoid contact. Explain that.

TV: I wouldn’t do anything dishonorable to do it. I can’t think of an example now that I said it, but—I can’t think of an example now to tell you, but what I meant was just as long as it wasn’t cowardly or foolish to avoid contact. If I could just avoid contact by making good decisions, that’s what I tried to do.

RV: Did you see others try to avoid contact in a not honorable way?

TV: Well, there were a couple cases similar to the guy who ended up in the fetal position. Not very often, but that would certainly be a dishonorable way to avoid contact. That is a good example. No, I would not do that. But I think most people felt sort of like I felt. There were some who were more aggressive who really wanted to go and kill these VC or kill NVA soldiers. Not very many, I don’t think, but there were some that just
really wanted to do that and lived each day to do that. But that wasn’t how I looked at it. I don’t think most of us did. I mean I think most of us knew that Nixon was elected to end the war. That the war was going to be ended. I think the way I looked at things was probably the way most people looked at things.

RV: Did you all have that in mind over there that you’ve got a president who’s elected who said he had a secret plan to end the war and that he was there to get us out? Was that in the back of your minds? Or was it in the front of your minds and discussed?

TV: I think we’d hear stuff about the—I’m not sure about this now, but I think there were peace talks even going on.

RV: Oh, yes. There were.

TV: I think we’d hear a little news about that once in a while and probably make derisive comments about the progress of it and whatnot.

RV: Do you remember anything, kind of the spirit of what was said about that? I mean were you thinking, “Don’t negotiate. Let us win.” Or were you thinking, “Yeah, negotiate,” and for whatever to happen?

TV: I didn’t see us being there to try to win. If we wanted to win that war, we’d have been in North Vietnam. We’d have invaded North Vietnam. I can’t honestly say that I felt that we were there to win because we were pulling out. The president’s motto was, “Peace with honor,” or something like that or something about ending the war with honor, which we didn’t do that either later on, to tell you the truth.

RV: We’ll have plenty of time to talk about that.

TV: Yeah. I don’t think that any of us thought that we were there to win by that time. I think we saw ourselves as part of this foreign policy thing against communism, but as far as winning the war, no.

RV: Well, let me ask you one more question before we end today’s session. You said that the folks there would probably describe you, your fellow soldiers would describe you as someone who did his job, did not try to seek contact when not necessary or when unnecessary. Would they see you as someone they could rely upon? That buddy beside them in the bunker who would take care of their back, no matter what? Or did they see you as someone who was more in it for himself? That is meant in the best spirit of the question because I’ve heard all kinds of descriptions from individuals about
their character and about how they were seen by their buddies. What would you say about that?

TV: I think I tried very hard, very hard to ensure that I was seen as somebody who was reliable, trustworthy, who would be there on their back, covering their back and expecting the same from them. So I think most of the people that I was in close contact with felt that way about me.

RV: Okay. Besides John Bernard, did you make any other really close friends over there? Was John with you on these operations initially?

TV: He was. He was a rifleman with me initially. [He] even walked some point. Then later on he became a gunner. But we still usually shared the same position at night if we could. I mean we’d get Sergeant G. to wrangle that for us just because we were buddies. You know, sometimes a machine gunner would have other duties and have to do other things. Later on—let me see, this is April. At this point, my squad leader had gotten a job in the rear. Lee Kaywork.

RV: Can you spell his last name?

TV: K-a-y-w-o-r-k.

RV: Was that on request by Lee or just rotated out?

TV: He had been in country probably at least six months or more and had seen a lot of combat as a squad leader. I think probably the opportunity arose and he had the seniority for it. But for whatever reason, I think his job was to help supply stuff. You know, for the unit in the field, for Charlie Company in the field. But he would also come out to 2nd Platoon from time to time and fill in when we were short of something. I mean short of a squad leader, I guess. But he wasn’t permanently back in the rear, but he came and went from time to time. Squad leaders seemed to come and go as well.

RV: Was that difficult for you all?

TV: No, not really. No. I don’t recall at this point getting a brand-new guy as a squad leader. Got one of those later on. But whoever took the role had plenty of time in the field and usually the most senior person would get the promotion or stand in as a squad leader.

RV: Did you ever do that?
TV: When we were very, very short on people at one point, I was an acting PFC squad leader of a very small squad. I was an acting squad leader as a PFC, and a very small squad. (Laughs)

RV: All right. (Laughs) Well, Tim, why don’t we stop for today? We’ve covered a lot of ground. We’ll continue the next time, okay?

TV: Okay. That sounds good.
Interview with Timothy Vail
Session 5 of 8
November 1, 2005

RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Tim Vail. Today is November 1, 2005 and it is approximately a little before two Eastern Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, again and Tim is again in Roanoke, Virginia. Tim, let’s continue where we left off and we were talking about some specific missions and some specific topics and I wanted to ask you a few more questions about some of these things. You mentioned forward air controllers and the role they played. Could you talk a little bit more about your experience or your unit’s experience with FACs and their importance, their role, and especially being out there over hostile territory in the type of plane they were flying?

TV: The forward air controllers and the airplanes, we didn’t routinely use jets for close support or for support. But when we did, it usually meant we were in pretty heavy contact, very close contact and needed heavy firepower in pretty close to us. The NVA soldiers would shoot at the spotter planes with their rifles as they were flying slow. Then they would also shoot the jets as they were coming in to make their bombing runs. Damndest thing in the world to hear some NVA soldier stand up and fire his AK-47 at a jet that’s getting ready to deliver a bomb on him. But that happened more than one time that I can recall. When we had jets for fire support, they were wonderful. Later on I saw those same folks set up a bombing run at night. It was in May of 1969 and you could hear the spotter plane flying around. He had been told where the targets were and he basically dropped a guiding trail of these parachute flares from some point up in the sky down towards the target that would guide the jet pilots to where they needed to release their bombs. In the dark, that had to be—I don’t know what kind of night-vision equipment they had on those planes, but I would think that the flares would probably make that useless. So they were relying on the location of the flares and probably control information from the spotter planes to fly in there low and drop a bomb in the middle of the night. It was an impressive thing to see. Brave people.

RV: They must be kind of a different sort. I’ve met quite a few of the FACs and they perform this vital role and they always downplay it. But you witnessed something
pretty interesting, I know, in watching these gentlemen. How often would you all call in
this kind of support? I mean not necessarily the fast movers, but the Cobras and Puff and
all of these things. I mean was this every time you made contact, would you, if you were
in range of the base call back for artillery support, or were there times when you did not?

TV: Each situation was basically different. Our usual support was artillery, when
we’d get sniper fire or we’d make contact. With an enemy that’s standing and fighting,
we would generally use artillery. I don’t have any idea for what the criteria was for when
we got jets and when we got gunships, but the gunships sure were the thing that I was
really happiest to see. They were just wonderful and just gave you a good feeling of all
that firepower going at the enemy. Only saw the Puff a couple of times. Maybe three or
four occasions and sometimes it was at long range where it would be working over an
area, it’d be pretty far. But how their time got allocated, how you got to get that kind of
support, I’m not sure. I just wasn’t a part of that and I don’t really have an understanding
of what it would take to get it.

RV: Let me ask you another question about something very vital in warfare, and
that’s logistics and supply. Tell me about your rating of the supply system that you all
had. Was it adequate for you and if so, why, and if not why?

TV: A couple times bad weather prevented us from getting resupplied when we
needed it. That was just something we had to deal with. Most of the time the resupply
was there when we needed it. Our normal meals were C-rations and if we needed water,
they would bring water. If you had to replace some gear, if you needed some new
magazines or parts for a weapon or maybe a new poncho, it would usually find its way to
you after a while. We also got—whenever C-rations were delivered, we usually got—oh,
what was it called? I just lost the name for it. It was a big bag of cigarettes, and toilet
paper, Hershey’s Tropical Chocolate Bars.

RV: Tropical chocolate bars?

TV: Which everybody griped about, but they didn’t melt as bad as regular
chocolate would and I usually got as many as I could carry just for the calories,
Hershey’s Tropical Chocolate Bars. They were kind of hard.

RV: I guess they were made differently just so they wouldn’t wither.
TV: Exactly. Yeah. They’d stuff pens, pencils, paper, usually envelopes, usually came in a big bag. There was a name for it but I can’t recall it now. Sorry about that. [It was called SP (sundry pak).]

RV: No, that’s okay. So did you all get this stuff as much as you needed it, or—I knew you had water problems. You talked about that, but what about just all the basic things like ammunition, change of clothes even?

TV: Clothes weren’t changed very often. I don’t know that anybody spent a lot of time griping about having holes in their uniform or how nasty and dirty it was. Everybody could see how bad our uniforms were, and generally everybody’s uniform was as bad. I mean the officers’ and everybody’s. It wasn’t a routine thing, it was a rarity to get new uniforms. They would just come out in a big duffel bag and they were used. By the time we were done with our uniforms, I couldn’t imagine that they were serviceable for anything other than a bonfire. They were just in tatters and rags.

RV: Did you all wear underwear in the field?

TV: No.

RV: Tell me why not.

TV: As soon as you get in the field you start getting what’s called crotch rot. It’s just a rash in your crotch and underwear makes that worse. I never even bothered with underwear because everybody told me right away that it just made the crotch rot worse. I did wear a T-shirt and actually kept my fatigue jacket in a plastic bag in my rucksack during the day and then hung the T-shirt up to dry and I wore the fatigue jacket at night.

The resupply came usually when we were starting to get low on food. It wasn’t necessarily every five days or every so many days. But it was on a routine basis when we would get it, depending on the circumstances and depending on where we were and if we had an LZ that was serviceable for it. But that was one of the jobs of the platoon leader, I think, or the company commander to plan that and schedule that. Generally, the C-rations came in cases. They would send a chopper in, kick the cases to the ground, and take off. The cases were divided amongst the platoons and then down to the squads. The way they were issued was you would turn the case over and open it up upside-down. Everybody would take C-rations out of the case without being able to tell what they were
going to get. Then, if circumstances permitted, everybody would start trading for their favorite.

RV: What was your favorite?

TV: I had different favorites. I went through different phases. I went through a phase for a while where I traded most of my regular food away for peanut butter and jelly and crackers. Then I got tired of that. Everybody liked peaches. Peaches and C-ration pound cake was the favorite dessert. You would basically open the C-ration pound cake, it just came in a green can, chunk it up a little bit with your plastic spoon, and then pour peaches on top of it. The peach juice would soak into the pound cake and that’s the way you ate it. Our favorite dessert. But I found that a lot of times I could trade my can of peaches for two cans of apricots. GIs have ribald or rude names for a lot of things, and apricots were called “fuzzy fuckers.” I don’t know why and I hate to use that kind of language on this tape, but that’s what they were called.

RV: Well, if that’s what it was, that’s what it was.

TV: I kind of liked the ham slices if I had a can of hickory-smoked cheese. You had to have a heat tab to make that particular meal, but you would chunk the ham slices all up and then boil a whole heat tab’s worth to boil as much of the liquid out of the ham as possible and then add the little can of hickory-smoked cheese, mix that up, and put it on crackers. Very tasty.

RV: Um-hm. Sounds like you guys had to be inventive, it sounds like.

TV: Oh, yeah. We would take an empty can, say that crackers or something came in, and make a little stove out of that. Put your heat tab down in that little stove and then the can you were going to heat sat on top. If you had heat tabs. Sometimes we didn’t have heat tabs.

RV: What would you do in that case?

TV: It was common to break open a chunk of C-4 explosive, which when you don’t detonate it, it doesn’t explode it just burns hot. Just break off a little piece to heat your meal. Once in a while we got LLRP (long life ration packet) rations. Those were dehydrated meals. It was a treat to get them, kind of a rare thing. Don’t really know how we got them or why we didn’t get them routinely, but the disadvantage was that you needed a lot of water to make it work. But they were freeze-dried dehydrated meals in a
bag that you added hot water to and let it sit for ten or fifteen minutes. The spaghetti and
the chili were both pretty good, and the scalloped potatoes weren’t bad, either.
RV: It sounds interesting you guys are eating scalloped potatoes and pound cake
over there in the middle of a war. But it was qualified because these were the MREs
(meal ready-to-eat) and the LLRP rations.
TV: No, no MREs then. Everything was in a can. Crackers were in a can, pound
cake in a can. One of the most disfavored meals was scrambled eggs.
RV: Why was that?
TV: They tasted terrible, they were green-looking, they were very dense and hard
to heat up. Everybody hated them.
RV: Nobody would trade for them?
TV: No. You couldn’t trade scrambled eggs for anything. There was a meal of
ham and lima beans.
RV: I’ve heard this, yes.
TV: I’ll say it. They were called “ham and motherfuckers.” Actually, I didn’t
mind them at all.
RV: Did most of the guys there not like them?
TV: Most people just don’t like lima beans, I guess. Or some people don’t. I
didn’t mind them at all.
RV: What other interesting names did you hear for the food?
TV: Oh, you’re putting me on the spot.
RV: I know. I’m sorry. You can think about that if you want to. If you decide
you don’t want to say, then that’s fine. But if something comes to mind, that would be
interesting.
TV: Well, it will be my luck that an eighteen-year-old lady is going to have to
transcribe this and listen to all this bad language.
RV: Well, yours is pretty tame, Tim, I’ll tell you, compared to some of the ones
we hear. You know, and it’s all real and that’s fine. The people who transcribe and the
researchers who will look at this and the folks who will read this hundreds of years from
now will understand that this was the lingo of the war when you all were there. I
probably could assure you that this lingo exists today and will exist for many, many years in warfare.

TV: Oh, I’m sure it does. I’m sure it does.

RV: Did you all need to use those kinds of names? I guess what I’m asking is, tell me about the use of humor and the use of entertaining yourselves in such a way to get through the times.

TV: Sometimes the humor was kind of dark, kind of black. We might talk about, very often talking about some guy named Jody stealing your girlfriend or your wife back home. That went on kind of constantly as a way to tease folks.

RV: You want to explain that, or just maybe give an example of what you all would say?

TV: Well, Jody was the name that was given to the guy that was dating your girlfriend or your wife or seeing your girlfriend or your wife while you were stuck over here and she was back there. Now, she might have been the most virtuous person in the world, but sometimes the guys would just invent suppositions about what was going on. Especially if a guy let it be known that it bothered him. People tend to pick at something like that. So if a guy would get a little upset about even mentioning the fact that his girlfriend might be unfaithful, he might hear it quite a bit. Just the way guys are sometimes.

RV: Did you all carry pictures of girlfriends or wives?

TV: Yes.

RV: What was your situation? You weren’t married. Did you have a girlfriend or someone you were corresponding with?

TV: I had met a girl just a couple days before I left, so we weren’t close. But I did write her every now and then and she did write me. But it was just a casual thing and it didn’t go anywhere, you know, the relationship didn’t go anywhere when I got home.

RV: Tell me more about the humor. What else would you all do?

TV: Well, talk about what the wife or girlfriend might do with your life insurance benefit. Somebody else would end up driving a bass boat with the proceeds of your death benefits, maybe. There were jokes about selling the farm, or buying the farm, I guess it
RV: What, the things you would do to each other?

TV: Yeah. Probably that was not a kind of comment that you would make to somebody that you were really buddies with. That was more the kind of comment that might be made between acquaintances, rather than people that shared a foxhole. Sometimes if circumstances permitted we played cards. Somebody in my squad had an Uno deck and we played Uno once in a while, and sometimes Whist or Hearts.

RV: When would you all have time to play cards?

TV: On bunker duty, in the field if we’re in a laager position and not on patrol, just sitting in front of a foxhole maybe for a few hours. You know, I think we would all know what the situation was. If it was dangerous, there wouldn’t be any card playing. But if it was a situation where there was no likely danger, we might break out the cards. I wasn’t much of a gambler, but there was a game called Tonk that probably relates to a better-known card game. But a lot of guys would play Tonk and gamble heavily. It wasn’t unusual for somebody to have a lot of money in MPC (military payment currency) in their pocket that they won gambling from somebody else. I sent all my money home.

RV: You did send all yours home?

TV: Um-hm. I kept just a couple dollars, which I never had an occasion to spend.

RV: So what about humor toward the enemy? Do you remember anything about that?

TV: Yeah, I think the names we used for the enemy and for the civilians were probably an attempt to dehumanize them a little bit so we didn’t feel so bad about having to shoot them, if you did. Not much humor about them. When we worked around the coast, we talked about the VC being Charlie and whatnot, or Victor Charles, or you know, a few names like that. But it wasn’t really a humorous thing. Less humorous even when we were encountering NVA soldiers. It was pretty serious business. Don’t recall people making light of them very often. Don’t recall a lot of humor there, Richard.

RV: Okay. Well, while we are on the subject, could you tell me about the enemy, about what your general impressions were? What you thought his strengths and
weaknesses were and some of the tactics that you saw. I know it differs with the Viet
Cong and the NVA, but if you could kind of touch on those things.

TV: Well, their strengths were that they could infiltrate in very small groups of
one or two through the jungle and survive. They could amass supplies in an area without
leaving much of a trace to get there. It was amazing to me that they could do those
things. It just took hard personal work, I’m sure. So they were tough people, physically
tough, physically capable of living in deprivation. All that made them very tough
soldiers. I think I may have mentioned before I had the impression that at times they
would be ordered into a spider hole, just a string of spider holes, as a blocking force
where whatever came through there to shoot at or to stop. They would stay there and the
only way to get them out was to go get them. I mean you had to kill them to get them
out. They were determined. The weaknesses were they didn’t have any air support.
They didn’t have much in the way of communications. I know they had radios, but I
don’t think they had the kind of command and control that would have really been
effective against an army like ours because if they used radios much we’d have found
them. We’d have had the technology to home in on them and greet their radio usage with
an artillery barrage. So their lack of technology, their lack of communications hurt them,
but their weapons were certainly good. AK-47 is a fine rifle. The RPG (rocket-propelled
grenade) can be very devastating. Those are the main weapons. Their hand grenades
weren’t much but didn’t have to be. If one landed near you and went off, it was going to
be plenty effective.

RV: What about their, you just mentioned this, their staying power? A lot of
people look back at this war and say that they simply outlasted the United States. Not
necessarily you guys, but just overall. What can you say about that kind of stamina over
years and years and taking the casualties that they did?

TV: Well, it’s a fact that they did. I believe that certainly their leadership drew
strength and more determination from our own media. You know, from the things that
people said and did in public. You know, the Jane Fonda kind of stuff, all the things that
happened on college campuses, I’m sure that sustained them. They probably had
political pressures to stop all this death and to stop their children from dying and they did
die in huge, huge numbers and I’m sure there was pressure to stop that. But I think what
they saw from us, you know our lack of determination, our lack of national will,
sustained them and urged them on. You can sort of see it today even.

RV: Um-hm. What common tactics would the Viet Cong use against you all?
TV: The Viet Cong? Sniper fire. They would jump up, shoot, and then run.

Didn’t encounter much in the way of Viet Cong, I don’t believe, except when we worked
out of LZ Baldy for the first thirty days. I’m sure they saw themselves as patriots, which
probably helped them in their determination. But they knew they were going to receive
this withering return fire, so it was a dangerous job being a Viet Cong soldier. They
didn’t travel in large enough groups to really engage us in any way other than just by
sniping.

RV: They used the booby traps. It was more hit and run and the NVA was
different, is that correct?
TV: Oh, yeah.

RV: Tell me about the NVA.
TV: They would come right at you and engage you and maneuver. They were
tough soldiers. Most of the time, they would be infiltrating in small groups and it wasn’t
as dangerous for us and it was very dangerous for them and fatal for them. But once they
would finally infiltrate and form up, then they could attack us. They had some significant
success with that on a couple of occasions.

RV: Why do you think they were willing to take the casualties they did?
TV: That’s an excellent question. Well, I don’t know. It’s hard for me to believe
that they have this tremendous love of motherland or fatherland, you know, like some
nationalities do. The other reason might be to obey or they know the consequence. In
other words, that their leadership dictated that if they don’t do what they had to do, they
would be perhaps killed. I haven’t really thought about that that much and I don’t really
know if the North Vietnamese had a tremendous nationality about their country. I’m sure
the leadership did, positive the leadership did. But it’s hard for me to believe that a
bunch of farmers would. Maybe they did.

RV: Did you all see NVA as a professional army as such, kind of trained and
working like you all?
TV: Oh, very much so. Yes. They had sapper battalions and people were trained just to infiltrate into fire bases and our camps and whatnot with explosive charges to blow up bunkers. Very dangerous folks. It was amazing how Vietnamese people in general could get through our wire, you know, our concertina wire. It took a lot of training and a lot of bravery to get near it and to try to get through it. They weren’t always successful. They weren’t supermen, but sometimes they could.

RV: Did you all ever run into any forces that were not Vietnamese in origin? Say any Pathet Lao from Laos or anybody from Cambodia? Or China, for that matter?

TV: Not that I know of. We felt a couple times we were working pretty close to Laos. I don’t really think we were. Laos wasn’t a tremendous distance away, but I don’t recall anybody ever having a feeling that we were dealing with any of those folks. There was a rumor amongst us that the NVA had a turncoat American. I guess he was thought as being a Marine, a turncoat American Marine with them. I’d heard rumors about that. That I don’t think was ever substantiated anyway. I don’t know if it was talk or if there is anything to it. But from my own personal observation, it was just a rumor.

RV: Let me ask you about something more personal, and that’s communication with home. You mentioned writing to this girl that you had met, but first tell me about getting mail in Vietnam and how it would happen for you all.

TV: Well, the mail would come with resupply. Getting mail was always a wonderful thing. Sending mail was an interesting process. All you had to do was write “free” on an envelope and put the address and it was good. I guess that’s free franking. But it was a nice benefit for the GIs not to have to mess with stamps and things. Getting the mail picked up was pretty easy to do because every door gunner on every Huey in Vietnam was thought of as a mailman. So anytime that a Huey came in, say to resupply, you could give your mail to the door gunner. Anytime you rode on a helicopter to make an assault you could give your mail to the door gunner and he would make sure it got mailed. It was kind of a neat system. It was just well thought of, or well appreciated that it was that easy to get your mail out. You could sort of handle it yourself. You didn’t have to go through the chain of command or your own people. You could just see that it got to the door gunner or give it to him yourself.

RV: What would you all write letters on?
TV: Just regular small stationery and envelopes. I can’t recall the name of the
supply bag that we would get that had candy and cigarettes and matches and all that sort
of stuff. But it came with C-rations and there was usually pens and envelopes and pads
of paper and whatnot and everybody had a waterproof bag in their rucksack where they
kept their pictures. I didn’t keep much from home.

RV: What did you keep?

TV: Very little, in case it got into the enemy’s hands in some manner. All the
letters that I got and most of the pictures that I got—well, the pictures I might keep, but
all the letters and things I destroyed in case my rucksack ever got lost and the enemy got
a hold of it.

RV: Do you regret that today or do you think you did the right thing?

TV: I wouldn’t have been able to get it home anyway, the way things worked out.

Plus, they would have been excess weight after a while.

RV: How much did you write your mother and father?

TV: Not enough. (Laughs)

RV: Is that your opinion or their opinion?

TV: That was their opinion. And my opinion.

RV: What about you?

TV: In my opinion, you know, I knew I didn’t. The thing was I didn’t know
what to say. You know once we got to LZ Professional, I certainly didn’t feel like telling
them about being engaged with the enemy and casualties and that sort of thing. I just
wouldn’t do that. I did write some letters to a friend of mine and he showed them to me
after I got home. He and I were high school buds, actually had been buds forever, and
one of my letters to him was just, “Here’s what’s going on.” The second one, I wrote it
as a travelogue. I can’t exactly remember what I said, but I told him some of the areas
and they were for the more adventurous types. I used sarcasm, “You might enjoy
dodging the booby traps here or low crawling here,” or something. By the third letter he
was, I guess, getting correspondence from the draft board and I told him if he got drafted
I’d come home and break his legs if he let himself get drafted. He needed to get in the
Navy or something. I reinforced that in my last letter that this was pretty tough business
and he didn’t want any part of it.
RV: Tim, do you remember any kind of censorship with your mail?
TV: Not a bit. Not coming or going, no. Of course, I never saw one of my letters—don’t recall ever seeing one of my letters. Yes, I do. The letters I wrote him.
No, I don’t think there was any censorship at all.
RV: Would you see a definite morale boost when the mail would come in? How would you all react? Even if you had just recently been in a firefight or you’re just simply exhausted, what would the letters and the contact from the United States do?
TV: The letters were a tremendous morale booster, speaking for myself at least. You could just see it amongst the guys. Everybody liked it. Also every now and then we’d get a care package from home of different things that might come in handy. I asked for a lot of Kool-Aid and things to put in water. Around the time of my birthday, my dad sent me some canned cocktails.

RV: Cocktails, as in drinks?
TV: As in drinks.
RV: Really?
TV: They were something new in Virginia and he found them, I guess. I don’t know, maybe he found them on a Navy base, but they were canned cocktails like a Manhattan. I can’t recall what kind, but got them while we were on Professional and really enjoyed them.

RV: Do you remember what kind they were?
TV: Oh—they were hot, I remember that. I think it was like a Manhattan or a—no I can’t remember. I think one of them was a Manhattan. It couldn’t have been like a rum and Coke because that just wouldn’t have worked.

RV: That’s pretty neat that he did that.
TV: Oh, yeah. I appreciated that.

RV: What other things did you get from home that were interesting? Or also the other guys, what did they get?

TV: I remember Charlie got a bottle of liquor one day, or maybe it was wine. He knew he couldn’t carry it, so he stood and drank it right away. I got a bottle of hot sauce that was really appreciated. Just helped spice up the food a little bit.

RV: Um-hm. Did you ask for that? Or did—
TV: I think I did. I don’t know. I don’t know if my mom or dad sent it or—I probably did because it was a small bottle and I told them whatever they sent had to be small and light. Whatever it was, I needed to be able to use it right away if it was heavy just because I couldn’t hump it.

RV: Right. What other interesting things did you see guys receive?

TV: I think I got a box of cookies one time that were totally crushed to just crumbs. But they were tasty crumbs.

RV: I was going to say, did you eat them?

TV: We ate them with spoons. I shared them with everybody and everybody scarfed them down. You’re right about one thing. To receive mail and to receive care packages was a big morale boost and I can see everybody’s face lighten up whenever we got them. I think in general, even though sometimes they were at a pretty good delay, most of the stuff got through.

RV: What was the lag time? Do you remember the delay?

TV: Going home, you know, going back to the world, not long at all. If you gave a letter to a door gunner, it would probably be received in the States in ten days or so.

RV: Wow.

TV: Maybe two weeks, but very quick. Coming back towards you, it got a lot slower. Packages took a while.

RV: The packages weren’t opened before you got them?

TV: I’m pretty sure they weren’t because probably my little canned cocktails—probably weren’t.

RV: They would have disappeared.

TV: Yeah. Charlie’s bottle of liquor would have surely gotten taken if somebody had looked in it. That might have happened but I don’t think it happened much.

RV: It sounds like you all just made an effort to make the best of things while you were in this very stressful situation.

TV: Very much so.

RV: Did you see it as a stressful situation? I guess that’s an obvious question, but were you conscious of it every day, or did you find yourself just kind of getting used to it?
TV: I think that we were all conscious of the fact that the combat was tons and tons of boredom. You know, days of just drudgery and boredom. More drudgery than anything, which isn’t necessarily boring. But we would go awhile without contact but then contact was always unexpected and always terribly stressful and terribly quick, on you right now, and that meant you had to be prepared for it constantly. There was very few times, unless you were on stand-down, where you didn’t have to worry about making some sort of contact. Some places were sometimes worse than others. But it was just always with you day after day after day.

RV: On that note, Tim, what would you characterize as your typical day? I know if on stand-down or back at base camp those were different, but out in the field what was your typical day?

TV: A typical day would be, rise at dawn—or might already be up if I’d been on guard—and fix something to eat, get my rucksack, pack up my air mattress, poncho and poncho liner if I’d used them, put my T-shirt back on, put some bug juice on, and get ready to move out. Generally, we would move from a night laager to a day laager position first. Wherever we were we would move as a company, stop, set up a day laager, and then generally run patrols out of there. Sometimes as a—usually as a platoon-sized patrol. Sometimes multiple platoons, even. Sometimes as small as just a squad. We’d be given different missions to accomplish different things.

RV: Which did you prefer? Operating as a squad, a platoon, or with the company?

TV: I think I preferred working as a platoon most. A squad was way too small. If you encountered NVA in any strength at all, you’d be in immediate trouble. For the most part, a platoon is a little bit small if you really hit something heavy, but that wasn’t a huge likelihood. A platoon could operate with some stealth that the full company can’t. The full company stretches out over a mile probably once it starts humping.

RV: That’s a lot of people. You all weren’t at full strength, though all the time, were you?

TV: Hardly ever.

RV: A company with full strength is 150. A platoon is what, forty-five or so, forty-five to fifty?
TV: I think our average strength was probably somewhere around seventy or eighty.

RV: For the full company?

TV: For the full company.

RV: Wow. Why was that? Do you know?

TV: A lot of coming and going. Don’t know the real reason. It was just people got sick, people got hurt, people got wounded. Every now and then people got killed. Some people after they had been there a while got cycled out for a job in the rear or something. There was a lot of things that happened. You know, a lot of reasons for people to come and go.

RV: But replacements really wouldn’t fill the bill basically? Wouldn’t fill you out?

TV: Not in numbers, no. We were always short-handed.

RV: So go ahead with the typical day. So you’d set up there in a position and then you’d run patrols out.

TV: Maybe a squad-sized patrol or maybe a platoon-sized patrol. Obviously, most of the time you don’t make contact. But sometimes you do. I’d have to say that making contact was a rarity as opposed to the day after day of normal activity. But if in fact we did make contact it was exciting.

RV: How far out would you go from this position? I mean, would you stay within a certain distance, or did you have a pre-planned walk set out, a patrol set out?

TV: Yeah, a pre-planned walk, generally.

RV: Of course, you weren’t making those decisions. You were told by Sergeant G. or the others, “Okay, let’s go. Let’s move out.” Or were you all briefed on it?

TV: Well, we usually had a briefing. Well, it depends on what we were doing. But if the platoon was going to make patrol, the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant were briefed. Then they would get together with the point squad and tell them what to do. It might be, “Go from here out to there and we’ll stop, and find a position, and set up an ambush,” Or it might be, “We’ll just make like a circle. We’ll leave the perimeter here at three o’clock and go out a ways and turn left and come back at twelve o’clock.” It might be just, “Go to the top of that hill there and set up for a while.”
RV: These were your typical tactics, basically? Get out, patrol, try to make contact, set an ambush.

TV: Um-hm.

RV: Was there anything else that would happen, as far as tactical? You mentioned certain formations that you would patrol in when you were out on missions.

The anvil.

TV: Oh, that was when from battalion level they’d get two companies involved. Basically one company would set up as a blocking force. Dig in, in a long line rather than a laager and be prepared to hold that if anything came through. So that might stretch over a pretty long area and then another company or companies would be making a sweep towards your general area from someplace else.

RV: How about on the platoon level in a single company or even a squad? I want to ask you about how you all actually set up an ambush. But if there’s anything else besides that, what else did you do?

TV: How we set up an ambush?

RV: Well, anything beyond that. I want you to describe that, but was there any other thing besides just simply patrolling that you would do? Would you set booby traps behind you, in front of you, to your side? Would you stop a platoon and send out a squad on recon?

TV: We weren’t allowed to set up booby traps. I don’t recall ever having a trip flare. I don’t recall us having trip flares, either. Some US units set booby traps out in front of their positions.

RV: But you guys did not?

TV: We weren’t allowed to do that.

RV: Really?

TV: In other words, they might booby trap a hand grenade or even a claymore mine with a trip wire. We were told not to do that, and frankly I’m damn glad that we didn’t. I would’ve not felt comfortable doing that.

RV: Tell me about why. Tell me about that because I’ve heard the opposite that when you would set up for the night you did put those trip wires out there and it was part of digging in.
TV: Too dangerous. Little tiny mistakes are what gets people killed. Just being
dead tired, sweat running off your face, and you’re setting a booby trap on a hand
grenade to me is just not a smart thing to do. We’ll get to digging in later on. But we
would at times, back to the humor, rig phony booby traps with cans and maybe bend a
sapling over and a trip wire and a notched stick to hold it, hoping to scare the hell out of
somebody, you know, a Viet Cong or NVA soldier that came along and tripped it. But as
far as a lethal booby trap, we couldn’t leave one. That would have just been foolish. As
far as setting one in front of your position, we didn’t do that and I’m glad because I
consider it just extremely, foolishly dangerous.

RV: Um-hm, okay. Well, a couple questions here, then. Take them in the order
that you want to address them. How did you set up an ambush and also how did you dig
in when you would set up for the evening?

TV: Ambush, usually we would be instructed to set up in a certain area. If it was
a trail, trails are good to ambush. We would look for some terrain above the ambush site.
We didn’t usually set claymores for ambushes. I’ve talked to folks who did that, but
normally we would just creep into an area as quietly as possible with making as little
disturbance as possible, and then just not dig any holes or anything, but just set up in a
line.

RV: Would this be company-, squad-, or platoon-sized typically?

TV: Squad size, typically. Never set up an ambush that I can remember bigger
than a squad or maybe a couple of squads. Typically just a squad.

RV: So when you say set up, you would basically get to the higher ground or off
the trail and then what?

TV: We would find a place with the edge, in an advantageous position where if
they were there, then we were—if they came along after we set up, they were in danger.
They were in a bad place where there was very little cover. We would pick an area
where there wasn’t a lot of cover where our fire would be the most effective.

RV: And wait?

TV: And wait.

RV: How often would you have the contact?

TV: Rare.
RV: How long would you wait? For hours and hours?
TV: Could be hours and hours, yeah. Maybe three or four hours. Could be several hours, yeah.
RV: What would you do with yourselves? Go ahead. If you have a thought, go ahead.
TV: I’d just sit and be quiet. I do remember one particular occasion where we finally had somebody walking through an ambush that we had set up for and some dumbass hollered at him instead of shooting.
RV: Hollered at the enemy?
TV: Yeah. Like dung lai. Like one of those things. Actually I don’t remember that as much as I wrote my friend that in one of those letters. I’m sure we weren’t really happy with that person because in a second an enemy could evade you, and this one apparently did.
RV: So he scared him off basically?
TV: He scared him off. I don’t know—actually, the more I think about it that might have been done on purpose.
RV: Really? By him, so you guys would not be in contact?
TV: Yeah. I call that going overboard. You know, that would have aggravated me. That would have pissed me off.
RV: Why?
TV: I mean, here is the chance to kill the enemy and that’s what I would’ve wanted to do. You know without putting ourselves at undue risk. Hollering certainly had to be the stupidest thing that anybody in the world would do. I do recall on one occasion we set up an ambush, we were on top of a hill and there was a trail a long ways away, too far away for small arms. So it wasn’t really an ambush as much as it was an observation post. We saw either a VC or an NVA soldier diddy-bopping down the trail and tried to shoot him with small arms at extreme range and didn’t hit him. That pissed us off.
RV: You wanted to get him.
TV: We wanted to get him because he was just diddy-bopping.
RV: Meaning he was just whistling, walking along?
TV: Yep.
RV: No worries in the world?
TV: Not a worry in the world. It happened to be the Burlington Trail. It was a hard-packed dirt trail raised on a berm and I guess my frustration was coupled by the fact that I had just broken my glasses.
RV: Oh, really? So you wore glasses in the field?
TV: Um-hm.
RV: Okay. You didn’t mention that before. How tough was that? Or frustrating, or no big deal?
TV: No big deal. My vision got a lot worse as I got older, but at the time I just needed it to see very finely at a long distance. The glasses themselves sometimes when the weather was, they would fog up that was a real problem. But generally it wasn’t a problem. It was just I had them and I wore them. But I broke them and I didn’t want to go on that patrol just because, “Hey, I don’t have any glasses. I can’t see.”
RV: Right. That’s a problem.
TV: So when we sprang that ambush, I wasn’t really able to chip in because I couldn’t even see the guy. Or, you know, nothing more than a blur out there. But those things happen.
RV: Okay. So the ambush was one tactic you all used. Do you think, Tim, there’s a misperception out there that the Viet Cong and NVA were the masters of the ambush and that they did it all the time and that you all were kind of the recipient of this? I’ve heard that, and you’re confirming, that you all set lots of ambushes as well.
TV: Oh, yeah. I think that we ambushed them much more than they ambushed us. The NVA was good at it. If they ambushed you, you were really ambushed. The Viet Cong typically didn’t, in my experience, didn’t ambush. They sniped. They would fire and run because they didn’t have enough people to affect an ambush. Every now and then we would have success.
RV: Right. So ways you dealt with the enemy—you had the ambush. What about digging in and setting up for the night or setting up a laager? How did that happen? What did you do?
TV: Generally, we would get in from the day position to a night position. If it was not fully dark by the time we stopped, we would just about always dig a foxhole. I
mean we would set up in a laager and again, if it wasn’t fully dark, we would dig a
foxhole. Most of the time I think that we got set up before it got dark, so most of the time
we did dig a foxhole. Sometimes the ground was hard as rock and the foxhole would just
be an indentation. But if the ground was workable—I don’t think anybody required
anybody to dig a foxhole. Some guys probably didn’t dig a foxhole. But I think most of
the time if it was dark, we wanted to have a place to fight where we were below the
ground. So we set claymores out every night, but they were command det. We would set
claymores in front of our position. I’m trying to think if we had—I just don’t recall ever
having trip flares.

RV: What was the shape of your position? Was it a circle or a semi-circle?

TV: Usually a circle. Usually a full circle, most of the time on the side of a ridge.

RV: Why that?

TV: It was safer to be on the side of a ridge than it was to be on the top of a ridge.

RV: Why?

TV: Because on the top it’s easier to get mortared. Easier to get spotted I think,
and easier to get mortared. Sometimes we would occupy the top of a ridge, but a lot of
times it would be a sub-ridge or the side of a ridge. Sometimes it was just an area
though. I mean it depends on the terrain we were in.

RV: Okay.

TV: So we would dig a foxhole, set claymores, clear fields of fire to make sure
that we could see out in front of us. Then decide the guard, depending on the number of
people and the number of hours, divide up how much time we would spend standing on
guard and how much time sleeping.

RV: What were the typical lengths of those two things?

TV: Oh, let’s see—I think most nights we’d have maybe—I need a calculator to
work this out. Most nights it seemed like we would have to pull two shifts, two guards.

RV: Okay, I don’t have a calculator. I have a way I can do that—

TV: I was kidding you.

RV: Okay. (Laughs)

TV: But it seems like we would [guard] maybe an hour and then sleep three, and
then an hour and sleep three, of course rotating. Generally what we did was if somebody
had a wristwatch with a luminous dial, we would pass it from guard to guard. One
interesting thing, when I first got to Vietnam I had a tendency to snore a little bit.

RV: Really?

TV: Nothing big time. But anybody who snored in the field was just gently
awoken immediately, or maybe not so gently. You can’t have somebody out there laying
there snoring when you’re trying to be quiet. What that does is it trains you after a
couple days to quit snoring.

RV: The more you’re woken up, you mean?

TV: Uh-huh, just in getting jabbed or hit or whatever it stopped. They wouldn’t
even holler at you, just jab you maybe. After a couple of days, you just stop snoring. At
least I did and didn’t snore for years after I got back.

RV: How important is it to be quiet?

TV: Oh, it’s tremendously important. A company isn’t real quiet, but once
everybody’s settled down, if you’re going to get attacked, if they can hear you or see you,
that’s going to make you stand out. That’s going to make you the point of attack.

RV: Do you remember any times when you had problems with people in your
unit not being quiet? Or not maintaining noise discipline?

TV: Actually, no. That kind of discipline would have been self-enforced by the
people around you.

RV: Took it seriously enough to do that.

TV: Yeah. We did have a case where somebody was stupid enough not to wake
the next guard up, just set the watch near him and went off to sleep and didn’t wake the
next guy up. At least that was what we all suspected. I can’t think of anything stupider
to do, but I believe that did happen.

RV: What happened to that guy?

TV: It was probably discussed in terms of, “I’ve never fallen asleep on guard,
ever once, which means that I wasn’t woken up. I really think I better be woken up next
time.” Just an implied threat of probably of group retaliation. In other words, “This is
not going to be tolerated.”

RV: You had multiple guards though, right? Around the circle?
TV: Each position had at least one person awake all night long. If we were looking for contact or expected contact, if they told us there was likely movement towards us, we might have more people awake, maybe two per position. I don’t think we were ever told that an attack was imminent, but in those circumstances everybody would have been awake. I don’t think we ever had that type of intelligence, either.

RV: On that note, what was your intelligence like? You’ve already talked about the fact that a lot of times you didn’t know where you were and you weren’t quite sure what you were going up against. You were just given some general information.

TV: I think in general the intelligence, whatever it was, wasn’t communicated down to the grunts. If you happened to work in a position where there was a radio, you probably knew a lot more about what was going on than if you didn’t have a radio in your position. Which I never had a radio in my position unless we were on patrol. Intelligence is something that they just didn’t trouble us with.

RV: Can you make any comments about sleep deprivation? How much of a factor was that for you and what did you see from others?

TV: I think that’s something to get used to. Guarding for an hour, or an hour-and-a-half, or two hours and then sleeping for two or three hours, and then getting woke up. That’s something you get used to. It takes a while, actually. When you first start, you feel tired. But I’m not really sure how sound you ever sleep in Vietnam. But it becomes at least restful where anytime you’re sleeping you wake up easy. You wake up instantly but get rest from it. I think your body adapts to it and you learn to get rest when you can. Sometimes you might get a little nap during the day even, under certain circumstances.

RV: Like if you all stopped and had a little time to eat or rest?

TV: Uh-huh. Just maybe for a few minutes. Might go fifteen and fifteen with your buddy, you know. If you’re going to be there for half an hour, let him sleep fifteen minutes and you sleep for fifteen minutes.

RV: Meaning one of you is going to watch the other’s back?

TV: Uh-huh.

RV: Even if you’re sitting there with your platoon?

TV: Yeah, in case the company commander came along or whatnot.
RV: I see. I see. (laughs)

TV: There’s more danger there than—

RV: I was just thinking that. Was that the imminent threat was the officer or commanding officer walking by, versus the Viet Cong popping up or the NVA?

TV: Yes. (laughs) Definitely.

RV: Tell me a little bit more about your resupply missions. I wonder if you would make the comment and discuss those subjects.

TV: A couple of things, there was two other types of resupply that we got. One we called hot A’s. I mentioned that it wasn’t very often. There was no frequency to it, no schedule to it, but every now and then, once every other week or so, we would get a hot meal in the field. Sometimes probably even oftener, but again not regular and not scheduled. But it sure was appreciated. It would be sent out to us in thermal cans, thermal metal coolers that would keep the food more or less hot. They would send out paper plates and things to eat off of, but it was more like mess hall chow than just eating the C-rations. So any change like that was a nice change.

RV: That must have been very welcome.

TV: It was. Sometimes the cooks would pour the dehydrated potatoes in the bottom of the thermos can and pour the hot water on top and forget to stir them, but other than that it was always appreciated. The other type of resupply we got was every now and then we would get two sodas and two beers. Got them more often when we were working out of the Baldy area, but every now and then, every few weeks maybe we would get that liquid refreshment. Which generally everybody would just use right on the spot just for the liquid. One of the things I did was I would trade a soda for two beers.

RV: What kind of sodas?

TV: Pepsis, Cokes, Dr. Pepper, that sort of thing.

RV: Um-hm, and what kind of beer?

TV: Budweiser, Miller in a can, Schlitz, just regular good old American beer. Of course it was hot. Most folks couldn’t choke down the hot beer, but they could slug down a hot soda. My interest was just in the amount of liquid involved. Not for the sake of it being a beer, but just to get the hydration. So I was usually able to trade one Coke
for two beers, which was good for me. The other thing that I didn’t mention was that when we did get resupplied, that they brought in hot A’s, the chopper would come in dump the hot A’s in or whatever it was bringing, would have to come back and pick those containers up later so we didn’t have to hump them around in the field. That kind of helicopter traffic was bound to give our position away to the enemy. Something I’m sure the company commanders were aware of. It’s hard to hide a rifle company. It’s not like we were totally stealthy out there. But depending on the terrain if we were in a very wooded area and had to cut an LZ, it’s likely that no one would know where we were until the choppers came in. I’m sure—you know, getting resupplied wasn’t an option. We had to have it. It kept us going, but it also affected how we operated and our tactics and strategies.

RV: How would you all react then? I mean, once the choppers came in would you then go, “Okay, we have to assume they know exactly where we are.” Then would you do anything differently?

TV: That thought came to me that it gave our position away, but I don’t recall dwelling on it unless there was a particular instance where we thought we had been stealthy and now we weren’t. But I think for most times it wasn’t on my level to think about. Probably the company commander had to worry about that as he was maneuvering the whole company. But it wasn’t the kind of thing that I would give a lot of thought to, other than being aware that people might know where we are and to increase one’s level of attentiveness.

RV: Okay. Also we had talked just briefly about, you mentioned the fact that it was a good thing that you did not have a wife and a child back home. Can you explain that?

TV: Thinking about it now and also how I felt back then, I was just tremendously relieved that I didn’t have the burden of worrying a wife and children.

RV: You were relieved back then? You had that thought back then?

TV: Yep. Definitely. I had that thought back then that I was just tremendously lucky and blessed that I didn’t have that to worry about. Out of all the things that I had to worry about, I didn’t have that to worry about and didn’t have my own personal family that had to go through that. You know, that period of not knowing if I was going to come
back or not. So for me it was lucky that I didn’t have a steady girlfriend or wife and just
made my life a little easier, less to worry about and think about.
RV: Um-hm. Looking back today you think the same thing?
TV: Yes. It had to be a tremendous burden to people that were married. It has to
be a tremendous burden for people who are in Iraq or Afghanistan and married. I
wouldn’t want to do that. I think it’s good to go to combat on your own, by yourself, as
much as one can be. I still had my parents and sister and friends involved, but having
one’s own family to worry about or to worry about you just makes life a little bit rougher.
RV: Okay, let me ask you a general question and think about your time in the
field off of base camp and also answer the question about base camp. Can you describe
the difference, I guess mentally, emotionally, and in a tactical-strategic way, the
difference between the daytime and the nighttime in Vietnam?
TV: I think strategically, emotionally, and every way possible we knew that we
owned the daytime and the Viet Cong and NVA soldiers had more of an edge at night.
That they were more likely to be successful maneuvering at night and that because of our
overwhelming advantage during the day that they would try to do things at night. They
would try to move, to infiltrate, to attack. So nighttime was a time of necessary
vigilance. It was certainly no time to ever let your guard down. I think I went from day
to day convincing myself, or reminding myself, I guess, to remain vigilant at night.
RV: So the saying is true that they did rule the night and we ruled the day?
TV: I think that’s fair to say. I know that we had some night vision equipment, I
mean the Army did. In fact, I think I even saw a Starlight scope demonstrated at one
time, but I never saw one in the field and I never saw one on the firebase. Probably they
were, we had them, but I never had benefit of it.
RV: Did you ever hear any talk or witness any incidents of fragging?
TV: The answer to that is no. Definitely not fragging. There was some self-
policing done amongst ourselves that might have involved a threat of violence if
somebody put the group at danger or put me at danger unnecessarily. But as far as the
connotation of fragging, which would be an attack on an officer I guess is how that’s
connoted.
RV: Yes.
TV: Heard about it but never nothing personally.

RV: Okay.

TV: I think there was no reason to. I think actually at one point probably somebody did take a shot at the battalion commander’s helicopter as it was firing on American troops.

RV: Oh, really? That’s my next question, friendly fire, what about that? I mean, that would fall into that.

TV: Well, actually, fragging I would look at as more premeditated.

RV: Oh, I’m talking about friendly fire, meaning Americans firing on Americans by mistake, or I guess in the case of someone firing on the battalion commander’s helicopter on purpose.

TV: I think probably the incidents of friendly fire in Vietnam were much higher than ever reported.

RV: Why do you think that is?

TV: Saw a lot of cases of people getting hurt by friendly fire and I think those go down as being wounded in combat. But short artillery round happens and sometimes things malfunction and people make mistakes. All that firepower coming in from gunships and all those things, mistakes happen. I think just in general my opinion is that there were a lot more friendly fire incidences of people getting hurt, wounded, killed than is acknowledged.

RV: Do you remember any specific examples where you saw that personally?

TV: Back on our attack on the NVA base camp after we crossed the river there were a couple of people being hit by fragments from rockets off the gunships. A couple people in the 3rd Platoon, I believe. The incident where the battalion commander’s command-and-control chopper fired on us is a part of a pretty involved story that we might want to talk about.

RV: Okay. I’d definitely love to hear that.

TV: That happened in May. I think probably we ought to chronologically wait and talk about that in May. There was an incidence in Charlie Company after I left the company where at least two people were killed by a short artillery round. It was a tragedy for everybody involved, including the people firing the artillery, the people
calling the artillery. I know it affected a lot of people. I had an incident that was almost
terrible case of friendly fire in April, walking point for the company again. In other
words, moving the whole company, and I wasn’t informed that where I was heading there
was American forces. I basically walked up on the back of another company that was
just stopped. Their rear guard was stopped, sitting down, shooting the shit, and I was
coming up behind him with my rifle on full automatic and I saw movement and put the
rifle to my shoulder but I didn’t fire. I guess I realized that what I was looking at was
actually GIs. It was a terrifying moment. If I had pulled the trigger, I’m sure I would
have hit four or five people. It would have ruined my life. It would have absolutely
devastated me and hurting those people or killing those people would have absolutely
ruined my life. It was because the company commander or my platoon leader didn’t tell
me that I was coming up on other Americans. I don’t know if he didn’t know or not. I
can’t really recall what happened after the incident. It was certainly very emotional. Gut
wrenching for me. I know I would have been very upset with anybody who put me in
that position.

RV: How did you resolve it? Did you try to communicate with them or did you
back away?

TV: I started hollering as soon as I recognized they were Americans. I started
to hollering at the top of my voice.

RV: What did you say? Do you remember?
TV: “GI! Friendlies here! Charlie Company!”
RV: “Turn around!”
TV: Yeah, “Turn around and look because you almost got wasted!”
RV: Wow. Do you remember what their reaction was?
TV: They were stunned because I was pretty close to them. I was maybe thirty,
forty yards. I’m not really sure of the distance but I was close and they didn’t hear me
coming. They didn’t hear actually all of Charlie Company coming even. But they were
stunned, I was stunned, and everybody was shocked. But also lucky.
RV: Yeah. It seems that having that many Americans in the field in such a small
country you’re going to have things like that happen.
TV: I think there’s no doubt, yeah. Some of it is just that you’re out there to break things and kill people and a lot of destructive power. Sometimes people make the wrong decisions under fire or when themselves are in danger. It just happens.

RV: Let me ask you one more general question and then we can go back to our chronological process. Did you see tension between those who were drafted, and those who enlisted voluntarily, and/or those who were kind of career military, either the sergeants or the officers? What did you see as far as tension was concerned?

TV: No tension in the field or in Vietnam. I don’t recall any tension at all there of that sort. When I got home, there was definite tension with career military folks and draftees. Especially if the career military had not been in combat and the draftees had. Saw that same kind of tension in basic training.

RV: Right. I remember you—

TV: Well, certainly the draftees weren’t combat veterans then, but just their way of dealing with draftees.

RV: So nothing really out in the field? What about back at base camp or even on stand-down?

TV: No. Everybody’s too busy having fun on stand-down to ever have any tension. I don’t think that’s the kind of thing that anybody worried about, at least from my perspective, from, you know, what I saw. Some of the lifers were damn good soldiers. I mean, they were experienced and if they had something to say, listen to them. The difference between draftees and just regular Army—I think probably some of the draftees weren’t as good of soldiers as they should have been. That might have caused some tension but it would have been the same tension that I felt towards them. If their conduct would put me in danger, it would also put a regular Army person in danger. So I think it wasn’t necessarily between regular Army and draftees, but rather between people who did what they were supposed to do and had to do and then people who didn’t. There was a minority that are just going to drag their feet. Especially of draftees who are going to drag their feet no matter what.

RV: Did you ever see any racial tension, or witness racial incidents, or experience them yourself?
TV: That’s a tough question. Racial tension definitely in training a time or two. Not a big deal but there was some tension a time or two in every training base I was at. Much better in the field in Vietnam. I mean the situation was much improved. There were a few. I guess I held the opinion that black soldiers were either the very best, the bravest, the brightest that we had or a very small minority the worst. There didn’t seem to be any mediocre black soldiers. They were, a lot of them just very skillful and brave and you were sure glad to have them there with you and then there were a few, a very small minority, that you wouldn’t trust.

RV: Do you have any examples?

TV: Well, my new guy, my FNG is an example of that. I really can’t think of any good examples. I think in the field everybody was too reliant on each other to have time for a lot of racial tension.

RV: Okay. Well, we reached, when we were going through your tour we had moved ourselves through your initial operations out of LZ Professional and I believe we had gotten to April 1969. I wondered if you could pick up with what your company was doing then.

TV: I recall a particularly bad day in April where we swept through a village and there were a number of people there. It had been a pretty big village, but we didn’t have any contact or whatnot. Stopped when we got through to the other side and just set up for the day to have lunch and did send some patrols out. On one of our patrols the point-man hit a Bouncing Betty mine and was killed. His name was Frank Flannoy.

RV: Frank Fennoy?

TV: Flannoy, F-l-a-n-n-o-y. He was in the 3rd Platoon of Charlie Company and—

RV: Did you know him well?

TV: I knew of him. I didn’t know him well. I knew him to see him walk point. You know I knew he was a point-man. That was just a blow to everybody. None of us were too happy to have a Bouncing Betty that close to a village. That meant that the villagers knew about it and didn’t say anything about it.

RV: What do you do with that emotion when you realized who it was that was killed? I mean how do you move past that?
TV: Well, what we did is we burnt the village down. I mean it wasn’t a My Lai or anything. Nobody was killed, but it was suggested and approved that burning this place down was a good thing to do. All the farm animals, I mean their pigs or chickens or goats or water buffalo or anything, the animals were all destroyed.

RV: How were they destroyed?

TV: Just with small arms. Just shot. Of course, the water buffalo would have been with a machine gun. They’re too big to tackle with an M-16.

RV: Were the villagers watching this? Did they see this happen? I mean obviously they’re going to see their village burn down, but—

TV: They didn’t. They just all left.

RV: When? When you started to burn it, or in the middle, or right after the Bouncing Betty, or—?

TV: No. They were there after the Bouncing Betty. At least some of them were. When we started burning the hooches, that’s when they left.

RV: Did anyone explain to them what was going on? Or did they kind of figure that out?

TV: Well, they knew what was going on. I mean they knew by our reaction that we weren’t happy with them.

RV: They knew, meaning they knew that your friend was killed?

TV: Yes.

RV: Okay.

TV: We felt that as close as this was to the ville, they had to know about it.

RV: How close are you talking?

TV: A hundred meters.

RV: Wow.

TV: It was very close. You know, from a trail that was on the edge of the village.

RV: What do you remember about what you did that day? This is stuff, Tim, we do not have to talk about if you don’t want to.

TV: Oh, no, no. Not at all. I helped cut a little LZ and popped smoke to bring the MEDEVAC in. I remember the MEDEVAC must have been really scared because he came in really fast and hot and bounced the helicopter on the ground. The fact that he hit
the ground and bounced it scared the hell out of me. There was no fire at all. There was no reason for him to come in that hot, but maybe he was a new guy. But we got him MEDEVAC’ed. I smoked back then, so I probably had a Zippo lighter. So I probably torched some hooches. I can’t recall shooting any animals but I’d have been glad to. If I saw one I would’ve. But I don’t recall—

RV: What about dogs and things like that? Or was it just farm animals?

TV: You hardly ever saw a dog or a cat in Vietnam. It was very rare. I’m not sure why. But very rare. If they’d have been there, they’d have been killed, too.

RV: How long did this take approximately?

TV: Probably twenty minutes, half an hour. We were just leaving the area and—yeah, maybe twenty minutes. They didn’t have that many animals. But, you know, we felt that they were definitely helping the enemy.

RV: Did you all interrogate the village leaders or anything like that? Was there any kind of communication with that crowd?

TV: I don’t think this village was actually, you know, had like a headman or anything. I think it was just some people that lived there. Again we were in a free-fire zone and there’s not supposed to be anybody there. You could tell that the village had been a lot larger. You know, hooches and all for a lot more people than were actually there. But I don’t recall any interrogation, especially after Frank was killed. The reaction was sort of from the gut.

RV: Was this a common occurrence for your company?

TV: No, it wasn’t. We’d had people hurt by booby traps and hit by RPGs and whatnot. Of course, we were very concerned about Bouncing Betties and knew all about them, but didn’t encounter them very often. But to have somebody killed in the field, it was a rough day. I remember a couple days after that we must’ve had a Kit Carson scout with us at the time because there was another area that there was actually a sign that said it was booby trapped, a sign in Vietnamese that there were booby traps around. So we were very, very diligent and scared and concerned of where you put your feet. I remember we stopped during the day in an old, in a used laager position to get paid. They sent a payroll officer out and we were reporting to this payroll officer and getting paid and I don’t know if it was VC or NVA, but there was a firefight started. Probably I
think it was a patrol outside the village had some contact. Anyway, a pretty good
firefight commenced and we didn’t take any casualties in the firefight that I recall. But
the fight meant that we had artillery coming in on enemy positions and there was some
shooting going on. So people were low-crawling around the area and somebody spotted
one of those detonators buried under blue plastic. One of those three-tipped detonators
that usually indicated some kind of mine and it was big. It was bigger than usual. So we
called out the explosive ordnance disposal people and they said, “Yeah, it looks like it’s a
mine.” So they put a charge next to it and told all of us to take cover. I remember being
real concerned about more booby traps. I took my helmet off and threw it down in the
bottom of a used foxhole a couple of times to make sure that there was nothing down
there and got down in this foxhole. There was a couple guys leaning up against the bank,
just laid back, kind of relaxing and getting a kick out of me hiding in the foxhole. We
heard the holler of, “Fire in the hole!” There was an explosion and then a secondary
explosion. Not real big, but we looked up in the air and saw these huge canisters. They
weren’t five feet in the air, they were fifty feet in the air and huge. I mean you could see
them. These two guys that were laid back, both thought it was the biggest Bouncing
Betty of all time. They picked their rifles up and ran outside the perimeter into the
jungle. What happened then was the canisters hit the ground and started spewing smoke.
What this was was a dud 105-mm smoke round. It hit the ground and somebody booby-
trapped it with a charge to make it go off. Our EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) guys
set it off, it blew it up in the air, and the smoke canisters went off and put smoke
everywhere. But these two guys ran into the woods outside of our laager and hit another
booby trap. It was a homemade [device] piece of bamboo I think, filled with explosives.
Both of them were wounded by the homemade booby trap. It was all happening in the
matter of a few seconds. It was a remarkable coincidence. A remarkable series of
events.

RV: You watched all of this happen?

TV: I was right there. That one stuck with me because I thought the same thing.
You know, I was down in my foxhole looking up and saw those canisters and I thought it
was—I mean they were really big. You know bigger than a coffee can. Bigger than a
two-pound coffee can. I thought this was going to be the granddaddy Bouncing Betty
that there ever was. So it was a little bit funny, but it was also tragic for those two guys that got hit.

RV: What happened to them? How bad were they injured?

TV: They were wounded. There weren’t mortal wounds, thank God, but very painful. Pieces of bamboo driven into your skin is the kind of thing that could cause infection and problems and scars. So their decision to kick back and then jump up and run out of the perimeter is probably with both of them to this day.

RV: I mean was that a foolish thing to do on their part or was it normal?

TV: That was totally foolish. I couldn’t believe it. I had seen the detonator and knew it was there. Didn’t know what it was but I knew it was real. That’s why when the EOD guys were talking about taking cover, I was serious about taking cover. But apparently they didn’t believe it or weren’t concerned. They had a little bank of dirt in between them and maybe fifty yards between them and where the explosion was going to be. But a bad decision.

RV: Yes. What did you do with that emotionally, Tim? I mean, then and now.

TV: Well, I don’t think and don’t think today that their bad decisions had much impact on me. Other than I hate to see it happen. Actually, they were kind of denigrating me for being overly cautious. Making fun of me, I guess.

RV: Right. When you got down into the bunker.

TV: Well, when I was throwing my helmet, my steel pot, down into the foxhole a couple times. I basically flung it and then cast my body aside so in case I hit something it wouldn’t blow my arm off and then reached in there and grabbed it and tried it again. It was a shallow foxhole. But at the time I thought that was just proper care to take. Their decision to be cavalier about things—well, it’s probably remarkable how many cavalier decisions ended in people getting hurt. You know when people decide to let their guard down, to relax, that’s when things happen and bad things happen. I guess that’s a good example of it.

RV: How soon after the village incident was this?

TV: Probably a day or two.

RV: Wow.
TV: But we were in an area where we knew there were a lot of booby traps. At least I think it was a day or two after that. You know, my chronology is really suspect. My memory of the order of things is of real concern to me. But as I recall that’s when it was.

RV: But you remember this incident very clearly?

TV: Oh, that incident very, very clearly. From having to low-crawl over to the payroll officer, to bringing those EOD guys out, to the final result.

RV: So how do you guys move on past that? I mean, you just call in the Dustoff, and get them out of there, and keep going?

TV: Just so, exactly. We had to get the payroll officer and the EOD guys out, plus the Dustoff for the wounded. The patrol that was out had to settle that firefight. Again, that was probably a sniper that was just taking a few shots at us. Then we picked up and moved, and glad to be out of that area. Glad to keep moving out of that area.

RV: Let me ask you this general question and we’ve touched on it, how do you deal with death being around you all the time every day? Either actually seeing it from your own fellow soldiers, your buddies, to the enemy, and/or the potential of death just hanging in the air with you. How do you deal with that? How do you function within that kind of atmosphere?

TV: That’s a really excellent question. That’s a tough question to answer. You know, some things are just really hard to turn loose of and I don’t know that I can. But on the one hand, it’s not like you’re given a lot of choices. In other words, an option to curl up in a fetal position just isn’t there. You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. You never get used to it. I mean, even just finding dead enemy soldiers. It’s something you never get used to. But I think down deep all of us every time that there’s a death we’re glad it’s not us. I think that’s how you have to look at it.

RV: Okay. So what happened after this incident with these booby traps?

TV: Again I’m not sure about my chronology, but I recall somewhere in this time period the 2nd Platoon was on point. I wasn’t on point that day. My squad wasn’t on point and I wasn’t on point. But we were in very thick jungle on the side of a mountain. We found a huge weapons cache in a hooch that had been built right in the middle of the jungle. It was very unusual to find a hooch in thick jungle like that. No trails around.
Amazing to me that the NVA could get all that stuff into that cache without making trails
and leaving a lot of evidence, but somehow or another they did. There was dozens and
dozens of brand new rifles, brand new ChiCom (Chinese Communist) SKS rifles.
Enough where, my recollection is that we had enough weapons that we sent them on up
to the battalion commander and the battalion XO. The company commander got one and
the first sergeant and people in the rear. Then basically everybody in [the 2nd Platoon]
got one and probably still had a few left over. There were also case after case after case
of RPGs, case after case—hundreds and hundreds of ChiCom grenades, cases of plastic
explosive. It was a huge cache of weapons. Probably some AK-47s, although I don’t
recall them. I recall the SKSSs were brand-new, still wrapped in Cosmoline. They had
never been fired. Had their Cosmoline cleaned up to—Cosmoline is the grease that the
manufacturer packs it in to keep it from rusting when it’s shipped from the factory.

RV: Right. Do you know how to spell that?
TV: C-o-s-m-o-l-i-n-e, Cosmoline. They were beautiful weapons. They had a
cherry wood stock and had a retractable three-sided bayonet. I guess it was a 7.62
chamber, which means that an M-14’s ammunition would have worked in it. But most
importantly it wasn’t automatic. It was semi-automatic. Or actually bolt-operated, I
believe. I could have brought it home. That’s how we all got awarded one. We cut an
LZ down in a flat area a couple hundred yards from the hooch. Well, first we set up
around the hooch because it was getting late in the day and laagered there that night. The
next morning we went down the hill, cut an LZ, and the battalion sent helicopters out to
haul off all the rifles and to bring the explosive ordnance folks out, the EOD, explosive
ordinance disposal people. What they did was, and they’re used to handling all that stuff,
they packed all the RPGs and the hand grenades and the explosives and there was small
arms ammunition, all that stuff they packed in our foxholes and covered them with
boards. They brought the boards out with them, and then tied them all together with
detonators, and then covered each of them up with dirt. So basically, most of the
foxholes in our perimeter were full or half-full of explosives and tied together. They told
Charlie Company to go up the hill about a thousand meters, which we did. Then on the
radio we heard, “Fire in the hole,” and we hunkered down behind trees and stuff. Not a
whole lot of humor in Vietnam, but the EOD guys came running up the trail we had made

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and they said, “We said, we told you a thousand meters.” They stopped and we said, “This is thousand meters.” They said, “It isn’t far enough,” and they kept running. Just after they had gone a few steps, I recall looking at a tree—I was just looking at a tree and this tree started shaking violently, and there was a huge explosion. Everybody got down under their helmet the best they could because, I mean, this explosion just rattled our teeth. If you were standing it would’ve knocked you to the ground. There was a shower of dirt, rocks, and twigs and stuff, and branches, but nothing serious and nobody was hurt. But the comments from the EOD guys later on were seen as funny. At the moment it wasn’t funny at all.

RV: So quite a large explosion?

TV: A tremendous explosion. We walked back down to our positions, you know, our old position where the cache was, and what had been very thick, dense jungle was now a huge crater, maybe forty to fifty feet deep and the size of our laager. Just a big circle. Except for being a crater, you could have played football there. All the trees, everything was gone. Just a huge crater that quick.

RV: That must have really dealt a serious blow to the enemy that they lost all of that pre-positioned equipment.

TV: That was a tremendous blow to them. Had to be because it took a tremendous amount of effort on their part to carry that stuff all the way from North Vietnam. It was amazing to me that they could do it and have it all there. It was fortunate for us that we found it. I don’t recall it being made a big deal out of by anybody, but I think the folks in the Americal tend to not make a big deal about stuff. Just part of what we were doing. It had to be a huge blow to them and it was good for our morale. We knew that all those weapons and all that explosive and all those RPGs and stuff wouldn’t be used against us.

RV: That was considered a good day then?

TV: That was a great day.

RV: What would constitute a good day in Vietnam?

TV: Of course, no contact, plenty of water, maybe being up on top of a mountain or way high where it was a little cooler and not having to move too far. Had to move
because you couldn’t stay in one place long. But that would be a good day, not having to
move too far, being up high, having plenty of water, and not making contact.

RV: What was a bad day?

TV: Somebody got hurt or worse. Or having to hump a long ways, you know, in
the heat, or running out of water. I mean just the opposite of the good things are the bad
things.

RV: Um-hm, okay. So after you blow up the weapons cache, you guys move on.

What other incidents do you remember? This is I guess, are we into May now?

TV: No, we’re—(coughs). Almost. One incident I recall was we were headed
back to LZ Professional. Excuse me a second.

RV: Sure.

TV: (Coughs) Headed back to the LZ and the company commander wanted us to
clean up a little bit because we were so scroungy looking. We found a river that we
could set up security around and we basically took turns bathing in the river getting all
cleaned up and shaving, washing our uniforms. Anyway it was really great to be able to
get clean and wash some of the grunge off and wash our uniforms even. One interesting
thing happened, and you probably read about it in the questionnaire, but we brought a
chopper in to get some resupply and a lot of our clothes were laying on the rocks getting
dry and were blown back into the river by the downwash of the chopper.

RV: Yeah, I remember reading that. I’m sure you all weren’t happy.

TV: Well, you know, we should have seen the chopper coming and we should
have grabbed a hold of our stuff in time. As it was, all of us just about, except for one
fellow, were able to get back into the river and swim around and find our stuff and match
up whose was what. Except for one guy who couldn’t find either part of his uniform.

RV: Oh, no.

TV: He ended up—I recall him standing there on the bank with a helmet and
boots and nothing else. What made it even a little more humorous was everybody was
pretty unconcerned about it except for him. He was really very, very concerned about
having a uniform. He was getting a little kidded about it and they were talking about,
“Well, it’s about time to pack up and get on out of here.” He was nearing, I guess, a
panic position, when somebody pulled a fresh uniform out of their rucksack. Which the
fact that they were carrying a fresh uniform was just amazing to me. You know, just
having the weight of it. The fact that he had it and was willing to donate it to this poor
fellow was a good thing and everything ended well.

RV: That’s funny.

TV: It was very humorous. It was a good day because we were acting like a
bunch of college kids and had a situation where we were pretty secure where we were.

Then the final upshot for our nudist GI was that it ended well.

RV: Tim, why don’t we go ahead and stop today?

TV: Okay.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am conducting an oral history interview with Tim Vail. We’re continuing today on November 16, 2005. I’m again in Lubbock and Tim is in Roanoke, Virginia. Tim there were a couple of things that we talked about before we began recording and that you had gone back in the past couple of weeks and read some letters and thought about some of the things we talked about. I know you wanted to clarify a few things. So you told me that you had some good details on your time there at LZ Baldy and when you were in the bunker and you had some contact with Vietnamese kids. Can you tell me about that?

TV: I sure do. I remember I discussed it in just very general terms of trading some stuff for something or other, and I went back and read a letter that I was writing while we were sitting in the bunker that day. Apparently some kids came up to the wire and had twelve assorted batteries, two M-16 magazines that were empty, and a dud 81-mm mortar round. It cost thirty cents and a pack of cigarettes.

RV: Wow, and they gave everything to you?

TV: They gave us that stuff and we gave them, you know, we’d have given them the cigarettes and the C-rations probably anyway. They used cigarettes like money, I’m sure. It was good I guess to get a little bit of that stuff out of circulation and help those kids out a little bit, too.

RV: Sure. That’s interesting. Were they nervous to approach you all or was it easy for them?

TV: No, they came right up hollering, “Hey, GI!” They weren’t scared. It was broad daylight and I was a little bit nervous. I remember we were nervous looking at that mortar round just because it’s a dangerous thing to be toting around. They carried it as if it was nothing.

RV: Wow.

TV: I’m sure others weren’t quite so lucky. Picking up dud mortar rounds could be a very dangerous thing.
RV: Yes. Tell me about the children there. I’ve heard a lot of stories about interactions with the kids of Vietnam, the civilian kids. What can you tell me about that?

TV: Lots of kids when we were working out of LZ Baldy and in that area there, they were generally looking to get cigarettes and C-rations. Sometimes they were wounded or whatnot or had scars. They might show the stub of an arm or whatnot and ask for food or cigarettes for their parents I guess, or for themselves. Don’t ever recall any problem of a kid shooting at us. None of that had happened but there were still worries of that. Some of the Viet Cong were very, very young. Even some of the Vietnamese men looked small, you know, they’re very short in stature.

RV: Was there any confusing the kids with the Viet Cong? I mean, were you always thinking this when you saw somebody maybe of age or who could be considered of age for the VC?

TV: I think anybody could be considered of age unless they’re smiling at you. So I think the first thing when you see somebody is to determine what’s in their hands and what their attitude towards you is. If a kid is waving and smiling, that’s going to put you at ease a lot faster than if they turn and run or if they had something in their hands like a stick or something.

RV: I can imagine that you have to really pay attention to that. Tell me about—you said you could not remember the name of the supply pack, the special supply pack that came in and you did remember that.

TV: Sometimes it was in a plastic bag. It would be cigarettes, and those chocolate bars, and candies, and razors, and razor blades, writing materials, and stuff. Sometimes they came in a box and it was called an SP. I don’t know what SP stands for. But I just couldn’t recall that name and sat and pondered it one night and it came to me. We always looked forward to SP. I did because of those Hershey’s Tropical Chocolate Bars.

RV: Right. The ones that wouldn’t whither in the humidity.

TV: In any heat they stood up.

RV: Okay. Tell me about the, I guess clarification on—we talked about the blown ambush.
TV: I related an account that I really don’t have a huge personal recollection of but that I was recalling to you from the letter I had written to a friend of mine. I recalled it—I related it to you incorrectly. It really was not an ambush at all. It was our point-man. This would have been the end of March, working out around LZ Professional. Our point-man was from the 2nd Platoon and walked up on six NVA soldiers who were eating lunch. They had rice bowls. Instead of opening fire immediately, he started hollering at them and they dropped their rice bowls and got up and ran.

RV: Do you remember what he said to them or what you heard?

TV: I think he was shouting the—whenever we worked around Baldy and we saw a suspect, we weren’t allowed to shoot. We were supposed to say, dung lai, “Stop.” That would be to a civilian, to anybody. These were NVA soldiers in uniforms and I think it was just a huge—I think a war is a comedy of errors sometimes and this was just a huge blunder on his part. But I remember being pretty unhappy with him, especially in my letter back to my friend at home that he had this opportunity to kill six soldiers and it didn’t happen. I also told him that I thought I would have been walking point that day except for I had broken my glasses. So as I mentioned earlier, my recollection of the chronology of things is in error, is bound to be in error because I was thinking that I had broken my glasses much later.

RV: Right. Was it troublesome in a way to have the glasses in the field?

TV: Oh, yeah, definitely. Well, it was on real humid days. If it was real steamy and humid like in the morning, sometimes they would fog up and I didn’t have any anti-fogging material and I’d stop and wipe them off. That wasn’t a good thing.

RV: Did you—I’m sorry, go ahead.

TV: I had pretty good vision. I was probably vain about wearing the glasses, but to do something like walk point or to fire the rifle I would definitely need my glasses to see what I was doing.

RV: Right, right. I imagine they wouldn’t either let you or wouldn’t be very happy or comfortable with you walking point with no glasses.

TV: I’m sure I would have not walked point with no glasses.

RV: Yeah, yeah.

TV: They wouldn’t have wanted me up there anyway without glasses.
RV: Right. When you all—after this incident with your point-man, what did you—how did you confront him?

TV: Richard, I don’t remember confronting him at all. It probably wouldn’t have been my place to do that. His squad leader or his platoon sergeant may have but I don’t know and I don’t know if there was any repercussion to him or if he was disciplined in any way or talked to in any way. I just don’t recall. I don’t have any recollection of that. I did mention in my letter to my friend that we captured two enemy mortar tubes, three base plates, a tripod and aiming device for the mortar, and four AK-47 rifles.

RV: What did you do with these supplies?

TV: We would have called in a chopper from our base. It might have even been the battalion commander’s C&C (command and control) chopper to come and take those back out and they would’ve just took them back to Chu Lai—or maybe to Professional and then on to Chu Lai. I have no idea what they did with them.

RV: How often did you come across things like that in the field? Or I guess you would uncover them sometimes in villages or, you know, buried. But how often did this kind of thing happen?

TV: About as often as we would make contact and usually if we made contact we’d end up recovering a weapon or two. The last session, we talked about the huge weapons cache that 2nd Platoon found, all those rifles and hundreds and hundreds of pounds of explosives. So I mean that was many, many opportunities all rolled into one there.

RV: Right.

TV: Sometimes we would make contact and not recover anything, but generally whenever we’d make contact with the enemy we would recover their weapons.

RV: What type of weapons were they using? Was it usually the AK?

TV: Usually the AK. The AK, we were told we couldn’t take it home as a souvenir because it’s an automatic weapon. So they were all just sent back and I have no idea where they went. But a weapon that was semi-automatic, if we captured it we could claim it as a prize and hopefully reserve it and take it home.

RV: Any other surprising weapons or interesting weapons you remember seeing, encountering either on the receiving end or recovering?
TV: I remember for a few days, probably in early—it would have been after we came back from the stand-down—being on bunker duty on LZ Professional. Every afternoon, just three or four in the afternoon, a solitary jet would come in the AO and fly around and just sort of circle the area for five or ten minutes and then drop a huge bomb somewhere. I don’t know what was directing him, I don’t know why he was doing that. But it was great fun to see him coming and it seemed like he did it every day for three or four days. Almost like clockwork. It must have been—oh, I don’t know how big bombs are but it was some sort of bunker-buster type bomb even then. You know, much bigger than the normal. I think the normal HE explosive from a jet was a thousand-pound bomb and this had to be five times that.

RV: Was it one of the Daisy Cutters that the—I think they were five-thousand-pound bombs?

TV: I don’t think so. I don’t think it was that big. That would be an air burst type bomb, I think.

RV: Well those actually would bury down into the ground and then—if I remember correctly, and would blow that way. They didn’t really employ them until later in the war, but this was a huge thing.

TV: Just a huge explosion. It was just fun to see it and we looked forward to it every afternoon but it only lasted a few days.

RV: You said it was like clockwork. Were you guys looking at your watches and predicting, “Here it comes?”

TV: Around three in the afternoon, yeah.

RV: That’s interesting.

TV: Again, we had no idea who was directing it, why it was there, what it was going after, but somebody was catching hell, that’s for sure.

RV: Tim, would you rate the performance of your weapons, the American weapons, and specifically your M-16, how would you rate their performance overall?

TV: My 16, that’s the only weapon I used. I would rate it very, very high. Mine performed flawlessly. It never malfunctioned on me, it never jammed. One time when I wanted it to shoot, I hadn’t cocked it and it didn’t shoot. I had to cock it to get it to shoot. But the weapon worked flawlessly and I could carry lots of ammunition and not be
bogged down with the weight of a 7.62. Carrying four hundred rounds of that 7.62
ammunition would be pretty heavy, whereas four hundred rounds of M-16 ammo—223-
caliber or 5.62-mm—that’s a very light round but it’s certainly effective for our use, for
close work.

RV: Right, right. Did you find yourselves keeping your weapon on automatic or
on a single burst?

TV: When I walked point I kept it on automatic. Otherwise it was on safe if I
wasn’t on point.

RV: Right. So your setting was automatic most of the time?

TV: On point, yes.

RV: What about back in the column?

TV: On safe. I was constantly checking to make sure that it was on safe. I don’t
recall getting particularly, getting ambushed from the side or whatnot, but if an ambush
had happened, probably everybody would go to automatic to try to suppress the fire. In
other words, if we were just walking along, if somebody ambushed us from the side, we
would return fire on automatic.

RV: Okay. So your 16 was your favorite. Was there anything that you didn’t
have that you wanted to have or that you’d heard about from others coming into the field,
I guess as replacements or just from other units that your ran into or associated with? Is
there anything else that you might have wanted to have out there?

TV: I can’t think of a thing, no. We knew that there were Starlight scopes and
whatnot. I wouldn’t mind using one but I wouldn’t have wanted to carry it. They were
pretty bulky. If you were on a base somewhere, that’d be fine. But in the field, it
wouldn’t be practical. So I wouldn’t have wanted to carry it and wouldn’t have wanted
to spoil my night vision by looking through a Starlight scope. On a base I would have
like to have had that.

RV: Right, okay. How would you rate the AK-47 and compare it to the M-16?

TV: It’s got more knockdown power because it uses a heavier round. I think
their magazines were bigger. I think they used thirty round magazines.

RV: Their clip was bigger, the banana clip.
TV: Um-hm. Although we could tape two magazines head-to-tail and pretty quickly get thirty-six rounds. Some people did that. I never bothered with it. I was too worried about the unused portion getting dirty. It was a good weapon. It was heavy, heavier than a 16. There wasn’t much long-range shooting going on, but if you got a long range shot the 7.62 round is probably more accurate at long range. But it was an assault weapon. It was meant for close in work, too. They’re still being used like crazy in Iraq and Afghanistan today, so it’s obviously a good weapon. It seems from everything I’ve heard about it, it was very reliable too.

RV: What would you say was the most feared weapon?
TV: Booby traps, especially the Bouncing Betty.

RV: How many of those did you encounter?
TV: There was one that killed Frank Flannoy in April. I think that’s the only one that I remember. We had a number of—no we had somebody else killed by one in March. So we had one in March, also.

RV: Can you describe what they were like?
TV: Never saw one personally, but in training they showed us and it came in two pieces. It had a—it was actually one piece. The whole thing was buried and when you tripped it, either by trip wire or by touching a sensor, it would set off a small charge on its base that blew it up in the air and set off a fuse that was timed. When it got to about four or five feet in height, the main explosion would happen and it was intended—it’s like any other exploding weapon. It’s intended to maim by spraying shrapnel. Being that close, if you are close to it, it could certainly be fatal.

RV: So besides the booby traps, what else? What more conventional weapon? I know all were not pleasant, but I’ve heard others talk about the lethality and the accuracy of the AK-47.

TV: Well, the NVA in our AO had .51-caliber machine guns that were devastating to—I mean it’s a very powerful weapon. It’s one notch bigger than our .50-caliber. It’s a heavy-duty automatic weapon. It could be used as anti-aircraft and the NVA used them primarily trying to shoot down helicopters.

RV: Tim, I wanted to ask you about something that was, I believe, commonality with a lot of units when they were digging in and also what they would do when they
would settle in during the day—a day laager, I guess—and then also at night. This was
the listening post and the observation post. Can you explain those a little bit and how
they functioned and what you personally witnessed?

TV: An LP or an OP is a squad of people, a small squad, maybe four or five
troops who are sent out away from the main laager to observe, to listen, to try to get early
warning if there’s a large enemy movement towards the laager. The idea is to gain that
knowledge that they’re there, communicate it back to the company command post, and
then do what you can to get back to the main body if you can.

RV: Yeah. Did you ever go out on these?

TV: A couple of times, yes. We didn’t always employ them because of terrain
and other situations sometimes it just wasn’t feasible. But sometimes we did and I must
have sat in—I was going to name a number but I don’t remember how many times. But
it was always a little bit of a concern, especially at night. Not a pleasant duty.

RV: Can you describe what it was like, what you went through?

TV: Well, one big concern would be that if somebody or something got in
between you and the main body and the people in the main body opened up, you’d be in
the line of fire. The laager definitely had foxholes. You almost always employed
foxholes and could fire from them, but in the listening post you’d want to be very quiet
and so you wouldn’t have a foxhole. You would just have a place advantage to look and
listen. But if the main body of the unit opened up and they were trying to work on
something that was in between the two of you, it would be very dangerous and scary.

RV: What did the jungle sound like?

TV: Well, sometimes eerily quiet. If it was raining, the rain made a lot of noise
and made it difficult to hear what might be coming toward you, sometimes birds and
animals and whatnot.

RV: Did you all come across anything that was really interesting in the jungle
that you weren’t expecting to see? This is independent of the enemy.

TV: I think last time we talked about the animals. We saw those little small deer
and saw some large monkeys of some sort from a distance. I can’t think of anything
special.

RV: Okay.
TV: Not anything more than that.

RV: Right. Tim, let me ask you a couple of general questions about what you observed in others and then also what you observed in yourself back then. Can you tell me about spiritual growth or lack of the spirituality you saw in Vietnam? Then tied into that, the opportunities that you all had to attend a church service and if you did, what it meant it you.

TV: (Laughs)

RV: (Laughs) It’s a lot.

TV: Interesting question and very difficult for me to answer but I became—I am a spiritual person, basically. Not faithfully now, but back then I was a very spiritual person. I became aware of—are you there?

RV: Yes, I am.

TV: I became aware of my own vulnerability and my own likelihood of dying so I tried to stay in touch with God pretty close. We had only a few opportunities for any sort of service and they were very humble affairs when the pilot would come out to visit. I mean when the sky pilot would come out to visit—the nickname for the chaplain. We would sit and talk and he would have a little service and it was always comforting and mixed denomination, everybody all jumbled together. But it wasn’t very often that we got to see a chaplain but it was comforting when one did come out and talk.

RV: What was the affect that had on the troops?

TV: I don’t know. It had to be positive. It had to have a good effect on the ones who cared about it. There were some who had no concern whatsoever or no interest in religious things. I’d say maybe—I guess what I’m thinking now is maybe twenty or thirty percent of us. You know, three out of ten. If we had a chance for a service we’d meet with the chaplain and attend a service. I was always concerned about getting too clustered together, too.

RV: Right because you were taught not to do that.

TV: Um-hm.

RV: So you’d be out in the field, out in the open doing this?
TV: It seems to me we would meet in small groups and have a brief little service. Maybe a chance to talk and then maybe a ten-minute service and then he’d probably go on to another group and make the rounds that way.

RV: How did you express your spirituality in Vietnam besides attending these services? You don’t have to comment on that if you don’t want to.

TV: I had a personal prayer that I said. One in the morning and one at night.

RV: The same prayer?

TV: Close. But one was basically for thanking God for getting me through the day and the other one was thanking God for getting me through the night, and in the case of both, to help me get through the next one.

RV: Do you remember what you said exactly or close to?

TV: No, I don’t.

RV: Was it that simple, basically?

TV: Yeah, just that simple. Just a thank you and please help me.

RV: What did you see in others as far as prayer was concerned? You know, there’s that stereotype or the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. What’s your comment on that?

TV: Yeah, there probably are. I don’t really have much of a comment on that. I don’t know that I knew much about other people’s spirituality. We kept that pretty close to ourselves.

RV: Well, what about relationships? Let’s see, I asked you about relationships within the unit but this is more specific. Did you see any homosexuality there?

TV: None.

RV: Even in the rear?

TV: None, no.

RV: Okay.

TV: Nope, absolutely none.

RV: Okay. How would you describe how close men get to each other in a warzone and then when they bond out in the field? And I’m not talking sexually, I’m just saying in general, this bond that I have witnessed as recent as last week, forty, thirty-five, forty years after the fact, it still remains. How can you describe that?
TV: Oh, that’s tough.

RV: Yeah, and I’ve heard that. It’s hard to put that into words.

TV: I mean it’s hard to figure out how to thank somebody who is willing to
[walk] twenty or thirty paces out beyond the perimeter and then watch your back while
you relieve yourself. But routinely we did that. You and your buddy would look out for
each other while he’s got his pants down. How do you thank somebody for that? It’s
tough. It’s hard for me to express, I guess. But that’s part of it. Then actually having
been in combat with somebody, it just—it’s got to be the shared experience that just, “Me
and you have been there and somebody else hasn’t.” I guess it’s really just as simple as
that. But I find that I also feel that bond with people that were in Charlie Company that I
never knew, that were in there but I didn’t know, or maybe were even there after I left, or
before. You know, were in Charlie Company before I got there and had left before I got
there. But when I meet those fellows today, we have the same bond as I do with Lee
Kaywork or Sergeant G., if I could meet him.

RV: Um-hm, that’s interesting. So there’s kind of a company or unit cohesion
that exists to this day whether you were there with them during your tour or not?

TV: Definitely, definitely. Because the unit just went on and on and people came
and went but Charlie Company just kept on humping.

RV: Well, on the flip side, what about contact with women in Vietnam?

TV: (Laughs)

RV: You do not have to answer this, obviously, if you don’t want to.

TV: Oh, I had absolutely none. Absolutely no contact whatsoever and no
opportunity to contact until I got MEDEVAC’ed and there were a few nurses. But as far
as—I’m trying to remember the one and only stand-down that I got to have if there was
any sort of band or whatnot and I just don’t recall there being there at all. I’ve heard
stories and seen pictures of other stand-downs. I know the stand-down that I missed at
the end of June, there was a Filipino band and some go-go girls or dancers or whatever,
but I never saw the first one.

RV: Do you feel like you missed out a little bit or would you have liked to have
that kind of experience, just the entertainment, the female entertainment?
TV: (Laughs) I don’t think that would have meant that much to me, the entertainment. The chance to talk to somebody or something a little more intimate than just watching a dancer on stage would have been nice. You know, like talking to somebody in a bar or just talking to a Donut Dolly girl or somebody would have been nice. But I didn’t have any encounters.

RV: Well, what were your forms of entertainment? If you couldn’t have those, what did you all do?

TV: Once in a while we listened to radio. In fact, I carried a small transistor radio in my rucksack and my buddy John carried a piece of a battery, a used battery, from the radio, the Prick-25 (PRC-25) radio, and we’d hook them together if we were in an area where the music wasn’t going to endanger us at all, where nobody would mind. We would listen to Armed Forces Radio. That was always good. Sometimes, if we were off duty or not on guard or whatnot, we’d play cards. We played Uno and Hearts.

RV: What music did you like, Tim?

TV: Rock-and-roll.

RV: Any specific bands or songs you remember that you hear today and it takes you back?

TV: “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” was a big one back then. I don’t think I ever heard it played in Vietnam but later on that was definitely a defining song. One form of entertainment is just talking to each other, especially if we were in a situation where you could sit and shoot the shit and not have to—if we were in a situation where it wasn’t dangerous, where you didn’t have to worry about keeping your guard up.

RV: Yeah.

TV: Then we’d talk about past experiences and past girlfriends and school and jobs. You know, things that we had done in the past.

RV: How about contact with home? You wrote letters and what about MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) phone calls or news from the States?

TV: I think the only news we got was something called the Stars and Stripes. It was a little newsletter thing. Parents sent pictures. They built an in-ground swimming pool when I was there. That was good news. (Laughs)

RV: Did you see yourself in it when you got back?
TV: Oh, yes. They would just tell us what was going on. I did get to make one MARS call after I was MEDEVAC’ed.

RV: Oh, yeah? What was that like?

TV: (Laughs) My parents weren’t home. I was trying to tell them that I was on my way to Japan. My sister who was probably fifteen, I guess, was at home and answered the phone and she didn’t understand the need to say, “Over.”

RV: (Laughs) Okay.

TV: Kept messing that up and it made communication very difficult. I think I had maybe two minutes or something to communicate. In the end, we didn’t communicate well. She didn’t understand what I was saying or couldn’t hear and then they broke the connection. Then months later I learned that when my parents got home she told them that I had called but she couldn’t relate really anything of what I’d said.

RV: Oh, I bet that drove them crazy.

TV: It did. They were they were very upset that they didn’t know what was going on or why I called.

RV: Of course.

TV: That was the only MARS call I made. It was through a ham radio operator who makes the local call from somewhere.

RV: Um-hm. What did you see in the form of disease in Vietnam? Was this a real problem for the United States or was it minimal by the time you were there?

TV: Disease amongst the people or amongst us?

RV: Both. Really amongst you guys more so, but what did you see in the people as well?

TV: The Vietnamese people, when I saw them they looked very skinny, very poor nutrition. I can’t really say that I observed or know much about their diseases or whatnot. They chewed the betel nut and so all of them had bad-looking teeth—or a lot of them. The older people had terrible-looking teeth. But amongst the GIs, I recall one time we walked back to LZ Professional and before we would have chow we were told we had to get a shot and so we lined up at a tent where the medics were. The medics had come out from somewhere, I guess from battalion. It was a shot in the hip from a huge needle. (Laughs) I think I heard it called something like hemogamaglobin or something like that.
It was close to that. Nobody really said what it was for, what it was about, but you could see the guys in front of you drop their pants, bend over and grab a hold of the edge of a table. That needle would hit them in the hip and it reminded me of seeing a horse get a shot. You know, that horse’s leg will jump? That’s what their legs did and what mine was going to do. It was an unpleasant shot. I’ve heard, probably unofficially, since then that that shot was for plague—an anti-plague shot. I don’t know if that’s accurate or not. At the time nobody told us what it was about. We just had to get the shot before we could eat. Again since, that it was for plague. Health-wise, a lot of guys got malaria. Some people probably didn’t take their pills and got malaria. Actually, I’m remembering now one time I was very sick with a fever and I was barfing and just feeling really rotten. On that day a chaplain came out and I was just talking to him and I mentioned the fact that I was just feverish and feeling really terrible and he asked me if I had drank any water out of the river that was running right past where we were laagered and I said, “Yes.” He told me that another company had killed a water buffalo in the stream upstream, and it had swelled up to as big as a house.

RV: Oh, gosh.

TV: So I got sick from that but it went away in a day or two. A lot of guys had, I guess—I don’t know if it’s heat stroke or heat exhaustion but they would just fall out from being dehydrated and overheated. It could be very dangerous, I think. Charlie Company had somebody who caught a fever. I’ve heard this story since I got home. It’s not one that I recall personally because he was in a different platoon. But he got very sick and stayed out—I guess they made him stay out for a day or two and he was getting sicker and sicker. They finally flew him back in to the hospital and whatever it was got worse and he died. In other words, he just had an undiagnosed illness of some disease. Some bug just killed him.

RV: Wow.

TV: A lot of us had, also I mentioned before, jungle rot sores. Just sores that never healed. Usually I’d drain the pus out of them every day and sometimes swab them with hydrogen peroxide. But they were just there until I got home. Bad feet.

RV: Did they go away? I mean did they heal up okay?
TV: Once I got home, they sure did. All of us had bad feet in the field. I guess it’s called immersion foot or trench foot, but it’s tiny little pinholes all over the soles of your feet. The feet would swell up and wrinkle and just hurt. It’s just from being wet. (Laughs) Just the worse case of athlete’s foot that you can imagine where you could develop cracks between all your toes and they just stay there.

RV: That’s got to be uncomfortable when you’re doing so much walking.

TV: It is. It becomes just a fact of life, though.

RV: You get used it in a sense?

TV: Yes, you do. You just have to get used to it. Just like getting used to having crotch rot, it’s just a fact of life.

RV: It’s the same kind of thing but located elsewhere.

TV: Yes.

RV: What was the treatment there?

TV: Sometimes you might have—if you got some powder, powder seemed to help. It wouldn’t last for long and there really wasn’t a treatment for it.

RV: Was it medicated powder or just regular, like baby powder?

TV: Like foot powder. It was medicated powder.

RV: What did you see in the way of drugs and alcohol?

TV: We got a few beers every now and then. Every couple of weeks we would get two beers and two sodas. But being in the field there was really no opportunity to abuse any alcohol. I can’t personally say that I ever saw anybody do any drugs. I know there were probably people in the field who did. But I never saw them do it, I wasn’t aware of them doing it, their use of it never manifested itself in a way that affected me. But on firebases, I’m sure it happened. In fact, I’m remembering now I got to go back to the LZ one time. I’m not really sure why I went back but it was for one night while the company was in the field. I can recall that because Charlie Company made contact when I was gone and I missed it. I was glad I missed it but I was also upset that I wasn’t there when I was needed. But back on this visit to LZ Professional—oh, the first thing that I remember was a large Chinook helicopter came in, a supply helicopter, with a cargo net of supplies slung underneath the bird and the cargo handler unhooked the net and he dropped immediately to the ground and nobody could figure out why. I didn’t
particularly get involved but people went to him and he’d been shot. What happened was that a sniper from somewhere long range off the firebase fired at the helicopter, the bullet ricocheted from the side of the helicopter down the top of his shoulder.

RV: Wow.

TV: The chopper was so noisy that you couldn’t hear the rifle going off. It was only one shot apparently, but it killed him.

RV: Wow.

TV: But to get on to the drug thing, that night I did witness a drug use that really upset me. I’ll explain about this person. I don’t remember his name at all, but some weeks before we were in a night laager high up on a mountain. It was pitch black dark and we had movement in front of us. We were all very nervous. We could hear something moving out in front of us. We didn’t know if it was coming towards us or just going by us, but we were all ready. In another foxhole, a buck sergeant went into the interior of the perimeter to the CP to ask if we could get an illumination round fired, an artillery illumination round from the base that would land over in front of us and give us some illumination of what was in front of us. The answer was no, and as he was walking back to his foxhole, this trooper who was I guess very scared turned and shot him. I mean, he heard the noise of his sergeant coming towards him and he opened up actually over the whole company. He fired over the heads of the whole company. Mostly everybody was sitting down. The buck sergeant turned his back and tried to run and took a round through the spine. The rest of us heard the shooting and didn’t know what was going on. We couldn’t get that buck sergeant out of there until the next morning. It was just too dark and too thick of a jungle. We got him MEDEVAC’ed and apparently this trooper was taken out of the field because he had shot his squad leader. He happened to be on LZ Professional that one night when I was there spending the night because I had arranged with whoever the company was on bunker duty to stand a guard for them if they’d let me stay in their bunker. Otherwise, I didn’t really have a place to stay. We were just talking, shooting the shit, and heard a noise down in the wire. We popped a flare and were getting ready to set off the claymores, or open up, or throw hand grenades and we saw a GI down there in the wire and it was this same trooper. He was squatted down there like he was fishing and we could tell that he was just totally doped out. I
mean he didn’t know where he was. He was just fishing. This was a guy who had shot
his squad leader. I wasn’t about to get in there and help him. I remember my attitude
was, “Leave him there. He can stay there all night, you know, whatever.” But the guys
in this other company, whoever they were, went down there at some peril and got him
and brought him back up to the bunker line. They took him off and I don’t know what
happened to him. But that was a notable drug use. Apparently, after he had accidentally
shot his squad leader he was removed from the field for his own good just because people
were scared to be around him or were unhappy with him. He was just hanging around LZ
Professional apparently and got into some drugs.

RV: What would you all do or kind of react to someone who would jeopardize
the unit if they used drugs out in the field? Was there a general unspoken or spoken
policy or attitude toward that?

TV: This particular fellow, like I say, I would have left him out there all night
long. I wouldn’t have cared what happened to him. I mean if he was gunned down right
there that wouldn’t have hurt my feelings at all, just because he was doing what he was
doing. If he’d have been in the field—all things dangerous or that cause danger there was
an, I guess an unspoken policy that if you put the rest of us in danger, we’re going to stop
you. That was a self-governing thing that everybody was clear on. It didn’t happen very
often, but when discipline was needed we disciplined ourselves. Or at least the threat of
that did, I guess.

RV: What would Sergeant G. do in this? What was his role in kind of policing
the unit or were you guys kind of policing yourselves?

TV: Oh, no. The platoon sergeant was responsible for everything in the platoon.
Charlie Company was in the field so he wasn’t there to have anything to do with this
trooper who was in the wire fishing but—I don’t know what he’d have done if he’d have
been there. Under any normal circumstances, such as a few cases we had where people
weren’t working out, we would go to Sergeant G. and Sergeant G. solved the problem for
us.

RV: He would follow through for you all?

TV: In every case. Yeah, whatever it took to solve the problem, he would solve
it.
RV: Let me ask you about working with other units. I wanted to know if you worked directly with other troops from other countries such as the Aussies or New Zealanders. Anybody from Laos, Cambodia, or even ARVN?

TV: I never saw anybody from another country. I knew there were troops assisting us like the Aussies and the South Koreans, but I never saw any that I recall. I know we never worked with them. The South Korean troops were called ROKs, Republic of Korea, but also because they were a pretty tough bunch. They were highly regarded as being very tough soldiers and tough fighters and pretty ruthless with the Vietnamese. Not the Vietnamese, but the NVA. They had a good reputation for carrying out their missions and doing what they were supposed to do. We worked with ARVNs a few times and I have to say that my opinion of them was not particularly high. There was, I guess, a feeling that they would go out and make contact somewhere and then bail out and then US troops would have to go in and finish their fight or bail them out. I think that’s more of a feeling or more of a perception than something that happened routinely or whatnot because I can’t think of any occasions—well, it happened once at least probably. But it was sort of just a perception that they weren’t that good or that interested in conducting the war. I remember one time a whole company of ARVN marched in front of our position in the field. I don’t think they knew that we were there but we could hear them coming forever. It was right at dusk and they were carrying pots and pans, and talking, and smoking cigarettes.

RV: Wow.

TV: It was kind of a disregard for the normal procedure that we would call foolish and crazy. I think that’s why they got—every now and then they’d get tore up. Now they probably knew—maybe they had better intelligence about some things. They might have known that they weren’t in danger whereas we thought we were always in danger. But all those pots and pans and racket and smoking while they were moving just didn’t seem like a proper way to do things.

RV: How did that affect you all, that the ARVN, that the South Vietnamese Army—and this is not talking about Vietnamese Marines or anything else, but in general, this idea that the South Vietnamese were not either up to task—or I say either/or—up to task with defending their own country and prosecuting the war aggressively or
appropriately; and/or this attitude of maybe being just lackadaisical? Did you all discuss
this or how did it affect you?

TV: I don’t think that their lack of skill or proper conduct came into particular
concern. I don’t think any of us cared that much about it unless we had to work with
them, unless we were in a situation where we were working with them and their
ineptitude or their whatever could get us hurt. I don’t recall ever knowing that we were
working with ARVN units, although sometimes there were ARVN units about. I think that
there was more concern about, “They’ll do some thing that will get me hurt, or get us
hurt, or get us in trouble,” than there was that feeling let down or demoralized in some
way. I don’t think anybody cared about that. I don’t think I did, anyway.

RV: Did you think that they were capable of defending South Vietnam and
maintaining it as an independent country when you left or when the United States left?

TV: No and no.

RV: Because of the reasons you just said?

TV: Yeah, exactly. From what I’d seen and just the general feeling and then
certainly later on whenever we left, whenever the US left, I didn’t think there was a
chance at all that they could stand up against the NVA.

RV: Did you all—I’m sorry, go ahead.

TV: I was just going to say that it was a done deal by that time.

RV: What do you mean by that?

TV: That when the US finally left, that the North Vietnamese were going to
prevail. I didn’t see really much change of the South Vietnamese hanging on for a lot of
reasons, political and military.

RV: Um-hm. Okay. Do you think you all were ever exposed to Agent Orange in
the field?

TV: I think so. Probably, yeah. I can recall now, being on LZ Professional and
seeing a helicopter with long booms on both sides just circling and spraying. I asked
somebody what they thought that was and somebody thought it was insect killer to kill
mosquitoes. But I think now it was Agent Orange or some sort of defoliant just knocking
the jungle down around the LZ. Now as far as whether we were actually exposed to it, I
don’t know. I’ve not suffered any, I guess, direct results personally but I’ve met folks who have. But I’ve also never had an Agent Orange screening done, either.

RV: Is that purposeful or just simply haven’t gotten around to it?
TV: I’m not sure. I got a call in the mid-’70s one time from the Centers for Disease Control. They did about an hour interview. You know, I submitted to an hour interview and then they wanted me to fly to Arizona for a three-day physical and it was just very intensive. They didn’t say what it was about but at that time it just wasn’t convenient for me to do that, didn’t feel the need for it, so I didn’t go. Then later on I learned that it was about Agent Orange and the Army or whoever—the Centers for Disease Control first stated Agent Orange after that study was that it was like soda-pop—harmless stuff. I was always glad that I hadn’t participated in that and if I had been in any part of that, with what I know now about Agent Orange, I would have been really disgusted. But I didn’t and I’m glad. As far as now, there’s no reason to. That’s why I haven’t. I just haven’t bothered to take the time.

RV: Okay. Well, I’d like to ask you about your R&R (rest and relaxation). Can you tell me about that?
TV: I never got one.
RV: You did not get one?
TV: Did not get one.
RV: That’s because of your shortness there in the field and being evac’ed?
TV: Um-hm.
RV: You were due one. You were going to save it until later.
TV: I was going to save it definitely until later. Actually, I was going to go to Penang, Malaysia.
RV: Why Penang?
TV: Because I had been there, Richard.
RV: That was one of your favorite places on that cruise wasn’t it?
TV: Yes, it was. It was a wonderful place and I was looking forward to going back. I didn’t make it though.
RV: Tim, how would you rate the leadership that you saw in Vietnam? I know you’ve spoken of Sergeant G. and his leadership and his follow-through, what about—
and you’ve talked about the officers, kind of, you know not really having so much contact with them, avoiding them at times. But overall, looking at platoon, company, battalion, and on up, how would you characterize the leadership that you witnessed and heard about or experienced there during your tour?

TV: That’s a tough question. You know, overall I think the officers were properly trained and motivated. Most of them knew not to, when they first got to the field, to not act like an officer but to let the NCOs and the seasoned troops handle things until they settled in. Every now and then you’d get one that was an officer and knew he was and he would generally start making mistakes. You know, those mistakes could get him hurt if it’s bad enough. Like playing cards, like our first platoon leader was, that was a big mistake. He was with a bunch of people and he got shot. I’ve mentioned that I never saw or felt any need—there was never any talk of any sort of fragging or whatnot, but that self-preservation thing would carry to that. If somebody consistently put me in danger or us in danger, I think the group would take action in one way or the other, just to protect ourselves. If somebody was doing something really stupid that was dangerous, people aren’t going to put up with it. I never saw that happen but I guess it could have happened. We did have a new buck sergeant at one point, a squad leader I guess, who very early wanted to—we got assigned point one day and I was going to walk the point. I told him what I was going to do and he said, “Oh no, no. You’ve got to do this.” In other words, it was a choice of terrain. I wanted to stay on the high ground and make a little longer trek of it but easier walking and staying up on the side of the ridge. He wanted to cut through the valley where you could tell it was thick and nasty. I said, “Okay.” So I went along with it and an hour or so into the move, he got called on the radio and the company commander was chewing his ass out, you know, “What are you doing down here? Get us out of this mess.” He sort of had to—I didn’t say much but I just sort of smiled and sort of a, “Told you so.” He understood. I guess he learned from that and became more open to suggestion after that. So some of them started off like that and generally those problems self-correct.

RV: What about leadership going up the chain?

TV: Didn’t have any contact with anybody higher than the company commander. We would see the battalion commander flying around and he might be in a chopper that
landed and kicked out come C-rations or whatnot. The battalion commander gave us a little speech after our first CA where we had some casualties and he made a little speech. But as far as the leadership, it didn’t affect me. I didn’t see him, didn’t have to deal with him. I didn’t know anything about the specifics of what they were doing, how they were organized. That kind of detail just wasn’t passed down.

RV: What about looking back now? What’s your opinion on it?

TV: You know, I think that well-informed soldiers would make better soldiers. There should have been more and better communication. There’s probably a lot of reasons why there wasn’t. But from the top down, from the standpoint of, “This is what we’re doing, and this is how we’re going to do it, and this is what our goals are,” and that sort of thing, communicating that to the people would have been nothing but smart. But also the basic approach of leaving the units there and just swapping people. You know, that was a huge mistake. That was insanity. I guess it was just the way they chose to do it with the draft and all, the only way, but not a good way to fight a war. Not a good way to [develop] that unit cohesion, that sense of togetherness. When you really are a unit you’re going to be much more effective. So in hindsight or from my sense now of the organization of the Army, conducting the war with draftees and just swapping people out, that constant parade was stupid. It was abysmally stupid.

RV: Why do you think that was going on?

TV: Because of the draft. I’m not sure now. The idea of the all-volunteer Army is so brilliant, and so effective, and it’s the only thing that we should ever have. Even being a draftee, I still felt something about being part of the unit and part of the group, but not like as if you went to war as a unit. I’m sometimes concerned that this talk you hear about instituting the draft. The people who would gripe the most would be the frontline soldiers that would have to serve with draftees and I don’t blame them. I think—a lot of things concern me but when people start talking about a draft, it’s just absolute nonsense.

RV: Well, to play devil’s advocate then, how do you fill the personnel needs of the military during wartime?

TV: Actually, despite of what you read in the news, the Army’s doing that just fine. I mean they’re filling their quotas and their goals.
RV: And using the reserves effectively?
TV: Well, that’s another story there.
RV: (Laughs) I know, I know.
TV: (Laughs) That’s another issue.
RV: Well, I don’t want to open up that can of worms at this point. We can talk about kind of the looking back at the war when we get to it chronologically, kind of when we get through your tour. But that’s an interesting comment about the leadership and about the draft and how those two things greatly affected the outcome of the war, which might be a no-brainer, but that’s an interesting perspective that you apply. Were the draftees like yourself, were they accepted? I guess if you proved yourself in the field, from what I’ve heard you say, that, you know, you were accepted.
RV: Oh, sure. Most of us were good troopers. There is an element though, a percentage that is just worthless and even we saw that as draftees. “This draftee here is a good guy and he’s been here longer than me so he’s smarter than me and you can tell he knows what’s going on. This guy is worthless. Don’t turn your back on him and don’t give him any responsibility.” So yeah, there’s just—I guess in any group there’s going to be a certain percentage that’s just worthless.
RV: Well, Tim, let’s move back to your tour and you were kind of walking us through that. We are in April ’69 and we had discussed some of the incidents there. Do you want to pick up with some of the things that happened then and moving into May?
TV: May—I’m trying to get my thoughts together.
RV: Sure. I know that you had discussed that there was a large battle in May.
TV: That’s going to take some time to talk about.
RV: Yeah, we can save for another session. What about before that, leading up to that time?
TV: I’ve got a story that might be interesting about—well, it’s just a story of we were climbing up a mountain, a huge mountain, and real thick jungle and going through point-men like crazy by just wearing them out. It came time where I guess I just recently walked point the day before or maybe a day or two before, but we needed another point-man so I was put on point. I cut us through to a trail near the top of the mountain and called back to the CO to ask him, “What do you want me to do? Do you want to keep
going?” He said, “No, let’s take the trail to the bottom and look for a laager position somewhere near the bottom of the mountain.” Which was sort of a change in direction from where we’d been going and I never did know why we did that. The trail was pretty developed and I took us down towards the bottom and got to a point where I saw a soldier sitting on the side of the trail. I stopped the slack man and he stopped the rest of the company. I put my rifle to my shoulder and actually switched it back to semi-automatic fire. It was on automatic. Then I walked up to him or walked towards him and he was maybe fifteen yards away. I can’t recall if he was reading a letter or eating. But I still had my rucksack on and getting closer. I wasn’t sure what he was. He was in a green uniform. It wasn’t a khaki uniform. He didn’t have a helmet and I just wasn’t really sure what it was. It was getting a little late and the vision—the light wasn’t real good. So I stopped and drew a bead on him and he saw me out of the corner of his eye and tried to run, so I knew right away he was an NVA soldier in a green uniform. I shot him a couple of times and he went down, and then I heard a whole bunch of hollering farther down the trail. So it turns out he was a little bit of an LP for a group. I couldn’t see him because of the foliage.

RV: You didn’t know if you had killed him or not but you took him down?

TV: Oh, I knew he was down. He wasn’t getting back up.

RV: Was he dead?

TV: Yeah, I knew he was dead.

RV: Oh, okay. I didn’t know if he could make his way back to the unit and warn them.

TV: No, he went down. When he was down, I couldn’t see him. Actually, I didn’t know he was dead, to be honest with you. I just knew he was down and I knew he was mortally wounded. I didn’t think he was going to be a problem. I wasn’t concerned about him

RV: Tim, let me ask you a question and please feel free to not answer this and I don’t mean to be inappropriate, but when you’re shooting an enemy, are you trying simply to take the best shot? Or are you aiming for a part on the body that you know will do the most damage? I guess it depends on terrain, weather, angle, et cetera. But is there any description you can give to how you all went about that, how you went about that?
TV: You don’t get that kind of shot very often. Usually it’s much more hurried
where you’re diving and firing and scattering, but in this case I had time to put my
weapon back on [semi-automatic] so I wouldn’t fire a burst. I could have shot him right
through the face or through the heart but I wasn’t sure what he was at first. Then when
he saw me it only took him a heartbeat to turn and run and so I just shot for center mass
on his back, just right for his spine and made sure I kept the fire down. Then like I said, a
group on the other side of some foliage, there was, I guess, some wood between me and
them, heard me shooting. He might have even said something. I heard them hollering so
I slipped back to automatic and sprayed the rest of the magazine towards them. I got
down on the ground, got my pack off, and reloaded and probably fired a couple more
magazines until somebody came up with a 60. Then the gunner and some more troops
went forward and there was nobody there. They were all gone.

RV: But they were there at one point?

TV: Oh, for sure. There were a group of them. I don’t know how many. They
had time to gather their weapons and stuff. The guard, the one I shot, one thing that
disturbed me then and probably still bothers me a little bit, he didn’t have a rifle with
him.

RV: Oh, really?

TV: He was infiltrating without a weapon.

RV: Why does that bother you now? It seems like he kind of put himself in that
situation.

TV: Oh, he did, yeah. I just would rather he had a fully-loaded AK there rather
than no weapon.

RV: Sure.

TV: At the time, I would have liked to have taken an AK out of circulation, also.
It would just be better in my mind if he had been armed rather than not armed. It
wouldn’t have made any difference one way or the other. I snuck up on him cold. He
didn’t have a chance. You don’t get that kind of situation very often. It’s a good lesson
in keeping your guard up at all times. You know, not playing the radio, playing cards,
grab-assing at the wrong time. He was thinking about either his rice bowl or, I think he
might have had a letter in his lap even, or been writing a letter, or reading a letter. I can’t
remember. But he was doing everything except thinking that a whole company of US
infantry would come down the mountain on that trail.

RV: Yeah, and he has no weapon.

TV: Sir?

RV: I mean he has no weapon, either, and he stumbles upon an American
company.

TV: Well, actually, we stumbled on him. He didn’t do any stumbling. He was
paying attention to his rice or his letter instead of looking for me. That could have gone
differently, too, especially if he had been paying attention. He could have warned them
and it could have been a total different outcome. As it was, I remember being elated at
not getting shot at—at doing the shooting and not getting shot at.

RV: That’s interesting. You weren’t concerned really with killing another
human, you were concerned with the fact that Tim Vail is living another day and you
didn’t get the bullet coming your way.

TV: Um, yeah.

RV: I don’t mean that in a disrespectful way or a noncombatant way. That was
the reality, right?

TV: Exactly. I’ve thought about killing another human being later and certainly
given an opportunity, he’d have drilled me.

RV: Oh, yeah.

TV: That’s just what you’ve got to do. Again, the real concern was just as I said,
he didn’t get a shot at me and I did all the shooting. So that was a good day.

RV: How far away from that is the action in May? Or is that just something that
happened there in the interim that you’re not sure about the timeframe?

TV: I’m not sure of the timeframe. I think actually that might have happened
after the actions in May. Again, the chronology is the biggest problem of my memory.

My memories are very, very vivid, especially as we talk about it now. But the
chronology of it is just all meshed together. It’s like soup.

RV: Are there any other incidents that stand out prior to the May incident, as best
you can tell, chronologically? Just in that time period, contact that was significant in
kind of working our way, I guess, toward a more major action?
TV: Yeah, there was just more and more contact.

RV: Things were just simply getting thicker with the enemy. There was an increased tempo of the contact?

TV: Yes, usually in ones and twos. In most of the cases, we were surprising them and ambushing them or walking up on them and dropping them. But as we got more and more into May, the enemy was infiltrating into our area, bringing in huge quantities of soldiers and materials and whatnot. Things were getting hotter and hotter day by day.

RV: Did you all get a feeling that something was brewing, that something had really changed?

TV: I can’t honestly say that we did. I think part of what I’m saying is that things were building up is more hindsight than actually how we felt then because things went by still on a day-by-day basis. I recall once—one night where I was back in LZ Professional by myself, left the company for a night, somebody in my platoon, I can’t remember his name, one of the point-men walked right up on an enemy soldier and they both exchanged full clips.

RV: Wow.

TV: Not quite point-blank range but very close to each other. Both of them were diving out of the way and both of them were emptying their magazines at the other and nobody got hit. Nobody on the point got hit. John Wise was wounded that day and got MEDEVAC’ed.

RV: What happened?

TV: I’m not really sure. They told me that he had a wound high on his chest that bled just a tiny little bit of blood. They weren’t sure if it was a bullet wound or a piece of splinter from a tree. There were so many rounds in the air that a couple of trees got splintered. It could have been just a splinter in his chest or it could have been he was shot in the chest. He was wounded and bleeding and down and I just can’t recall. I just didn’t know other than he got MEDEVAC’ed and I never saw him again.

RV: What was it like not seeing these people again? Was that difficult? I mean, all of the sudden they’re gone. They’re gone from your life.
TV: At the time, you don’t give a whole lot of thought to it, but as time goes on and especially after I got home, yeah that kind of thing is just terrible. You just don’t know what happened to all these people or what happened to their lives. It doesn’t do to brood on that too much, but not having bothered to find out is something to feel a little guilty about. You know, not having bothered to try to find these folks and check on them and whatnot. It’s something I feel bad about.

RV: Okay. Yeah, I know after things settled down, that had to be kind of strange that you form bonds with folks and all of the sudden they’re just kind of transported out of your life. Was it urgent to you or necessary for you in someway once you were back stateside after the appropriate amount of time to try to get back in touch with people?

TV: It would have sure made sense to. I didn’t and I don’t recall many people doing that. All of the folks that were wounded or left, I wasn’t really close to any of them. Well, one or two, pretty close but I guess once you’re out of there, once you’re out of combat your priorities change so much. Maybe there’s all kinds of reasons why you don’t stay in touch. But I’ll repeat it later on. That remains one of the biggest disappointments in myself was not staying in touch with folks and not communicating with them.

RV: Well, yeah. We can revisit that for sure.

TV: Yeah, there’s a lot of good reasons to have done it, I guess, because a lot of folks did it. But gee, it sure would have been nice if I had thought how I would feel thirty years later instead of how I felt then.

RV: Well, it’s hindsight.

TV: It’s easy, it’s 20/20, yeah.

RV: Well, Tim, would you like to go ahead and stop for today?

TV: That’d be fine.

RV: Okay.
Interview with Timothy Vail
Session 7 of 8
December 5, 2005

RV: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Tim Vail. Today is December 5, 2005. I am in Lubbock and Tim is again in Roanoke, Virginia. Tim let’s pick up in May 1969. You’re getting ready to encounter or have some large contact you said. Would you like to talk about the lead up to that and what happened then thereafter?

TV: I sure would. Richard, in retrospect things were heating up gradually. I don’t think, in looking at it now, that I really understood that. The intelligence folks at the battalion level may have seen that, but I think on the ground it was just almost daily contact and we didn’t realize that we were being infiltrated, our AO was being infiltrated by a lot of NVA soldiers. In fact, we were probably outnumbered.

RV: You all didn’t have a whole lot of awareness of that?

TV: I don’t think we did at all. Certainly I did not. But things sort of came to a head on the evening of May twelfth. Delta Company was on the hill, on LZ Professional and the rest of the battalion was out working in the AO and the hill got hit by a land attack, sappers, RPGs, mortars. It was at night and LZ Professional, being situated as it is, like a tall skinny hill, all of us that were out there in the area could see the attack happen. You know, see the pyrotechnics of it. It was a spectacular and terrible thing to see. Just a tremendous amount of fire happened.

RV: Okay, how much—what kind of period of time are you talking about?

TV: Intermittently for three or four hours. It would build to a crescendo, and then taper off, and then build back up again. What we were seeing was a lot of incoming explosions but also the bunker line firing back.

RV: Where exactly were you positioned? How far away?

TV: Probably five or six kilometers away just in a night laager position.

RV: You knew this was a different kind of attack? I mean, this was something much larger?

TV: Oh, yes. I mean, the LZ took sniper fire and sporadic fire, a few mortar rounds all the time. But this was a sustained attack and we suspected a ground attack. The next day we learned that there were sappers that tried to enter through the perimeter
and didn’t make it and twenty NVA soldiers were killed and left laying in the wire, or left behind. Don’t know how many were killed. Twenty bodies were left behind. For us, the next day was just another day of just normal combat but actually we were working towards LZ Professional, I think, on the thirteenth. Probably, I think we knew that we were marching, working our way towards the hill so that we could come in behind the attackers there.

RV: This was a deliberate activity? You were trying to get in behind the force that had just attacked?

TV: Yes. In the meantime, in the afternoon on the thirteenth or sometime during the thirteenth, we were told that Alpha Company was in very heavy contact with the enemy fairly close to us, not next to us but in the general area that we were in. But we were told to keep on going towards LZ Professional. That night, the night of the thirteenth, the hill was hit again but the attack wasn’t as ferocious. But there were mortar rounds, and RPGs, and I think even the recoilless rifle fire directed towards the hill. The hill responded with tremendous firepower back. Now that I think about it, those two nights were certainly a big buildup. I remember, I think on the night of the thirteenth, wherever we laagered was near a trail because my laager position was directly on the trail.

RV: Wow. That’s dangerous, isn’t it?

TV: It was intended to be an ambush in case somebody came down the trail. But that meant that at least in our position and probably most of the positions nearby stayed up all night at one-hundred percent guard. Everybody was on guard in case there was movement up the trail. On the opposite side of the laager position there would have been another position that was also on the trail. But nothing happened that I recall.

RV: Tim, how difficult was it to stay awake all night?

TV: Not difficult at all. With all the firing and all the combat that was happening, we knew then that there was just a lot of enemy activity and that they were NVA soldiers and that kind of closeness to that made it pretty easy to stay awake. We might have individually let each other nap for a few minutes. I can’t recall now, but I’m sure that we stayed up all night on guard because of the fear that somebody would come down that trail.
RV: Right. So there was no incident that night?

TV: No incident that night for us but we were told that Alpha Company was working with a recon company also. The Echo Company is a much smaller unit in size and they were attached to Alpha Company. Both units together were in contact, I think, most of the night on the thirteenth. I didn’t have any personal knowledge of it at the time other than probably the next morning before we moved out, our platoon leader would have told us from radio reports that they were in contact. On the fourteenth, on May fourteenth, I’ll give you a little rundown of some personnel things that happened. The company commander was Captain Bergeron. For some reason, I still can’t recall why—

RV: Can you spell his name?

TV: B-e-r-g-e-r-o-n.

RV: Okay.

TV: He wasn’t in the field and so the 2nd Platoon leader, Walter Brownlee, who was my platoon leader—that’s B-r-o-w-n-l-e-e—was the acting company commander. That left Sergeant G., Sergeant Gonzales, as the acting platoon leader of the 2nd Platoon. [Sgt. Lee Kaywork was in the field handling the platoon sergeant’s responsibilities.]

Nothing spectacular about that, but that’s just the way it was. There were some documents that I’ve read since then, of reports that people made on behalf of the company commander of Alpha Company, for his actions that informed me of that. I probably, on my own, would not have had a recollection of that. But I’ve been able to read about that since. On the morning of the fourteenth, we picked up and were moving towards LZ Professional again until about noon. It was very hot. I think we probably had encountered some heat casualties already by then, where folks just got too hot and had to be MEDEVAC’ed. But about noon we were told that Alpha Company was in tremendous peril and in deep shit, in the parlance, and that we needed to go back and help them. Which I think for once, all of us were more than glad to do it. So what we did is we took our rucksacks off and just carried a few canteens and ammunition, left our rucksacks in a pile beside the trail—actually right on the Burlington Trail which goes right through the middle of our AO. I think we had been on the trail, trying to make good time to get towards the LZ. But we all took our rucks off and left them there in a pile, left a squad from the point platoon, which was the 3rd Platoon. They were on point that
day. We turned around and marched back in the direction that we had just come, back
towards Alpha Company because they were pinned down and taking casualties and we
knew they were in serious trouble. I think we had probably two or three kilometers to go
back towards them. I’m sure it was a very, very hot day and we were having trouble with
people just not being able to take the heat. But we got back towards where Alpha
Company was and we could hear a lot of firing, knew we were getting close, and came
into contact ourselves.

RV: On your way back to help them?

TV: On our way back to help them. We had a couple of casualties and I
remember—I must have seen it because I have a clear recollection of this that was
supported by a document that I read. But the platoon leader of the 1st Platoon was a black
first lieutenant. He looked down, saw the barrel of a rifle sticking out of the ground, out
of a spider hole, grabbed a hold of the rifle, and pulled the rifle and a small, but
uniformed, NVA soldier out. In other words, he grabbed the rifle and pulled the rifle and
the NVA soldier out of the ground at once.

RV: Wow, that’s incredible. I wonder why the soldier didn’t fire on him.

TV: He had already shot a couple of people but why he didn’t fire, I don’t know.
I just don’t have a clue. I didn’t have anything to do with interrogating or wasn’t even
close I don’t think. But apparently he was interrogated and told Lieutenant Brownlee that
there was a lot of NVA up ahead of us waiting in ambush. I think Lieutenant Brownlee
reported that he [the NVA POW (prisoner of war)] told him that there was a hundred
NVA up ahead of us. Anyway, we established a CP on a piece of high ground that was
defensible and I don’t really know how the patrol formed up, but elements of the 2nd and
3rd Platoon formed up into a patrol. It wasn’t all of either platoon. I do know that. We
moved out mixed together which was very, very unusual. In other words, there were 3rd
Platoon guys on the point but there were also 3rd Platoon guys behind me. To this day I
don’t know how we organized. But I do know, I think anyway, that all of us felt that this
was a chance for a mission that is really worthwhile, and that’s to try to rescue Americans
that were out in front of us and in terrible danger. There was basically a huge, open rice
paddy with high ground to our right and there was a lot of fire coming from the high
ground. The rice paddy was bisected by a creek that had cut a deep bed maybe fifteen
feet deep into the rice paddy. But it left you below the level of the ground which was
protection against the fire that was coming off of the high ground. So we proceeded
towards Alpha Company. We knew where they were. I’ve actually been told that we
were in radio contact with Alpha Company. We had switched our frequency to theirs so
that we could talk to them. I remember that we were definitely bunched up. We should
not have been. But again, I think we were all so very eager to try to help some of our
buddies in Alpha Company that we overlooked that and just proceeded towards Alpha
Company.

RV: Now when you say bunched up, can you describe what being too bunched
up is?

TV: We should have—even in that situation we should have had an interval
between people, a significant interval in case we got ambushed. I know for a fact that we
didn’t. I mean I remember distinctly that we didn’t. We were too close to each other,
front and back. I think that was just eagerness to get in there and help. I’m not really
sure of the distances, Richard but we proceeded down that creek bed for a pretty good
ways. I know, or I’ve been told anyway, that we were very close to Alpha Company,
maybe forty meters or so. I know we were in radio contact with them and I think that our
point people may have even exchanged some hand signals or some hollers, you know,
hollered up towards Alpha Company that, “Here we are and we’re coming.” The point-
man, who’s name is Oscar Bussell—

RV: Buffell?

TV: Bussell, B-u-s-s-e-l-l. His nickname was Bobby and he’s a very good friend
of mine now. I didn’t know him then but I knew of him. He was a buck sergeant in the
3rd Platoon, older fellow, very experienced, carried a shotgun. He was a country boy and
just felt comfortable with a shotgun and he had a reputation of being one of the best
point-men that we had in the company. He was on point and passed by a branch in the
stream that came off to the right. The stream branched up in front of us and went off to
the right but the main branch is where Alpha Company was. He went through that. I
guess the NVA let him walk through that and then sprung the ambush on the rest of his
squad that were coming up behind him. It all happened just very, very quickly.

Tremendous fire came from the right. I think they were probably fifteen meters or twenty
meters in front of me. Basically the whole point was cut down. At the time, I didn’t
really know anybody in the 3rd Platoon, but I didn’t know the numbers that we had lost.
There was just a tremendous amount of panic, pandemonium, all that fire coming in at us
and I knew we had a bunch of people down. John Bernard and I climbed the bank on our
right and started putting down fire in case somebody was attacking from the rice paddy,
from the high ground.

RV: When you say putting down fire, what do you mean?

TV: Just loading up and firing. We didn’t have to look for targets, and not seeing
targets just firing at bushes or places where somebody might be hiding.

RV: What do you do, Tim, kind of psychologically and emotionally when you’re
right there in the middle of combat. How do you feel? How do you remember feeling? I
mean, this is real combat, this is not getting a sniper.

TV: No, this is very serious. The fire is very heavy. I think I was too busy to
feel much of anything at the time. Right then I didn’t have much feeling other than I
remember John and I were up on that bank and looked down behind us and there was
wounded everywhere. The 3rd Platoon had an older platoon leader, I’m sorry, platoon
sergeant. He had a French name. It was rumored, I guess, or talked about that he’d either
been in the French Foreign Legion or the French Army. But he was an older guy and his
nickname was Pappy. I remember seeing him wounded in the stomach and he had a real
bad wound. I thought he was—when I looked down I thought he was dying. A number
of folks were hit, though, and there was fire coming in right directly over my head and
hitting the bank on the left side. It was coming down at us so I remember hollering down
to the guys that were down in the stream to stay down. I remember rounds hitting right in
front of my face in the dirt and sprayed dirt in my face.

RV: Could you see the enemy or were you just taking the fire?

TV: I kept looking in case they were trying to overrun us but I never did see one.
I didn’t see a soul. But they knew where we were and were aiming at us. It wasn’t just
casual fire; it was directed right at us. The guys in front were also firing into the branch
on the right where the ambush had come from and trying to rescue the people that were
shot and down up at the front. It was just absolute pandemonium. The firing tailed off. I
remember Sergeant G. was talking to the 3rd Platoon leader, an officer named Joe Dolock
that I’ve since met. His last name is D-o-l-o-c-k and they were in radio contact with the company commander. I think we were ordered—I assume that we were ordered to pull as many people as we could together and back out of there because it was just impossible to go forward. We couldn’t put enough fire onto the ambush site and we couldn’t walk through it without more people getting hurt. There were some dead bodies that we couldn’t get to because of the fire, the NVA field of fire. I mean, you just couldn’t get to them. So we had to leave some people behind and I guess the most important thing was getting everybody who wasn’t hit, you know, all the wounded out safely. At the time I didn’t know the numbers, but we ended up having six people killed that day. For many, many years I knew there was six or eight or something like that. We had to leave four of them out there. We took two of the bodies and all of the wounded. I ended up—I stayed up on the berm as security for everybody as we got organized and gathered everybody together. I stayed up there until just about the end and climbed down the bank into the stream and picked up as many rifles as I could.

RV: These are M-16s?

TV: M-16s, just so we wouldn’t leave them laying around there. I don’t know how many I had in my arms but probably enough that it would have made it very difficult for me to fire my own even. But for years and years I thought I was the last person backing out of that ambush site. We just basically retreated, walking backwards until we got back to our CP.

RV: How did you decide which bodies to take with you? Was it a function of safety? You know, which ones you could get and which ones you couldn’t get to?

TV: Yes. There were some that the NVA soldiers just had a bead on them and the terrain allowed them a shot a that body where we couldn’t shoot at them.

RV: Were any of them still alive that you know of?

TV: Americans?

RV: Yes.

TV: No. No, I’m certain that there was nobody alive. What I didn’t know was that Bobby Bussell had walked through the ambush and was beyond the kill zone and was still alive and was still out there.

RV: By himself?
TV: By himself, more or less. He was closer to Alpha and recon than anybody, but basically on his own. I’m not sure exactly how many soldiers he killed, but once we had backed out of there and retreated he knew that he had to get back to us. So he came back through the ambush site and I know he killed some of the enemy on his way through. He was awarded, later on awarded the Silver Star for his heroism that day. But I didn’t know that he was still out there and was just astounded to hear his story years later.

RV: So when did he hook back up with you guys?

TV: It was probably fifteen minutes after we all got back to the CP.

RV: What was your reaction when he walked up?

TV: Well, he was in the 3rd Platoon so he would have gone to his people and again, I never knew that—I just never knew that he had been out there, or that he came back, or that any of that had happened.

RV: Wow. That’s a heck of a story. I mean, he must have seen some incredible things. I guess he realized, “Oh, boy. The people behind me are down. I’m cut off.” I guess then he determined it was safe to go back?

TV: Well, it certainly wasn’t safe. I think just sheer determination on his part that the NVA may not have known that he was coming and he may have ambushed them. I’m not really sure. I’ve talked to him about it a few times but this is a subject that it’s very difficult, even today, to get into a lot of detail with. It’s very painful to talk about.

RV: With him or yourself or both?

TV: I think both. Certainly for me.

RV: Is that because you lost men you knew?

TV: I can’t really say that I knew them other than they were us. But again, things are so—I’m not sure of the right word, but so self-contained that I really didn’t know anybody in the 3rd Platoon. Here we were working with these folks, they were ten meters in front of us, but as far as knowing them or knowing their names, I did not know them at the time. But I do now and I’d like to read their names into this history if I could—

RV: Absolutely.

TV: —just because it’s so important.

RV: These are the men who were shot down?
TV: Yes.

RV: Okay. Tim, please spell them, if you can, if there are any questions, to make sure that we can transcribe them properly and make sure their names are there properly.

TV: I sure will. Phil Hernandez, H-e-r-n-a-n-d-e-z. Phil was in the 3rd Platoon, probably only a few weeks away from the end of his tour. I’m sure just a few weeks away from his tour. A person who had been in Charlie Company in 1968 wrote a book about his tour and his best friend was Phil Hernandez. So I communicated with him about Phil just to let him know that I was there when Phil died.

RV: When were you able to tell him this?

TV: This was in probably 1999.

RV: What was that like?

TV: Well, to be honest with you, when I was reading the book, I thought maybe he didn’t know that Phil had died. But then later on—and I was worried, “Oh, God. I’m going to have to tell him that.” But then later on it was clear that he did know that Phil had died and he had lost his friend. Next was Steven Pettis, P-e-t-t-i-s. We were able to carry Phil and Steve out. Actually, I think Steve was still alive and died a few minutes later after we got him back to the CP. Next was Joe Bragg, B-r-a-g-g. In recent years, I’ve been in touch with some of his family members. I guess a nephew of his that put a locator request out for folks that might have known his uncle. Next was Merlin Laber, M-e-r-l-i-n L-a-b-e-r. Next was Gary Clodfelter, C-l-o-d-f-e-l-t-e-r. I’ve been in communication with Gary’s brother-in-law. His sister, Gary’s sister, married this fellow and this fellow went out looking for information on his wife’s brother and several of us have communicated with him about Gary. Last was Winston Smith. Again, I never knew the names, never knew the exact numbers, but that’s something that I have been able to study on in recent years. It was a pretty bad day.

RV: It sounds like it. This all happened very quickly, as you’ve said.

TV: Very quickly, yes.

RV: Are you talking two or three minutes? Ten minutes?

TV: The initial fire that probably took most of the people down was probably a minute or less. But the fighting and the engagement itself was probably half-an-hour maybe, maybe forty-five minutes. We got back to our CP. We were told that there was
going to be a smoke barrage in the rice paddy and Alpha and recon were going to make a
jailbreak across there. All of our machine guns were set up on the right side and we were
told to put suppressing fire down to the right of the stream, just anywhere that there might
be a likely place to shoot. Our machine gunners and just about everybody else was going
to be firing into that. We also had, while all this was going on we had air strikes coming
in almost constantly. I remember seeing a Phantom come in so low and so slow that I
could see the pilot’s helmet. When he released the napalm canister, he released it to our
left and the canister spun, went past our field of vision and landed to the right, very close.
I could hear the canisters spinning in the air, that’s how close it was. I could hear it hit
the ground. But those folks did a wonderful job getting that kind of support in that close
to us. It killed a lot of NVA soldiers, I’m certain of that. The Phantoms also brought in
drag bombs that day or used drag bombs, where they would come in and deploy the
bomb that would put out like a little brake and then drop straight down. So that—I’m
sure that was for close—the purpose of that was to be able to support us that closely. The
smoke barrage started and later on we learned that the battalion had run out of smoke
rounds and so they also had to use white phosphorous rounds. So there was, in addition
to smoke everywhere in the field in front of us, there was also a number of white
phosphorous rounds going off. Then right in the middle of this we could see Alpha and
recon charging across the rice paddy. In my mind I likened it to a jailbreak, exactly, just
to lighten it up a little bit. But they’d had some tremendous casualties. It had been
almost constant combat, or contact for about thirty hours. More than thirty-five hours
probably, and their strength was down to minimal strength. They had to leave some of
their dead behind because they didn’t have enough people to carry them. They made sure
that they carried all the wounded and as many of the dead as they could but they had to
leave eight bodies behind. They came in to the CP right in our sector because Sergeant
G. testified to that later on. I can’t say that I witnessed this because I was looking out in
front and shooting my rifle but I know what happened and so I want to talk about it a
little bit.

RV: Okay.
TV: Most of Alpha and recon made it back, including the company commander of Alpha Company. His name was Captain Dunagan. I’ve just forgotten—because of a mental pause, I’ve forgotten his first name. Kern. Kern Dunagan, D-u-n-a-g-a-n.

RV: How do you spell Kern?

TV: K-e-r-n.

RV: Okay.

TV: He was told that some of his people didn’t make it through the smoke barrage, that they were still out there and he had already received two wounds. He had shrapnel in his jaw and you could actually see his teeth I was told, through the wound in his jaw and he was shot in the shoulder. He’d been in contact for thirty-five hours with an overwhelming enemy force. But he went back out into the field and found Sgt. Bob Tullos. His last name is T-u-l-l-o-s. Bob and three other people were carrying a body on a poncho when a white phosphorus round landed on Bob’s foot and blew his foot off and burned him and set everybody else that was in that detail on fire. Bob was laying there with his foot gone and Captain Dunagan found him and picked him up and carried him off the field back to us. The rest of the people were MIA (missing in action). He couldn’t find them. Nobody could find them. They were just missing.

RV: The body, I assume, was gone as well?

TV: The body was just a body and Captain Dunagan wanted to rescue Bob Tullos. As important as it was to get bodies out of there, it’s not worth your own life and it’s certainly good—the wounded and the living are more important. That was the priority. Anyway, Captain Dunagan carried Sergeant Tullos back into our CP and he was attended to and they stopped the—I think, actually, Captain Dunagan had already put a tourniquet on the stump of his leg. Sergeant Tullos survived that wound and he’s a good friend of mine today.

RV: I recognize the name. Has he been to the reunions?

TV: Yes, he has.

RV: I might have met him. You all are close today?

TV: Yes, we are.

RV: Tim, has the bond been over that incident or the service in Americal in general, or what do you think the bond is between the two of you?
TV: I think it’s that day. There is a general bond with all of those folks, but just the events of that day, it’s just a big deal.

RV: Um-hm. So you’re back at the CP. What happens then?

TV: We organized a Dustoff for all the dead and the wounded. I guess on the last—and actually, the battalion commander’s C&C chopper actually took a lot of the wounded away and the very last flight in, they took Captain Dunagan away. Took him back to LZ Professional for a real Dustoff back to the hospital in Chu Lai. [About a year later, Major Dunagan was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions on May 13 and 14, 1969.] I’ve got the numbers of how many folks were left out there. In round numbers, Alpha, Charlie, and recon had less than a hundred people for all three companies.

RV: Wow.

TV: Left in the field at the end of the day. I remember just an overwhelming outrage building in me. I was just so fired up and so—just so insane, so pissed off. I could really feel it. I remember it just building on me.

RV: That day? That night?

TV: That day. Right at the spot. If they’d have said, “Let’s go back out there,” I’d have been ready to go. It just gets you going. It’s just a blood lust is the simplest way to describe it. But what would actually happen was we’d go back and pick our rucksacks up. So we humped back to our rucksacks. It was pitch dark by then and we found out that another tragedy had occurred. About an hour after we’d left our rucks behind with a squad of the 3rd Platoon, they were guarding them, the battalion commander’s chopper flew over the area, saw some soldiers and opened up on them with an M-60. I didn’t know those folks, but one of the guys that was carrying a radio was talking on the radio, you know, screaming into the radio and had a bullet go through the handset cord. It missed him and had another bullet deflect into his wallet. I guess he was carrying a Kennedy half-dollar that stopped a round.

RV: This is friendly fire?

TV: This is friendly fire. I think I have reason to believe that at least one person returned fire but he didn’t hit anybody. Years later—it’s somebody I haven’t talked to personally, but he related he was so glad he didn’t kill anybody but he did return fire to
try to stop it because the fire was pretty prolonged. I guess they heard somebody on the
radio hollering. Roy Cordingley, that’s C-o-r-d-i-n-g-l-e-y, Roy Cordingley was shot, I
guess, two or three times in the gut and wounded terribly. The C&C chopper landed,
picked him up and took him back for Dustoff. But as near as I can find out, nobody ever
came and said one word to him, to apologize, to tell him how sorry they were or how it
happened. His wounds were really grievous and Roy still suffers from those wounds
today. Roy was actually the very first person that I encountered when I realized in 1998
that the Americal Division had a website and a locator and all that. Roy had done a
locator request and I wrote him back and said, “If you’re the guy that was guarding our
rucksacks, then I sure do remember you.” I guess the odd thing was Roy didn’t
remember what they were doing that day. His recollection of what their mission was
when he got hit—I mean he just lost it. I guess it’s the trauma of getting shot so terribly
and spending so much time in the hospital. But he didn’t recall that they were there
guarding the rucksacks even.

RV: How bitter was and is he about the fact that no one came and explained the
incident to him and offered an apology.

TV: He’s a remarkably un-bitter person. He’s just a gentle, nice guy. He wasn’t
at the last reunion, but he’s been to several. He’s just a very gentle, easy-going guy.

RV: Does that bother you or did it bother you that he never got an explanation?

TV: Oh, it does to this day. I remember saying to myself back at the time in 1969
and maybe for years afterwards, “If I ever got a chance to talk to this character, what
would I do or say?” I was very bitter. I’m not as gentle as Roy is.

RV: This person in the chopper, he’s a member of Americal, correct?

TV: Yeah. He’s a colonel.

RV: Do you know who he is? I mean, you don’t have to say his name but do you
know who this person is?

TV: I actually met him.

RV: Really?

TV: He attended a ceremony at Fort Knox a few years ago that was a dedication
of a training facility in honor of Kern Dunagan. He’s just a sad old guy. I couldn’t feel
or say anything. I just could not have any animosity towards him whatsoever. I just said, “Colonel, I was out there on the fourteenth and I’m glad to shake your hand.”

RV: That was very big of you to do that.

TV: Nah, it wasn’t. I couldn’t do or say anything different. What happened then and what he is now and who we were then and what are now is really two different things. I know he has some responsibility in his mind over all those people that got killed. So, you know, he had to live with that for all those years, too.

RV: Right.

TV: That would be tough. But while we were back gathering up those packs and hearing about what happened to Roy and the squad there, or what was left of the squad. I was asked to guard the prisoner for a few minutes.

RV: About how many people?

TV: Sir?

RV: About how many people?

TV: There was just one. It was the only POW we ever had. It was that same soldier that was yanked out of the spider hole. He’d been under guard all day and I don’t know how it happened but somebody told me just to guard him for a few minutes and then they’d take him back out of my hair. It was pitch dark and I was in a mood where what I really wanted to do was kill him but I couldn’t figure out how to do it quietly. I just really wanted to kill him but I didn’t have a knife or bayonet or anything or I would have killed him, I’m sure.

RV: Really?

TV: I was just that fired up. I just dared him to move. Anyway, he was just probably scared to death or overwhelmed by being captured.

RV: Did he try to speak to you?

TV: No.

RV: Do you remember what you said to him?

TV: Oh, it was probably hateful and threatening. It was probably inappropriate, hateful, threatening, and profane. I kind of wish I had that to live over again. I would probably do something different.

RV: Like what? What do you mean?
TV: I’d be more, I’d hope I’d be more, not kind, certainly wasn’t kind. But less brutal. But again, what I really wanted to do—I was hunting around for a knife or something, some quiet way that I could kill this guy. Of course, now I’m glad I didn’t. That would have been a huge mistake and that might have been one of those things I would have done that I didn’t want to live with or whatnot. So I didn’t and I’m glad I didn’t. It was too dark to find our own packs but everybody just grabbed a pack, grabbed a rucksack and we kept on humping. I remember we even found a rice paddy to walk through so we’d get nice and wet and found a hill somewhere and got up out of the rice paddy area into the high ground. I’m not sure if we actually formed a laager. I know we didn’t have positions assigned because we were all just physically spent, just totally wore out, just gone. We got into some semblance of a laager. I remember whoever’s rucksack I had, I hunted around inside for some food. He had one can of eggs in his rucksack. Those green eggs and that was it. But I ate them cold and basically just went to sleep.

RV: The tension psychologically, the fatigue, I guess psychologically and emotionally, is this what you’re describing? I mean I know physically you were tired, but is it added because of what happened?

TV: Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt, building up all that emotion, all that adrenaline, all those things that really get you going, that get you to the point where you just don’t—I wouldn’t say you don’t care but you might do things that are just more dangerous than you would normally do and maybe even a little more reckless. I don’t know, it’s just when you really get that much emotion going and that much anger, all these things tied together and then it stops, it just leaves you just drained. Plus it was physically a tough day. I’m sure we were low on water and it had been very hot. So I guess we got lucky because I remember distinctly the position that I was and we didn’t stand a guard or anything. We just got quiet and went to sleep.

RV: This day, the fourteenth of May obviously stands out in your mind as a huge day of significance for you. How have you dealt with that day over the years? This anger, the frustration? I know that being fired up, that died away after time probably, but the rest of it, how have you dealt with that?

TV: I never thought about it for years and years and years. That was a part of my—just totally walking away from Vietnam and just ignoring it or just making it go
away. So I never did think about it for years and years. Now I do think about it and what
I usually do is communicate with some of those other veterans. Joe Dolock is good about
sending an email out on May fourteenth. There might be a few people I might even call
or they might call me.

RV: So you all, not celebrate it, but you remember it every year?
TV: Oh, yeah. Bob Tullos remembers it every day. The date is in his email
address even.

RV: Really?
TV: Sure is. You know, thinking that I could go home and forget about it is
insanity. It’s crazy, because you can’t. You can never forget it, but that’s what I
attempted to do for nearly thirty years.

RV: You never talked about it until you had come to terms with it after thirty
years?
TV: I never talked about it with anybody ever until—probably the first time was
in 1999 and that would have been the thirtieth anniversary of that year and the first year I
got together with other ADVA (Americal Division Veterans Association) vets. Anyway,
the next morning, the fifteenth, we got up and got organized and got back together as
Charlie Company and 2nd Platoon and all those things because we were all jumbled up
together with Alpha Company and recon and it was just all mixed up. Having that
happen is very unusual. It puts you out a little bit, even, not being with the people you’re
supposed to be with. But we got ourselves organized and got our own packs back and
everything and all three companies started marching towards or walking towards LZ
Professional. It had gotten very hot, in fact overwhelmingly hot and we stopped and tried
to find a little shade. We were on the floor of the valley so there’s not much jungle there,
just bushes and shrubs and trees and rice paddies and whatnot. So it was very hot and we
just tried to find a little shade during the hottest part of the day and then continue on later.
One thing that I recall very well was the battalion commander’s C&C chopper flew over
us and fired at us.

RV: Really?
TV: Exactly.

RV: That’s incredible. This is the same guy?
TV: Same guy.

RV: My God. Now who’s spotting? Is it him?

TV: I don’t know. To this day I don’t know.

RV: Wow.

TV: He didn’t hit anybody.

RV: That’s got to be a bit troubling.

TV: Oh, it is. I can remember guys begging Sergeant G., you know, “Can we shoot at this son-of-a-bitch?” He said, “No, no, give me just a second with the radio here.” I mean we really wanted to shoot at him. I think the reality is they were taking a lot of fire everywhere they went in the AO and so they were on edge. I’ve looked at some of the battalion staff journals and that C&C chopper was taking a lot of fire.

RV: (Laughs) From the enemy or from you all?

TV: I’m not sure now. (Laughs) I’m really not certain. But it was taking a lot of fire and that would have made the door gunners jumpy and maybe made everybody on board jumpy.

RV: Sure.

TV: What happened though that really, really just totally aggravated the hell out of me was that some of the rounds hit very close, some of the tracer rounds and set the woods on fire. So we had to get up in the heat of the day and move. I remember being—that was what got me. Not being shot at so much as being forced to get up in the heat and move. Not a happy camper. But all three companies just said, “To hell with it.” We got to Professional, climbed up the side, and I remember the battalion XO was standing on the concertina wire, holding the wire down for us. I knew he had to be an officer because he was wearing a white T-shirt. I mean, you could have seen it twenty miles away.

RV: You all were wearing OD (olive drab)?

TV: Oh, mud.

RV: Yeah, at that point.

TV: Always.

RV: Did that mean a lot for him to be there to greet you?

TV: He was just a—yeah, I think it did. I think he was trying to be supportive. I didn’t know his name or even know what he was. But it turns out his name was Maj.
Lawrence Remener, R-e-m-e-n-e-r. That’s because he was the battalion executive officer
and he’s in the battalion staff journal. But I remember that bright white T-shirt. I don’t
remember seeing—I think that Delta Company had cleaned up all the NVA bodies out of
the wire. I don’t remember seeing a lot of the carnage. The LZ was shot up a bit. There
was evidence of incoming rounds and things that had happened. But earlier in the day on
the fifteenth, a Chinook helicopter had landed on the lower pad, on the lower hill and got
shot up by incoming .51-caliber machine gun fire that set it on fire and it burnt right to
the ground on the pad. It was totally burned up. I remember it even burned the end of
the rotors. I guess it’s because the helicopter was made out of magnesium. But it was
just a scorched place on the earth and some lumps where the engines would have been.

RV: And casualties?

TV: I don’t believe so. I don’t remember hearing about any casualties.

RV: May fifteenth. You all get back to Professional. Tell me what happens after
you come into the wire.

TV: First thing was noticing that Chinook helicopter down. Even though the
strength of the company was relatively small, it was pretty crowded there on Professional
with that many companies the first night. But we just doubled up in the bunkers and got
something to eat. We got C-rations. One thing I do recall, didn’t mean as much to me,
the people didn’t mean as much to me then as they do now because I didn’t know them.
But Alpha and recon had five MIAs after the battle on the fourteenth. Some of them
were carrying the litter that was hit by the white phosphorus round and on the evening of
the fifteenth, they walked into Bravo Company’s night laager position. They snuck up on
them and made a lot of noise so they wouldn’t get shot and basically just walked in a
said, “Here we are.”

RV: Wow.

TV: Everybody was ecstatic that they were alive, five people that were presumed
dead. They were all wounded, all burned and had wounds but they were all alive.

RV: That’s incredible. Did they tell you all what happened, or did you hear how
they kind of escaped and evaded, or evaded?

TV: I never really did. I never talked to any of those folks, but just for me then
and now, just knowing how alone you would feel is just the main thing. You would feel
tremendously alone. Hundreds of NVA soldiers running about, the idea of being captured. I’ve got to be honest with you, the idea of being captured was just totally out of the question to me. John Bernard and I had made a little pact amongst ourselves that whatever it took, we would not be captured no matter what.

RV: Meaning?

TV: Meaning that we would sit back-to-back and save ammunition until they had to come and get us. Not suicide, but make them kill us. But definitely not to surrender. You know, that was probably just out of a fear of having to endure, what we knew you’d have to endure if you were captured. We just couldn’t live with that.

RV: What did they tell you about what to do in that case? Were there instructions for you?

TV: I can’t think that I recall ever hearing anything other than the standard uniform code of military justice stuff. You know, what a prisoner’s supposed to do. There were classes on that in training. Nobody even talked about it Vietnam and no specific instructions other than just use your own good sense. I don’t know if those five guys—one of them was an officer. I don’t know if he had a map. I’m sure they didn’t have a radio. But the whole battalion just felt better about everything, I’m sure, whenever we learned that those guys had made it back and were alive. So amongst all this bad news was some really good news.

RV: Did the contact—and I know you just spoke of that—but in a deeper sense, did the contact affect the morale or how did the contact, this very negative experience, affect the morale? In the sense that you all had been out on patrol so many times, you had held yourself well, you had done well against the enemy and all of the sudden you walk in to something like this and some bad things happen. Does that mess with your confidence level or what? Or is it a disappointing feeling?

TV: For me, it was a disappointment to lose those folks. On one hand, we’re on a rescue mission and on the other hand, we’ve lost a lot of people. I don’t know that I gave it that much thought, Richard, as far as am I demoralized or not? It was a—you feel like you should have done better. I wish we had gotten through to Alpha Company so they didn’t have to come across that rice paddy. I always found a little element of failure
there that we didn’t get to them and felt sorry that we hadn’t. But we damn sure gave it a
hell of a try.

RV: So how much rest do you all get before you go back out?
TV: Well, what they did—I guess a number of things happened. The first night
we just crammed into the bunkers. The next day, I think it would have been the
sixteenth, they had Alpha and recon and Charlie Company move to a ridge outside the
perimeter. I’m not sure of the direction, but there was a ridge right beside Professional
that would really be—if I was attacking, that’s where I would attack from. (Coughs)
Excuse me for coughing.

RV: Sure.

TV: But they put us on that ridge and what I remember was the ground was nice
and soft and they told us we’d be there a couple days until we got resupplied and maybe
even some replacement troops and whatnot. We knew we’d be there a couple of days so
John and I—John Bernard and I dug a hell of a foxhole.

RV: (Laughs) What do you mean?
TV: It was just deep and just a hell of a fighting position. We could have done
some serious fighting from there for a long time if we had to. If we had to, we could get
way down inside and actually built an area where we could escape almost a direct hit. On
the sixteenth the LZ was still getting a lot of sniper fire and .51-caliber machine gun fire
whenever a helicopter—whenever a helicopter would come in, somebody somewhere
would fire at it and then they’d have to pick up and move, I guess, if we’d return fire. It
was not a game, but very perilous being on a helicopter or being anywhere near a
helicopter. I can’t remember how many days we were there exactly. I thought for years
that we stayed there four or five days but it was probably more like six or seven days
altogether, getting resupplied and put some replacements in. We were down to probably
sixty people or so. I remember the second or third day, though, the 2nd Platoon went on a
patrol out looking for one of those machine guns. I actually had an incident that I related
in the questionnaire to you that I was walking point and was going up in between the
saddle of two hills. I hadn’t really gotten to the highest ground there yet, but was still
sheltered by the hills. A helicopter landed on LZ Professional behind me and the
machine gun that we were going after fired right over our heads at the chopper. We

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dropped down until the fire had stopped and the helicopter left and I was expected to continue on. As we got higher and higher, we were going to be visible to that machine gunner. They told me he was after helicopters and that’s why we had to go stop him. But I wasn’t really thrilled with the idea of exposing myself to that machine gun. I was just really, really concerned and scared and I remember having a discussion about it and that’s when John Bernard who was carrying a 60 at the time offered to come up and walk slack for me with a 60. That just gave me enough confidence to pack up and go on.

RV: Was it hard to get back out after what had happened? Did you act any differently?

TV: No, no different.

RV: Not hard to get back out?

TV: Not hard, no, as long as I had water. I remember that day, I had been told that we were only going just a short distance and we’d be back early. As it turns out, we humped all over the place for that machine gun and I ended up running out of water. But that was just something that I tried to manage, you know, was my water supply. If they’d have said we were going to be out all day, I’d have carried enough water where I’d have had plenty. But I guess things happen. But we hunted for that machine gun, hunted and hunted, and we walked right to the suspected location but they had moved already. We never did find that one. I can remember one day, everybody on Professional was sitting, looking out towards the valley and a chopper was coming in and there was fire and then machine gun fire, including two or three accidental tracer rounds. The NVA had purposely pulled their tracer rounds out. Somebody screwed up and left three or four tracer rounds in and we spotted the location and immediately called artillery on it. I mean it was like all of us, from where we were on the ridge and all the guys on Professional saw those tracers and saw exactly where it came from and got maps out and was trying to tell the cannon cockers where to fire. They had probably already spotted it and called their own fire mission. We put a devastating amount of artillery on that position and took that gun out. That was a good feeling.

RV: Right. When you have an incident like that where you’re really able to effectively strike back, I assume that does feel good. It gives you a sense of accomplishment.
TV: Oh, yes. Definitely. So you have plusses and minuses, I guess, knowing most of the time whenever we’re calling artillery or whatever kind of firepower in that it’s having a bad effect on the enemy.

RV: Because you had so much to call in. I mean, you could really rain it down on them.

TV: Well, we had it and used it, of course.

RV: Um-hm. Can you speak to the significance of that? I mean, having that on your side? You talked about this in the context of what the enemy had and did not have, but what about your side?

TV: Well, what I’ve learned, I guess a facet of that is our battalion strength was so low on the fifteenth that I don’t know if Americal Division or somewhere in the organization declared a tactical emergency. I never knew that for the rest of my tour. I didn’t understand the significance of it, but that was the beginning of Operation Lamar Plain. That was the name of the operation from the fifteenth on. What it meant was I guess a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division was put under the control of the Americal Division and sent to our AO and then the 1st of the 46th was put under their operational control. All of which I’ve read about, it didn’t mean a thing to me at the time. Except for I never really saw much of the 101st but they apparently were in the AO and engaging the enemy and they had a lot more helicopters than we did, especially Loaches (LOHs, light observation helicopters). I remember there was a lot of activity of Loaches flying around. That’s a little reconnaissance helicopter. But they would also arm them and engage the enemy with small arms out of Loaches even, drop hand grenades out of the things. I guess the point was the Americal didn’t have jack for helicopter support compared to what the 101st had. I don’t know what or why, but we just didn’t have the resources that they had, which I found crazy. I mean, we were a big division. It was probably political or something. I don’t know. Maybe there’s a reason for it. But that’s something I’ve learned since then. It didn’t really affect me at the time or I didn’t have any knowledge of it at the time. But the NVA had zero for helicopters, the Americal Division had some, and 101st might have had the rest, I don’t know. It doesn’t seem fair, is what I’m trying to relate, or even smart. I guess the next important thing that happened, though, was six or seven days later we got rested up. Even though we had gone on patrols, we were
rehydrated and we walked over to Professional and got on some helicopters and they took
us back out to the—wow, I’m talking now and I’m not really sure that I remember being
helicoptered out there, but we must have been.

RV: Well, that’s okay. That detail is—

TV: I’m just not sure now. We got back to the battlefield.

RV: How far away was it? I mean, probably you were helicoptered out there.

TV: Four kilometers. Four or five kilometers, I think.

RV: How long would that have taken you all to walk? Approximately, of course.

TV: In that kind of heat, with that many people, that would probably take a day
or two.

RV: Right.

TV: That’s a pretty good hump in over a hundred degree heat.

RV: Absolutely. So do you remember taking a day or two walking out there?

TV: I just don’t know. I can’t remember. I was thinking that we got CA’d out
there in choppers but I’ll be damned if I can remember.

RV: Okay.

TV: But we did get back out there and what I do remember is we were there to
recover our bodies. Charlie Company had four and Alpha and recon had eight. I
remember not wanting to bring home that memory. I remember specifically John and I
went to Sergeant G. and we said, “Sergeant G., we were down there on the fourteenth.
We really don’t want to go back down there now.” He said, “That’s fine.” Although he
was also out there on the fourteenth and supervised whatever was needed to recover the
bodies. That was just a memory that I didn’t want to have so John and I set up security or
part of the securities for the people who went down to the stream bed and recovered the
bodies.

RV: So you specifically said, “Listen, I don’t want to be back there?”

TV: Yes.

RV: It was because if the fourteenth, or was it because you were actually going to
get the bodies from the fourteenth?

TV: It’s because of getting the bodies from the fourteenth, knowing what kind of
condition they’d be in.
RV: How important was it for you all to get back out there to get those bodies?
TV: Oh, of critical importance. I’m surprised now that it took as long as it did.
RV: It’s almost a week, I think.
TV: Yeah. At least a week. I don’t know the exact date but it had to be at least a week.

RV: Tim, do you mind describing that? The recovery of your comrades’ bodies to people listening to this in the future who are not military and who might not quite understand the absolute need to get back out there in hostile territory, putting yourselves in danger, at risk again in doing this?
TV: I didn’t do it so I can’t give you a clear description.
RV: Well, not actually the description, but just the idea of this, the need to do this.
TV: Getting our people back together and getting them home, getting their remains back to their families, it’s very important. Everybody thinks about, “What if that was my remains? What if my family didn’t get me back? What kind of closure would there be for them?” It’s a little bit of empathy of, “That could be me.” So the mission of recovering the bodies is so important to everybody just because it could be you. But physically doing it is—it could be very tough on a person. I remember John and I both, we talked about it on the way out there and I don’t know who thought of it first, me or him, but we thought it would be nice to not have that memory and that’s why we pulled security rather than actually going down and helping bag the remains. The 3rd Platoon medic, Alan Johnson, did the identification as much as possible in recovering the remains and making whatever identification that you could and getting all of it done properly and the paperwork done properly.

RV: Can you make any comments on the medics and their role within your unit and what you all thought of them?
TV: Oh, they were, you know people who exposed themselves to fire to help us if we were wounded so—and also who on a day-to-day basis carried vitamins, and medicine, and bandages, did stuff, foot powder—little things. As well as crawling forward under fire to help somebody who’s hurt was just very important to us. They were brothers. Basically anything that they wanted or needed, any protection they
needed or wanted, they would get it from us for sure because we thought so highly of
them, respected their bravery and courage so much. Important folks. Also the task of
taking care of the remains of our brothers, that’s a tough job.

RV: I can only imagine.

TV: I remember while we were securing the area, we found some indentations in
the ground where a resupply helicopter had come in to—I’m not sure if it was to bring
supplies out/in or to take wounded or bodies out for Alpha Company in their part of the
battlefield. But one of the pilots had been shot and killed and the helicopter apparently
made a hard landing or maybe tried to take off and hit the ground. I remember seeing
where the marks or where the skids had hit the ground in this area. We had heard about
the helicopter pilot getting shot. The other pilot flew the helicopter out of there and it
wasn’t something I witnessed but I did see indentations in the ground where the skids had
hit the ground. For a Huey to do that is a pretty hard hit, but it didn’t crash. But that’s
one thing I remember while we were looking around while the bodies were being
recovered.

RV: So once you get the bodies back in, did you all stay out in the field or did
you come back to Professional?

TV: Stayed out in the field. We started patrolling. We separated from Alpha and
recon and just went off on our own.

RV: The same mission? I mean the same kind of thing, search-and-destroy?

TV: Search-and-destroy. One important thing that happened that I never knew
about until thirty years later was that about a year after May fourteenth, Captain
Dunagan—I think by then he was a major—he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his
actions.

RV: Oh, really?

TV: Knowing that that happened, finding out that that had happened was very
rewarding and fulfilling to me. It was just a good thing to know that somebody’s actions
had been acknowledged and the furor of that battle had been enough to earn him the
Medal of Honor.

RV: Right. Did you all ever think about things like that, medals, awards?

TV: Never.
RV: What about your officers?

TV: I think a lot of them probably wanted to get a CIB real bad. I don’t know that—I really don’t know, Richard. It’s something I never thought about at all. I didn’t care about it and the only award that I ever got that really mattered was a CIB.

RV: So what else happened there in May and then going into June as far as the unit is concerned?

TV: At one point, Bravo Company got mortared and suffered a tremendous amount of wounded casualties. Excuse me just a second. (Coughs) Sorry about that. The battle went on. I read that the 101st had brought in two battalions of infantry and between May and August suffered what I consider huge casualties—over a hundred killed.

RV: Wow.

TV: But I can’t say that I really knew about any of that while it happened. I just didn’t know about it. (Coughs) Sorry again.

RV: It’s okay.

TV: Charlie Company didn’t have any more heavy engagements that I recall. I just can’t recall other than Bravo Company getting mortared. I think that was the day that I spent one night back on Professional, out of the field is when that happened. I got back the next day and life went on.

RV: Okay. As time goes by, are you thinking about your time in-country, about getting out, things like that? Kind of the larger context, the larger picture.

TV: I was thinking about an R&R.

RV: I bet you were.

TV: I think we knew we were headed for a stand-down at the end of June and I’m not sure when I would have wanted an R&R, but I know I was thinking about it and planning it.

RV: What were you planning?

TV: I was planning to go Penang, Malaysia, because I had been there before.

RV: You said, I think in our last session, because it was one of the most beautiful, interesting places you had been.

TV: Yes, and I also had a girlfriend there.

RV: Oh, really?
TV: Yeah.
RV: From the previous trip?
TV: Yeah.
RV: Really? Okay.
TV: I actually corresponded with her a few times.
RV: Tell me about that. You corresponded when you came back to the United States after you finished that cruise and got into the military and then you continued while in Vietnam?
TV: Uh-huh. Not a serious correspondence. You know, this wasn’t a love affair or anything but she was a very nice person. Just a few letters, but I really wanted to go back and see her again and I wanted to go back to Penang because it was just such a nice area. It was just such a nice town. I just felt comfortable there and you could stay in a really first-class hotel for dirt cheap there. You could ride around in a trishaw.
RV: And relax.
TV: And relax.
RV: Did you and any of your friends, were you guys talking about R&Rs and what you wanted to do, where you wanted to go, what you would be doing on the R&Rs, things like that?
TV: Yeah.
RV: I mean, you might not be able to comment on it right now but I’ve heard that one of the things that men look forward to, those who are in the field, you all would talk about, “Here’s where I want to go, here’s what I want to do.” Then when you would actually go out and do those things, come back and say, “Yeah, let me tell you the stories.”
TV: Yeah, that pretty much—I’m sure that R&R was a big conversation, you know, about where we’d go or where we’d been. Guys that got to take one came back and talked about it and that was a glimmer of the real world or even an imitation world. A fun one, a safe one, gave you something to look forward to. Some of the married guys wanted to go to Hawaii so they could catch up with their wives. (Coughs) Excuse me. I think by 1969, Australia was probably a popular R&R place, also. Sydney.
RV: Definitely. So continue chronologically. Did you all get the stand-down or not?

TV: Well, at the end of June—I’m not sure of the exact date—but we were on the backside of a mountain that faced LZ Professional, walking up the backside of this mountain and intending to laager somewhere near the top. Then the next day we walked down the valley and climbed onto Professional and catch then helicopters in for the stand-down. The day before the stand-down, I was walking point climbing the mountain and having to cut a trail with a machete. It was very steep and pretty close to the top. I was very, very tired and got careless with the machete and hit my right knee with the blade. It just cut, and, oh, it just scared me and hurt.

RV: How bad was the wound, can you describe it?

TV: Right on top of my knee at an angle. I’m left-handed so I’m swinging the machete with my left hand and had my rifle in my right hand. Right on top of my knee.

RV: A full blow?

TV: A full blow.

RV: Instead of on what you were cutting.

TV: Yeah, my right leg was probably bent, flexed because of the hill being so steep. Imagine climbing the side of the steep hill. I put about a three-and-a-half inch gash across the top if it, right down to the bone.

RV: On the kneecap or above it?

TV: On the kneecap, which was probably pretty lucky. It seemed to bleed pretty good. The medics came right away and slit my pants and got a bandage on it and somebody helped me to the top of the hill and the guys cut an LZ there. I remember whatever C-rations I had and radio—I knew I was getting MEDEVAC’ed so I handed my radio to somebody and my C-rations to anybody else that wanted them and jumped on a MEDEVAC helicopter. They cut an LZ for me, I think I said, and I jumped on a MEDEVAC and waved goodbye and that was the last I saw of Charlie Company.

RV: Wow. How fast did that all happen?

TV: Very, very quick. There was no time to discuss it with anybody. It just happened and I was out of there on my way back to Chu Lai to the hospital. The next day, Charlie Company did go on to Professional. I mean you could see Professional from
the LZ that they cut at the top of the hill, down in the valley below us. The next day, Charlie Company humped down there, got on the hill and some Chinooks picked them up and took the whole company back to Chu Lai. A buddy of mine from high school was the door gunner on one of those Chinook helicopters. I don’t really remember how it came to be that he knew I should have been there. But more than a year later, we met back home and he mentioned that he had picked up my company. It didn’t dawn on me at the time but he was with the 101st Airborne. Matter of fact, it just did dawn on me.

But somehow or another, he knew that I was supposed to be there and asked about me and had been told I was MEDEVAC’ed the day before. It was just an interesting little tidbit that happened. I can’t put reason to it but he knew I was supposed to be there and knew that to ask.

RV: Tim, let me ask you about leaving the field. You said this all happened very quickly and you’re out of there and C Company is gone from your daily life. What is that like emotionally, psychologically? Perhaps at that time you’re focusing more on your knee.

TV: At the time, I didn’t think it was that bad of a wound. I hadn’t had any medical attention yet other than the medics bandaging it up. I expected to go back and get it patched up and be back in the field, is what I expected would happen. I guess in truth, my focus was just on what was happening. You know, riding the helicopter, making sure my weapon wasn’t loaded, and then getting to the evac hospital where they treat everybody like they’re a trauma patient. They have to deal with your weapons and rucksack and all that stuff. I remember before I got into the hospital, somebody had injected me with a—oh, what do you call it?

RV: Morphine?

TV: No.

RV: Tetanus?

TV: Tetanus and they had marked a T on my forehead. Then they asked me, “Was it spurting blood?” I said, “I’m not really sure.” It seemed to bleed pretty good. So they got everybody ready before they took the compress bandage off and it really wasn’t that bad at all. It wasn’t spurting arterial blood or anything. It was just bleeding.

RV: What was this facility like? Can you describe it physically?
TV: I think it was a Quonset hut building, I think. Sometime in the timeframe of me being in or near the hospital, the place had been—I guess every now and then they received rocket fire from these huge rockets, the huge Soviet-made rockets that the Viet Cong or the NVA had. They weren’t very precise. They couldn’t aim them, but they could launch them from far away [outside] the perimeter of Chu Lai and every now and then it would inflict casualties. A nurse from the hospital I went to—I think it was a 312th Evac but I’m not certain of that. But a nurse in the Americal Division was killed, either right before I got there or after I got there, by a rocket. Her name was Sharon Lane. I think she was the only female person killed by hostile fire during the war.

RV: Yes. We’ve been in contact with her family, actually. So yeah, I’m aware of that and you’re right about that. She was the only nurse killed by enemy fire, by combat.

TV: It would have been either late June or early July because I remember hearing people talk about it. What I remember is sitting on a gurney. Somebody came by and took my uniform off. I was wearing a T-shirt and fatigue pants and the fatigue pants were slashed and they took that off and I guess tucked them underneath the gurney. But I was just sort of sitting there bare-ass naked and didn’t really like that and complained about that.

RV: Completely naked?

TV: Completely naked.

RV: Wow.

TV: People were coming and going and could really care less. I remember a male orderly wanted to start an IV. They were going to sew my leg up in a little while and he wasn’t good at starting IV’s. One thing with me is I can’t look when I get a shot or when somebody sticks me like that, so I have to close my eyes, turn my head or whatever. I was doing that but there was a lot of pain. I looked and there was also a lot of blood where he was stabbing and missing, and stabbing and missing, and I was bleeding pretty good. I remember grabbing him by the scruff of his shirt and telling him he had one more shot and that was it and he went and got somebody else and they started the IV with no problem. Somebody got a sheet on me then and basically took me in, sewed me up, put my uniform back on. I remember somebody brought me like a deli
sandwich of some sort. But it was a really good-looking sandwich with potato chips and a 7-Up, and I couldn’t eat the food. My stomach was just—I don’t know. I couldn’t eat it. I really wanted it bad because I would have killed for that earlier in the day.

RV: What was it then that kept you?

TV: I was just so, just the trauma of having people sticking needles in your arms and sewing you up and being through the hospital experience. But what was a little unusual, I thought, was they put my uniform back on, my nasty, filthy uniform and sent me to an aid station. It was a place where a lot of guys were recovering from malaria and whatnot. I think the day of the week this happened was a Friday. I got into a bed, still wearing my fatigue pants and stinking to high heaven and just went to sleep. I remember the next morning, everybody in the place—it was kind of like a ward of cots—everybody got up and went to the beach and I was the only person there. I was the only person in the room and it seemed like everybody, all the orderlies and whatnot had all gone to the beach. I had to get up and go to the bathroom and it was a good long hike to the outhouse and my leg was hurting. I don’t know if I had a crutch or not even.

RV: There was no one there to assist you?

TV: There was nobody to assist me.

RV: So everybody was gone?

TV: Everybody was gone. I mean, there was probably somebody there but when I needed to go to the bathroom there was just nobody there. But I managed to take care of it and get back in the bunk and basically the same thing happened on Sunday. Monday morning everybody was back and somebody came around to look, to check and I was running a fever and my leg was swollen up. They took the bandage off and it was swollen to the extent that the stitches were ready to bust.

RV: What was it, infected?

TV: It was infected.

RV: Even with the tetanus? I mean that’s going to protect against the metal and all that, but something had gotten in there.

TV: Who knows? It was just that my skin was so dirty that it was probably covered with every kind of germ that ever was. (Laughs) An interesting thing happened. They sent an ambulance, which was—yeah, it was an ambulance. They put me in a
wheelchair and I sat on the point of the end of a crutch and had the other end of crutch
that goes into your shoulder underneath my legs, supporting my foot to keep my leg from
bending because it was really painful to even bend it just a tiny bit. They got me on an
ambulance and put me someplace and I was in there and they were looking at it and
talking about it and I was explaining where I had been and what had happened and they
said, “Oh, you’re in the wrong place.” This nurse, round-eyed lady American nurse,
came and said, “Well, there’s another ambulance out there that’s getting ready to go,” to
where I needed to be. “Let’s get him on there.” So she was pushing my wheelchair
down a ramp to the back door and my leg hit the concrete. I must have screamed or I
might have even passed out from the pain, but I remember her just trying to comfort me
because it just hurt so bad. But they got me back to the place where I started. The same
doctor came and looked at it and basically he took the stitches out and had to let it heal
from the inside out. It was pretty gross-looking with all the pus and infection and
whatnot. I did get, finally, rid of my uniform and got a little hospital gown or pajamas or
something. I remember getting shots of penicillin. It was a huge syringe and it felt like a
big square needle but it was in the hip and they would come by morning and night, I
guess, maybe three times a day, with this huge syringe of penicillin asking, “Which side
did I prefer?” After a day or two, it didn’t matter. Just do your best because it hurt so
bad. But they bound my leg up with a huge bandage and poured hot water on the
bandage and had some sort of heating pack thing, a chemically reactive heating pack to
heat the area and draw the infection out, plus getting penicillin at least twice a day or
however often it was. It was remarkable.

TV: At this point, did you think you were going to be evacuated out of the
country or do you think you’re going to be rejoining Charlie Company?

RV: At this point, did you think you were going to be evacuated out of the
country or do you think you’re going to be rejoining Charlie Company?

TV: I still thought I was going to be rejoining but I thought it was going to be a
while now because I was actually in the hospital. At one point, probably the sergeant
major or first sergeant of the company—somebody I didn’t know but somebody from the
company rear came and visited. I remember while he was there talking they changed the
bandage and it was pretty nasty bandage. But he could tell I was really ill. Four or five
days later the doctor said, “Well, we’re going to send you to Japan.” All I could think of
was, “The farther I am from Vietnam, the better off I am, so send me on.” I got evacuated to Cam Ranh Bay.

RV: Um-hm. About what time is this? This is in July?

TV: This is probably about the fifth or seventh or so of July, somewhere in there. Maybe a couple of days later. I got sent to Cam Ranh Bay and I remember I was getting transferred from a gurney to a bed or something or other and a male nurse, he was trying to be polite, but he said, “You’re the stinkingest thing that’s ever walked the face of the earth,” or something like that. I said, “Damn right. I haven’t had a shower in four months or something.” He said, “Would you like a shower?” I said, “I’d do anything for a shower.” He rigged up a plastic covering over my leg and put a chair in a shower and gave me a brush, and a bar of soap, and some shampoo and just said, “Have at it.” I must have spent an hour in the shower. It was a wonderful experience to finally get clean.

RV: I bet so.

TV: I remember being amused by him thinking—he was afraid to tell me how bad I stunk.

RV: Oh, yeah?

TV: As if I was proud of it or happy with it or whatnot or not showering on purpose. In Chu Lai, nobody bathed me. I tried to wash myself but that’s just the way it was. I did make that MARS phone call to my home the day before I left and spoke to my sister and we really didn’t communicate well because of her not understanding how to say, “Over.”

RV: Um-hm. Did you give her a hard time about that later?

TV: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Definitely. She was kind of upset, I’m sure, because what I was telling her, she couldn’t hear and there was just no communication. I think I spent one night in Cam Ranh Bay, part of it in the shower, and flew on a C-141 MEDEVAC to Japan. I’m a little fuzzy on where it is. It was Clark Army Hospital, I believe, but I couldn’t swear to that and I think it’s near Yokosuka or Yokota.

RV: I’m looking at a map right now, Tim, but go ahead.

TV: Well, I’m just not sure which one it was. I’m not really positive it was Clark Hospital, but I believe it was. I remember when they wheeled me in, somehow or another I had the impression that this doc was a Hawkeye Pierce kind of doc or at least I
assigned that to him later on because he took one look and said, “You’re going home, buddy.” In fact, he asked me where my home was so he could find the best place to send me. I was just elated, just ecstatic and totally—I was now starting my disassociation with Vietnam. It guess that’s the closest you could put to it, just putting it behind me, putting it away from me and forgetting about my buddies and trying to forget everything that happened and everything I did.

RV: Did you purposely make this decision of, “I’ve got to forget this. I’ve got to move forward,” or was this something that kind of happened naturally, looking back at that?

TV: I think it just happened naturally. At first I just wanted to just get on with my life. Why I just totally wanted to forget about my buddies and all those people there, I just don’t know. But I think they were part of it and if I wanted to forget Vietnam and combat, they got lost, too.

RV: So you said—let me make sure I heard you right—you wanted to forget about them as well? I mean, not in a malicious sense but—

TV: I had to yeah. They were part of the deal. That, of course, for me is a huge regret to this day. I wished I had done the exact opposite. I wished I had done a lot of things different. But that one thing of trying to put it away from me, not just behind me but away from me, to keep it farther than arm’s length was just the wrong thing to do. It was not good for me, it was not good for—it just wasn’t the right thing to do. That was reality back then. I’ve spoken to other people who felt very much like I did and maybe it’s just a natural thing to do.

RV: Well, at the time, that worked for you, obviously, psychologically.

TV: Yeah, it did. It sure did.

RV: Well, Tim, this might be a good stopping point for us today. How about that?

TV: Okay.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Tim Vail. Today is December 6, 2005, and we’re continuing, Tim, with your story. You had been evacuated to Japan and you get the word that you’re going to be going back to the United States. I wanted to ask you about what Japan was like. I know you don’t get out and see it, I suspect, but can you describe the facilities there? You said that you were at Yokosuka, I think you said, and you thought Clark Army Hospital. Can you tell me about the facilities there and what it looked like and how different it was from where you were just a few days before?

TV: It was a modern hospital. I didn’t really get to see much of Japan at all. From the Air Force base where we landed they put us on a bus that was equipped to hold stretchers. You could see a little of the countryside as we drove to the Army base, but really very little. It was interesting to me to be in Japan and I wished I could have—I guess I wanted to be able to sightsee or to see more, but I just couldn’t do it. But the hospital there was multi-storied, modern, the folks were awful nice to deal with and, of course, getting the news that I was heading back to the States elated me. I was just very happy.

RV: How long were you there in Japan?

TV: I guess about a week, maybe eight or nine days.

RV: Was the—I’m sorry go ahead.

TV: They continued the penicillin assault, but also they splinted my leg to immobilize it. It just continued to heal from the inside out, and drain.

RV: The pain was, I guess, lessening and lessening?

TV: If I moved my leg at all, it was pretty painful. You know, it was just an open wound. The doctors made a point of saying that flexing my leg would tend to move the infection around or might force it into my bloodstream. That’s why they splinted it, was to keep it immobile. It had the good effect of stopping the spread of the infection, but it also kind of locked up on me after a while.
RV: Tell me about your feelings about leaving Southeast Asia. I mean, you said you were elated. I guess now you realize your war is over. How did that feel?

TV: Huh. I never thought of it in those terms before but that’s exactly the circumstance. Even after I got evacuated to Japan, the likelihood of going back to Charlie Company and back to the war was still there. Just hearing that I was going home just took a big load off my shoulders. No more getting shot at. That was just a damned good thing.

RV: Tell me about the trip home, then. You’re there about a week. Tell me about the transfer and how you got home or got back to the United States.

TV: They put us on an Air Force C-141 again. A bus ride to the Air Force base and then in the back of a C-141 that was rigged for stretchers. It was a whole planeload of us. Some guys were ambulatory and some were stretcher cases. We flew a very long flight to Anchorage, Alaska, and the ambulatory got off the airplane there but the rest of us, we just stayed on board.

RV: What did you do on board? Did you sleep? Did they give you a sedative?

TV: Did a lot of sleeping. I think I was probably taking something for the pain so I remember doing a lot of sleeping. Oh, I also remember sometime during the flight a nurse gave me a back rub. (Laughs) That was just such a comforting—just having contact with a round-eyed woman was a good thing. She was probably older but just having that human contact was just so enjoyable, so pleasant that I remember—I never forgot it. (Laughs) It was nice.

RV: Yeah, yeah. Were you disappointed that you never got down to Penang?

TV: Later on I was. At that point, I don’t think I was even thinking about Penang or R&R or anything else, other than just getting home.

RV: So after you left Alaska, where did you all go?

TV: Went to, I believe, Clark Air Force Base in Illinois for refueling and then landed at Andrews Air Force Base and went to a hospital there for the night. I remember a high-ranking officer came by and visited and welcomed us home and that sort of thing. The next day we flew on a Navy airplane, a prop-type airplane, to Norfolk Naval Air Station and then a bus ride over to the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. Of course, Norfolk
was my home. I don’t really remember communicating with my folks or when I did. I
guess I must have called them once I got there and then they came down.

RV: Once you got to Portsmouth?
TV: To Portsmouth, yes.

RV: I guess they knew from your sister that you were on your way home or was
that even clear?

TV: I don’t think it was clear until I actually got there. [During this time the
Army sent my parents a telegram stating that I was being evacuated because of a leg
wound. It upset my mom a lot because she couldn’t tell if I still had a leg or not.]

RV: What was it like talking to your parents there, locally, again?
TV: Oh, it was wonderful. I guess their joy in knowing that I was home safe and
out of harm’s way, just seeing that in your parents is a good thing. By the way, Richard,
I arrived home on July twentieth and the news at the time was Ted Kennedy’s problems
up in—

RV: Chappaquiddick.
TV: Chappaquiddick and the Apollo mission to the moon.

RV: Wow, what timing.
TV: Yeah, it was just really interesting. I mean, the Ted Kennedy thing wasn’t
interesting at the time other than it was big in the news but certainly the Apollo mission
was.

RV: Oh, yeah. Were you able to watch all that on television?
TV: Uh-huh.

RV: How did that make you feel about your country? I mean, you’re over there
fighting this war, this pretty nasty war—and, of course, by this time it’s not determined
whether we’re winning or losing. We’re negotiating in Paris, and then we put a man on
the moon. How did that strike you?

TV: It was certainly a proud moment for the country and I’ve always thought that
space exploration was a good thing, that the expense resulted in scientific breakthrough
and was just good for industry and good for knowledge and caused other things to happen
and it had good results. So yeah, I was very happy to see that. It was an important day in
history.
RV: So the reunion with your family was very positive as you remember?
TV: Oh, it was wonderful.
RV: Do you remember what you ate and what you thought of being back in the country? Was it—were you thinking, “Okay, family. I’m going to get a good meal. I want to see my hometown.” What were your thoughts? What did you do? I mean, I know you’re confined to the hospital also.
TV: I was confined to the hospital and stuck in bed so there wasn’t a whole lot I could do. I could maneuver around a little bit in a wheelchair after a while, after a day or two. The food was wonderful. Even if it was institution food, compared to C-rations the food in all the hospitals was better than I’d had in a long time. I was starting to gain weight again. I think by the last day in the field—I don’t remember when I got weighed, but somewhere along the line I did get weighed and I weighed a 135 pounds and when I went to Vietnam I weighed 170.
RV: Wow. That’s quite a bit of weight lost. Did your parents comment on this?
TV: Oh, yeah. I was skin and bones.
RV: Who else did you see besides your mother and father?
TV: My grandmother. My mom and my grandma were both intent on—or looking forward to the opportunity of putting weight on me and stuffing me full of home cooking and whatnot. Probably my pastor came by, I’m sure. The girl that I’d met just a few days before I went to Vietnam and I’d corresponded with, she came to the hospital. My life-long buddy from the Boy Scouts, Dave Harrison, I’m sure he came by. I guess that’s pretty much it.
RV: Um-hm, okay. How long did you stay there at Portsmouth?
TV: After a few more weeks I was actually able to get up and start walking again. I had a couple of problems. One was the soles of my feet turned just hard as a rock, just dry and hard from being dried out and the skin actually cracked when I put weight on it. Of course, my knee was stiff. I think I was discharged the end of August. I think it was the end of August.
RV: So that gives you what? About eight weeks or six weeks in the hospital?
TV: Uh-huh, that’s eight weeks.
RV: By the end of eight weeks, how mobile were you? How back to normal were you?

TV: I’d been taking physical therapy on my knee and bending exercises and whatnot. I could walk but it was with a pronounced limp. I remember my parents, when they came to pick me up my dad had bought a Volkswagen. He’d always had Buicks before and now he was driving a Volkswagen.

RV: Do you remember what kind it was?

TV: It was a Super Beetle, just beige. It didn’t have a lot of legroom and I had to really kind of manipulate to get my right leg in the passenger’s compartment. But I did and got home and that was a really good sight to get home and see my parents’ house where I grew up and they now had an in-ground pool.

RV: Huh, okay.

TV: One of the things I remember from first getting home was my grandmother took a look at my feet and in the evenings she would sit on the floor in front of the chair where I was sitting and soak my feet and then she had some sort of pumice stone or whatnot that she would scrape the calluses off. She worked on them for a week or two and got them shined up and a very thick layer of callus off my feet which made it easier to walk. It took the pain away.

RV: What were you thinking about Vietnam? Or were you thinking about where you’d just been two months previous?

TV: I’m certain I wasn’t thinking about it at all. I was every day working hard at not thinking about Vietnam and it was a definite effort on my part to put it behind me or to put it away from me, to not think about it.

RV: Did your parents or any members of your family or your buddy, Dave, did they ask you about Vietnam, about what had happened and what you did?

TV: Yeah, I guess my parents probably didn’t talk about it at all or didn’t ask much.

RV: Why, do you think?

TV: Because my dad had been through a war and my mom knew how my dad felt about war and how he’d talked about it or didn’t talk about it. My sister was really too young to—well, she wasn’t that young, but she was just glad that I was home. I don’t
think she thought much about—it wasn’t on her radar screen. Now my friends and all—
people were lining me up with dates and whatnot. A lot of people, the first thing they ask
you was, “Oh, you’ve been to Vietnam. Did you kill anybody?”

RV: Really? They were that blunt with it?
TV: Yeah. “Did you shoot anybody?”
RV: How did that make you feel?
TV: I don’t think they were really interested in how I felt. I just think they
wanted to hear something sensational. My pat answer to those kinds of questions was
usually, “Never saw anybody.”

RV: Really?
TV: Something like that.
RV: You felt comfortable with just kind of giving that answer and letting that
rest?
TV: Oh, yeah, because I didn’t want to talk about actually pulling the trigger on
somebody. I just didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t know why. But I didn’t want to
think about it and I didn’t want to talk about it. I still had time to do in the Army. But
one thing I did do was I went out and bought a brand-new 1969 Oldsmobile 442.

RV: Why do you say that?
TV: Oh, it was a big, gas-guzzling car with a big engine and all that. It wasn’t a
good investment. It was too flashy, too fast, but that’s what I wanted so that’s what I
bought.

RV: So your friends set you up on dates and you got back into the social scene?
TV: Yeah, I started dating around because actually one of the first things that
happened was this girl that I’d corresponded with, after I bought the car, she came over to
look at it or whatnot and made some comment about it being our car. (Laughs) I
corrected her immediately and that sort of ended the relationship right there. I was not
looking to get hooked up with anybody, and for her to say our car, that wasn’t true and
that wasn’t ever going to be true. So while I was home, which I guess was another two
weeks or so, I dated around as much as I could.
RV: How was that for you? I know it probably must have been fun, but you’re putting the war behind you. Were you able to make the transition back socially and kind of step back into the United States okay?

TV: I think for the most part I did, yeah. Certainly there in Norfolk, no problem. After a couple weeks or so, I got order to—I remember filling out a questionnaire when I was in the hospital of where I wanted to serve or where would I want to be stationed for the rest of my—I had like nine months to go or something—where I wanted to be stationed for the rest of my enlistment. There was a local Army base there at Fort Story, Virginia. I picked that. Fort Monroe is right across the bridge tunnel. I picked that second and Fort Eustis is maybe an hour away, third, and I got orders to go to Fort Knox. I drove my new car out to Fort Knox with not a great attitude towards the Army.

RV: I can imagine. I can imagine.

TV: A profile, a medical profile which meant that they couldn’t make me do PT and stuff. I got assigned to—I guess it’s called a TO&E unit, TO&E (table of organization and equipment). It means it’s a regular operational unit that does training exercises and whatnot, but it’s armored with a tank unit. I had never seen a tank, but I’d been in the Army. I was an infantryman, but they assigned me to a tank unit and I learned how to drive a tank, M-60 tanks.

RV: What was that like?

TV: (Laughs) That was most fun you could have and still be in the Army. Driving a tank, especially if you get one going downhill, is an exhilarating thing because they’re so big and I actually enjoyed driving tanks.

RV: Was it difficult to learn?

TV: No, not really. There were some rules about driving on the post with cars around or whatnot. You had to be careful. But that was kind of a fun thing. But serving there wasn’t. The unit was a mixture of mostly beat-up Vietnam veterans just like me. They’d been MEDEVAC’ed or whatnot and had some time to go and then guys that were fresh out of training just working side by side. Maybe even guys that wanted to be tankers. You know, most of the Vietnam veterans that were in the unit were like me and had never seen a tank before.

RV: Did you all talk about the war?
TV: Very little.

RV: Was this because of your own personal stance, you just wanted to put it behind you or did you sense that from everyone? Or I guess the question is, why?

TV: Yeah, that’s the question and I’m struggling with it. I think it’s because of my daily continual effort to just put it away. I think I applied that to everything that I did. I don’t remember, even with the Vietnam veterans, discussing the war or talking about what we did.

RV: When you did discuss it, what would you all talk about?

TV: I guess if we did discuss it, it might have been to the effect of, “Was it worth it?” I think we all knew that we were backing out of there, that we weren’t fighting to win. Those are hard questions.

RV: Yeah. Well, on that note then—

TV: I think it became clear to me that none of us were fighting for the flag and once we got over there we were fighting for each other. That’s really what it’s about.

RV: What did you think of the anti-war protests when you got back to the United States—what you saw on TV and if you witnessed anything like that?

TV: I was pretty disgusted with them. I thought it was—like Jane Fonda’s antics, I thought she was a traitor. Still do. I think that that kind of conduct is treason. I don’t remember anybody getting in my face about it and when I traveled I was supposed to travel in uniform. I’ve heard people were told to travel in civilian clothes but until July of ’70 at least, when I got out I always traveled in uniform. I can remember some people being nice and some people giving dirty looks, probably. Probably the most I ever got was a dirty look.

RV: Were you watching TV, kind of following the war in that sense?

TV: No. No, I don’t think I watched much TV. My interests were going to town and drinking like crazy and finding women. That sort of thing.

RV: How long were you there at Fort Knox?

TV: From probably mid-September until July of the next year.

RV: Then you got out?

TV: That was a wonderful day.

RV: Tell me about that, separating from the Army.
TV: (Laughs) The girl I was seeing at the time drove a red convertible and on the
day that I was supposed to DEROS (date of expected return from overseas), she lived in
Louisville and I was supposed to have been back at the post early. I don’t want to say
like a typical deal but I showed up I guess around ten o’clock or so with her, late for
going out of the Army of all things. My buddies actually came back to the barracks
around noon and I was packing up and getting ready to go and there were some papers
that had to be delivered and some things that had to be done. I can’t remember the exact
details but they all helped out. They helped me pack, helped me—I think I actually had
some gear I had to turn in. My first sergeant had put me on a guard duty two days before
that, which was unheard of.

RV: Why did he do that?
TV: Because he hated me.
RV: Why did he hate you?
TV: Because he was a lifer and didn’t have a CIB and I was a draftee and getting
out of the Army and real short and just all kinds of attitude I’m sure that he didn’t
appreciate. So he put me on the guard duty like two days before I got out just because he
could do it. I got all my papers processed and my DD-214. While I was sitting in the
office waiting to get my DD-214 I actually ran into a guy that I served with in Charlie
Company. I think he was 1st Platoon but he was shot on May fourteenth.
RV: Really? In the same action?
TV: Uh-huh. Shot through the shoulder. Boy, you know, seeing him, that was
wonderful.
RV: What was that meeting like? Do you remember it?
TV: We didn’t know each other but just that camaraderie of having served
together and the fact that he was alive, that was a good thing. There was hugging and
backslapping and carrying on.
RV: So you leave the Army and what are you plans? Did you have any plans?
What did you want to do with yourself?
TV: Well, I went back to the motor pool area where all my friends were and told
them how short I was.
RV: (Laughs) I’m sure they loved that.
TV: (Laughs) Oh, yeah. I got in my car and picked up a friend who had DEROS’ed the day before. He wanted to hitch a ride to Washington. So I picked him up and we drove straight to Washington, D.C. I dropped him off and then home to Norfolk.

I don’t think until I actually got home I had given much thought to what I was going to do. I was just intent on getting through the Army and getting it done. But I was home. I probably wanted to take a few weeks off, so to speak. Just lounge around just because I could and then sit back and decide what I was going to do with myself. What I decided was to go to a computer technology school. Going back to college would have been great but I just wanted to get going. I didn’t want to spend the time of three more years of college and whatnot. So I picked this computer tech school and went to that for six months.

RV: It was probably a wise choice, would you not say, with the computer age just around the corner?

TV: I think it was. It certainly taught me a lot and helped me over the years. After I got out I was looking for a job then and I remember somebody at my dad’s office told him about this company in Roanoke, Virginia, that was hiring bodies. It was called Universal Communications Systems and they were putting phone systems in and needed technicians and installers. I called up and talked to the general manager and he sort of interviewed me over the phone and hired me over the phone.

RV: This is in 1971?

TV: 1971, in May of ’71. I had gotten out of school and, in fact, we agreed on $3.25 per hour is what I was good to start at. But he said there were all kinds of opportunities and that would just get my foot in the door, so to speak. So I drove up the next week and met with him and we continued to interview and he said, “We decided on $3.50, right?” I said, “That’s correct.” (Laughs) So I got an instant twenty-five cent raise.

RV: Pretty good.

TV: So I moved into an apartment in Roanoke. Actually, I stayed for a few days with the son of a guy that my dad worked with. It was just somebody he knew and until I found an apartment I stayed with him a couple days. I found kind of a neat furnished apartment, centrally located. It was furnished and there were a lot of single people there and whatnot. It looked like a neat place to live. That’s where I met my future wife.
RV: Really?

TV: She was a neighbor. I pulled into the apartment complex and they saw this new guy coming in. Her and her roommate were both out getting a little sun on the terrace in front of their apartment and checking me out and I was down below checking them out. Later on we ended up dating and my next door neighbor, two doors down married her roommate and then I married Sue.

RV: When did you all get married?

TV: In ’73.

RV: Okay.

TV: In May of ’73. Oh, I’m sorry, April. Whoo! April of ’73. (laughs)

RV: (laughs) You better watch yourself, Tim.

TV: (laughs) Yes, indeed. I was speaking before thinking.

RV: Well, let me ask you this. Did your wife—what was her name?

TV: Sue.

RV: Sue. Did Sue talk about Vietnam with you? Did you share more with her or were you still kind of just not going there?

TV: Not going there at all.

RV: Really?

TV: In fact, I don’t recall even telling her that I was a Vietnam veteran until much later.

RV: That’s very interesting. Did you tell your employer that you were a Vietnam veteran? Or maybe he knew through—

TV: Just that I had served in the Army.

RV: Did he or any of your colleagues at work ask you about the war?

TV: Hmm. I remember one guy who was also a veteran. He was in the break room telling war stories, just talking about the war himself. I nicknamed him Killer right on the spot.

RV: Out loud or to yourself?

TV: No, to him. I said to everybody, “Well, you’re just a real killer aren’t you?” That nickname stuck with him and, actually, I think he’s still got it.

RV: Really?
TV: But no, very little discussion with anybody.
RV: Did his discussion of whatever the things he was talking about, did that bother you?
TV: I think it probably did, yeah. Yeah, I think that’s why I called him a killer.
RV: Do you regret not talking about Vietnam with Sue early on?
TV: I regret not talking about it with everybody and anybody.
RV: Even knowing that maybe you weren’t ready to or you maybe weren’t able to?
TV: I wished I had been ready to and able to. Apparently I wasn’t, but I wished I had. I wished I had done this interview in ’72 or ’73 instead of now.
RV: What would you have said in ’72 or ’73?
TV: I don’t know. I might have lied to you, though. That’s the thing. In today’s mindset, I wished I had done all of that but again, being ready to and able to are a couple of extra things that I probably wasn’t. So I probably would have—I don’t know. I probably wasn’t ready to tell the truth so I probably wouldn’t have. That’s where I am now, where it’s important to me that the truth is told.
RV: Is this why you’re doing this interview?
TV: Yeah, I think it is. Partly for me but also for the sheer truth of knowing that if somebody hears this or reads it, I’ll know that it’s true, at least as true as it can be. As true as I can make it, hopefully.
RV: Let me ask you some general questions about—thinking back into the 1970s, you’ve already stated what you thought about the anti-war protesters. What about the veterans, the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War), those vets from Vietnam who protested the war?
TV: I think I would have thought they were traitors, too. The war was terrible and being in Vietnam was terrible, but it was duty, it was responsibility, it was something that had to be done. Especially, I guess, the veterans who came back and talked about the war would have incensed me, would have just really pissed me off because they were doing a disservice to everybody. I would have looked very unfavorably on those folks, I’m sure.
RV: Did you follow the war and it’s kind of ending on television? Were you aware of what was happening, say in Paris, and the peace accord signed in January 1973 and then the fall of Vietnam? Or the fall of South Vietnam, I should say.

TV: I remember watching the POWs come home. I paid very, very close attention to that. That just tore me up. I was certainly glad to see them home but the fact that they had been there that long just—that just really tore me up bad, the fact that they were mistreated and abused and held that long. I still don’t know why we didn’t get them back.

RV: What do you mean by that?

TV: I think we should have done whatever it took to get those prisoners back.

RV: Before Hanoi released them?

TV: Oh, yeah. I mean, if it meant dropping a nuclear bomb on most of North Vietnam, that’s where the war should have been fought. The North Vietnamese needed to have been defeated.

RV: Well, tell me about your opinion of US policy and looking at the war effort.

TV: We didn’t fight to win. It was another Korea. We made that mistake in Korea and we made the identical mistake in Vietnam. That is not fully engaging you know calling Korea a police action and that sort of thing. If we had fought World War II with the same attitude, we’d have lost it or would have walked away from it.

RV: Why do you think there was a difference then with World War II versus Korea and then your war in Vietnam?

TV: I don’t know. I think I believe that if World War II had been reported in the same manner that Vietnam was, maybe even the same manner that the Iraq War is being reported now, I think the support would have eroded. I think if the D-Day invasion was shown on TVs and radios and people actually—if the truth of it was reported, mothers across the nation would have been screaming to get their sons home. That would have been a mistake. I mean, I think the truth of war is something the country can’t live with. It shouldn’t have to live with because it’s too terrible to see day after day every day. I think to a certain extent, ignorance is bliss and if people kept themselves a little more ignorant back then, censorship or whatever. I think that America would not sustain that war if it had been reported the same way.
RV: Tell me about how you saw Vietnam reported, how the media covered it.

TV: Walter Cronkite from a pulpit every night, communicating with his looks and his expressions and his sighs and just telling everybody how bad things were and how unwinnable things were, which is probably true. But that turned a lot of people against the war which then pitted them against the warriors, against the people that were fighting the war. I can see that happening again today. It hasn’t yet, but it sure could.

RV: What do you mean?

TV: Where enough people—I mean, we’re at war now and I think we should be supporting our troops and doing everything we can to support them and that support is eroding because of the anti-war reporting. I don’t know why. It’s a terrible, tough question. To me, if everybody was ready to go to war, unanimous almost, and then after a short period of time and some casualties, whatever thought process went into saying, “Okay,” now is being reversed and you can’t do that. I mean, you’ve got to fight to win. You’ve got to carry the war to win.

RV: What could the United States have done differently in Vietnam? You mentioned the war should have been taken to North Vietnam. Besides the intense bombing, what else do you think we could have done?

TV: I think we should have invaded North Vietnam. I think we should have told China and Russia both, “Stand back or it’s going to be tough on you guys, too, and get out of the way.” Invaded them with the intent of totally obliterating their army.

RV: So a ground invasion?

TV: Yes, in the North.

RV: What about the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex in Laos and then in Cambodia, these sanctuaries for the NVA? Did you have thoughts then and now about that?

TV: Oh, there’s no doubt that they were well entrenched. I think if North Vietnam was occupied that it wouldn’t matter if they were in Laos or Cambodia. They would be out of the way and the war machine would stop, their war machine. Sooner or later it’d be bled dry. So I think that supply path wouldn’t matter if there was no origin for the supply train.

RV: What do you think about the concerns about China entering the war, kind of like they did in Korea? You know, if we had invaded North Vietnam? There are people
out there who say our hands were tied then because of Communist China. I’m not trying
to play devil’s advocate, I just—

TV: Oh, no. It’s exactly the same thing and we reacted exactly the same way with
half steps. We had the Army in place, we had the weapons we needed to win. We chose
not to win. Then did the same thing in Vietnam.

RV: Who made the choice to not win? Was it Washington or was it
Westmoreland and the admirals and generals?

TV: I think it’s Washington. I mean, look at Korea and Truman running the war
instead of letting MacArthur run the war. Truman might have been a good or bad
president, but he wasn’t a warrior. He certainly didn’t know anything about conducting a
war and it looks to me like that’s what he wanted to do, that’s what he did.

RV: Do you remember April 1975 when South Vietnam fell and what your
thoughts were?

TV: I thought it was pretty shameful that we stood those people up for so long
and then walked away from them and let them get overrun. I’m sure I thought it was
shameful, still do. Knowing that anybody who took our side over there was in deep
trouble, including all the ARVN and everybody that was going to suffer. I guess a
million or so of them did.

RV: The policy of Vietnamization, of turning the war over to the South
Vietnamese, did you think that this was a viable, feasible option for the United States?
This is during the Nixon administration.

TV: I think the way that things rolled out, by then we had never fought the war to
win. Nixon was elected to get us out of there. I think they did what they had to do. I’m
not saying it was right, wrong, or otherwise. I don’t think there was many choices. So
trying to Vietnamize—or Vietnamization was probably a logical thing to do because
American troops were coming home and they had to stand up for themselves. The fact is
they couldn’t, but it was the logical way to go.

RV: Do you think the United States achieved peace with honor as Kissinger
stated?
TV: Peace with honor. I think truly in my heart, no. We acted dishonorably. So no, we walked away from an ally and that caused a whole lot of people a whole lot of grief. No, it wasn’t honorable at all.

RV: Some of the policies within Vietnam, the emphasis on the body count and the one-year-rotation policy, what are your thoughts on that?

TV: You know, body count is absolute stupidity. I mean to use that as a gauge of whether you’re winning or not, that just doesn’t make any sense. It’s ignorant. Having the draft and putting humans in permanently and just cycling fresh troops through the units is clearly easy to see how silly that is and how stupid that is. The Army works as units and so putting units in and taking them out, like we’re doing now, is the only sensible way to conduct a war. I mean, sensible and war are two words that don’t really go together. War is insanity. But if you’re going to do one, that’s the proper way to do it because of the unit cohesion, of the fraternity that develops amongst the people in a unit. It’s not just fraternity now. I mean there’s women soldiers in some units and whatnot, but I’m sure that their bond with other soldiers is as strong as ours was. I think there’s a lot of mothers and fathers that don’t understand why their son would want to go back with their unit back to Iraq for a second or maybe even a third tour. They see that as crazy, but the soldiers see it as staying with their brothers.

RV: Well, let me ask you about a topic that is associated with the Americal Division and that’s the My Lai Massacre. Can you tell me your thoughts on that action and then how you think that might or might not have affected the Americal Division?

TV: You know, I think people should be held personally responsible for what they do. If somebody had given me an order to kill a civilian that I didn’t think needed killing, I’d have told him to kiss my ass. I would not obey what I consider to be an unlawful order. On the other hand, I think the troops there went nuts. They went on a frenzy. They’d probably had a string of bad days and—I don’t really know, but to kill all of those innocent civilians or even un-innocent civilians, to kill civilians and babies and children is just wrong and they should have been punished for it. To try to make one officer a scapegoat for the whole thing was, I think, the Army’s way of trying to cover it up or just trying to get out of it as quick as they could. I don’t know what—certainly one officer couldn’t control all those troops to do one way or the other. They did what they
did because that’s what they wanted to do. So I see it as disgraceful and I see the soldiers as culpable. They should have been court-martialed.

RV: What about My Lai and America?

TV: It’s a blot against everybody that served with us. It’s unfortunate. Ninety-nine percent of the people in the division weren’t there. That wasn’t them. I don’t think that the Americal has to deal with that stain. I think it’s seen by everybody else just because of the Americal and My Lai. In other words, the stain is on us because of them.

RV: Because Calley and all of those were basically pardoned and were able to go on with their lives. You said they should have been court-martialed and—

TV: No, the troops who pulled the trigger.

RV: The troops did. What about the officers? I mean, they were sent to prison for a short amount of time, some were demoted in rank and things like that.

TV: I don’t think anybody was convicted of murder and that’s really what we’re talking about there. If they were convicted of not controlling their troops or losing military respect or order or something or other—I can’t remember what they were convicted of but we’re talking murder. I think that the only crime that was valid, the only charge should have been murder and they were either guilty or not. But again, I think the people who pulled the trigger are the ones who are guilty.

RV: Who actually did the killing.

TV: Who actually did the killing. There’s no justification for that. If anybody said, “I was ordered to,” that’s a bunch of bull.

RV: Tell me about your thoughts or your own personal experience, if you would like to comment on anything about the subject, with posttraumatic stress disorder. Any PTSD incidents that you would like to relate?

TV: Richard, I think that for probably about a year after I got back from Vietnam, I must have been suffering from PTSD. I had to have been.

RV: Are you talking about because of the kind of avoidance of the topic or was there something more specific?

TV: Yeah, I did a lot of very heavy drinking for a while. I just made a lot of bad decisions. I got over it and stopped it but I never heard of anything like PTSD back then.
I think probably I was—that was my reaction to it was to drink like a fish and do stupid things.

RV: Um-hm. Do you want to talk about the stupid things you did besides the drinking? What other symptoms, I guess, were going on that says that you think you had PTSD at that point? I ask that from more of a historian’s point of view as how people are understanding this disease now. I mean, it continues to evolve and so information on what actually happened is invaluable.

TV: Well, for me it was a matter of excess drinking and that results in just getting a ticket or not doing your job as well as you could do, in the Army I meant. Maybe spending the night in jail for drunk in public or whatnot. That sort of thing. I never had flashbacks and I don’t think I had any of the classic symptoms. I could see my reaction being tied into my resentment of the Army and the way the Army treated me for the last eight or nine months or whatever it was. Being a combat veteran and having to do stinking nasty details and stuff, I just didn’t think then that that’s the way combat veterans should be treated and I still don’t, I guess. So I spent a lot of effort to not do what I was supposed to do out at Knox. If I could use my profile to get out of doing a detail or get out of doing some work or whatnot, I did. That isn’t like me to do that normally but I was so aggravated with the Army. I don’t know if it’s PTSD or not, Richard, but my attitude was—I can’t think of the right word. I can’t put it in the right words but I just wasn’t fond of lifers and I think I really resented being pushed around or screwed with by somebody who didn’t have a CIB. I think that was, for me personally, that was the icing on the cake. That made it worse. I have to say, when I got out of the Army that reaction just went totally away. It stopped. I quit doing all those worthless things and got on with my life.

RV: It seems that you carried on successfully. You did land this job as soon as you got out of tech school and you stayed with this company for a while, didn’t you?

TV: For twenty-two years.

RV: Yeah.

TV: I became their manager of corporate operations, as a matter of fact. Yeah, that’s why shamming out of a detail in the Army is not something that I would normally
do but I sure as hell did it. The Army was screwing with me and I’d do whatever I could
to screw back.

RV: Do you think this was common amongst Vietnam-era veterans? Maybe it
depended on their experience.

TV: Yeah, I think so. I think it was pretty common.

RV: Can you speculate on why or do you think it’s a commonality for US
military service in general?

TV: I think it’s a result of taking a draftee, send him off to war, bring him home,
and then rather than letting him go, putting him in a situation where an unskilled (laughs)
lifer who’s never been anywhere in his life except a tour in Germany has authority over
him. The resentment is both ways. I think the people who don’t have combat kind of
resent people who do, I think, in that position and vice versa for sure.

RV: Yeah. Well, how do you think the VA, the Veterans Administration, has
treated Vietnam veterans? What kind of comments can you make about that?

TV: (Coughs) Excuse me. I really didn’t know anything about the VA until
maybe one year ago. I went to the VA for just routine medical care and I have been just
amazed at how good it’s gone. The care has just been first class and the people that I’ve
met at the VA in Salem—of course, we have a big VA hospital right here in town and
that might be contributing to the picture that’s being painted for me. The care has been
wonderful, the people have been wonderful, and you can tell you’re dealing with a
government entity. I mean it’s just obvious, but I’ve been very pleased. So my
experience has been very, very positive. But it’s only been for about a year and I haven’t
been screened for Agent Orange and I haven’t had any PTSD problems. I did have a
friend who I worked with years ago who did have all kinds of problems, all kinds of
PTSD problems. He ended up being really medicated badly and it changed the quality of
his life. It was a sad thing to see him go through that and then he got cancer and died. I
just saw him—interacted with him at work is all. We weren’t close enough friends for
me to know the details of his care or what, but I knew he was having PTSD-type
problems, and I knew the VA was treating him, and pretty soon it was obvious that he
was being way over-medicated. He was zoned out all the time. He went from being a
smart guy to making little gizmos like handicapped people might make or whatnot.

That’s how far he fell.

RV: It was because of the PTSD and the medication, you think?

TV: I don’t know. I saw it that way, yeah. I don’t know that it actually was but I suspected it and I guess it sort of has to be. He was actually a warrant officer in Vietnam, a helicopter pilot, and was involved in a highly-publicized incident where a Special Forces team was being overrun. This Sergeant Benavidez was awarded the Medal of Honor for getting these people that were left out and this fellow, Roger Waggy was his name, was the driver of the helicopter that got them out. When they landed, the helicopter was shot up so bad that it never flew again. I’m sure it was a very traumatic day for him, not to mention his whole tour.

RV: Um-hm, yeah. How is your knee? Do you suffer from any kind of disability from that?

TV: It got better and better and it makes some noises now but so does the other one. (Laughs)

RV: That might not be machete-related, though.

TV: It might not be. Because I was going to say, the other one makes noises too. It got well and is fine. No problems.

RV: Let me ask you some general questions about service in general, your personal service. How do you feel about your service today, looking back? In Vietnam, not in the Army in general.

TV: Oh, I’m very proud of my service. I’m proud to have been associated with the people that I served with, most of all, and proud to have survived combat. There’s only one way to take that test and if you pass it, inside, you can just sort of pat yourself on the back and say you did okay.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your experience in Vietnam, if you could?

TV: In Vietnam, no, not at all. I think if I could have been less hostile towards the Army in general and lifer platoon sergeants out at Knox, it would have made more sense to have gone with the flow instead of being a hardhead. Just because now I can see
that anything counterproductive isn’t good, it would have been better to have been more productive, to have not been such a pain in the butt. (Laughs)

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing you learned there, either about yourself, or about the United States, or about war, or about relationships within a unit?

TV: I guess learning about that bond that develops between brothers-in-arms. It’s real hard to explain but it develops quickly. There’s some people who are part of the unit that are excluded from that because they’re worthless and really shouldn’t be there. But the vast majority, we really care about each other.

RV: Um-hm. Do you think that civilians who didn’t serve or those who did not serve in war could understand that?

TV: No, no.

RV: Why not?

TV: I think you have to go through it to understand it. I’ve probably mentioned this already but one of the hardest things for me to understand was when I got home, how much I missed being in combat.

RV: Really?

TV: I don’t know how I knew I missed it, but I missed it tremendously for months and months.

RV: Can you explain that? Why is that?

TV: I said I didn’t think about it at all, but I did think about it. It might be just an adrenaline thing, a very low-level brain reaction to combat but I can remember for months and months having this yearning to be back in combat again. Thinking that then would lead one to say, “You’ve got to be nuts. You’re crazy.” I mean, wanting to be back there is insane so you can’t justify that kind of thought. I never have figured it out.

RV: Have you heard that from other vets, say, the ones you talk with at the Americal reunions?

TV: I’ve said that a time or two and people have nodded their heads as if they’re agreeing with me. I don’t know that I’ve heard anybody else say that, but when I’ve said it to a few folks they’ve nodded their head like, “Yeah, I know just what you mean.”
Because it just doesn’t make any sense to want to be there. I bitched about it every single
day while I was there, but I truly did miss it.

RV: Does it have to do more with the bond with your buddies and kind of, in a
sense, serving them daily, watching out for another human being daily that you’re so
close with?

TV: It probably does. It’s hard to know for sure but that’s probably part of it.
But I think also that it is the adrenaline thing. Like skydiving or bungee jumping or
anything that’s dangerous. I think people do that because of adrenaline or that rush you
get, that feeling of, “I survived another day.”

RV: Right. How would you characterize how the war has most affected your
life?

TV: Well, I think since 1999, when I attended my first reunion, it’s enhanced it.
The fact that I have all these friends now that I didn’t have before is a wonderful thing. I
guess that’s been a positive result. It’s very positive for me, anyway, being able to get
together with those folks. Some I served with and never knew and some I didn’t even
serve with at the same time but served in the same unit. But that coherency just continues
on with folks that I didn’t actually serve together with.

RV: What have those reunions been like? You’ve touched on this already a bit
but can you describe the reunion experience?

TV: Well, the very first one was—I was scared, I guess. I don’t know why, but I
was concerned about how I was going to react and how people would react to me. It’s
like going into combat a little bit. You’re unsure about how you’re going to do and I had
flatly rejected the idea for years and years and years of even trying to hook up with any of
those folks. It started off for me, quite a bit bittersweet. I had traded emails and whatnot
with a lot of these folks for a couple of months before we actually met in St. Louis. I was
signing in at the sign-up table and I got to meet Roy Cordingley for the first time because
he was signing in right beside me. One person I did meet, just right away I ran into this
guy who looked real familiar and I said, “Man, I’m just terrible with names but you sure
look familiar.” He said, “Well, you might have known my brother.” He gave me his
brother’s name, which was Bruce Klingaman. The way he said that really concerned me
right away because I did know Bruce very well. He was a good guy and he was a
replacement who came, I think before May fourteenth even. But he had been killed by
friendly artillery fire in March of the next year. He had extended his tour a little bit
actually to get an early out of the Army. He was still with Charlie Company in March of
’70 and a short artillery round landed and killed Bruce and I think one other person. His
brother, Glenn Klingaman, had joined the Americal Division Veterans Association as an
associate in honor of his brother and was there to meet his brother’s friends. So I learned
right then that Bruce had been killed and that was a shock, but then I got to develop a
close friendship with Glenn that was wonderful. Unfortunately, Glenn died of a heart
attack at age forty-nine, two years ago. But he was a hell of a good guy.

RV: So after you overcame the fear or the worry, what were the reunions like?
TV: They continue to be just wonderful. I wish I had gone to one way years ago
because it has been such a wonderful experience.

RV: Why didn’t you go before ’99?
TV: Just the same reason. Actually, my brother-in-law became involved in the
Vietnam Veterans of America in the mid-’80s and he talked about being in a little bit and
he talked me into joining the Vietnam Veterans in 1990, only I lived in Roanoke and
joined the chapter in Virginia Beach. So basically I was lending my support, monetary or
otherwise, but I wasn’t involved and just didn’t have anything to do with it. I guess I
wasn’t ready. I can’t explain why. That lack of readiness or whatever is the same story
again and again. I don’t know why I wasn’t but I wished I had been, if that makes any
sense.

RV: Yes, it does. Now you’re quite active, is that correct?
TV: Yes.

RV: Tell me about that.
TV: Well, in addition to being in the Americal Division Veterans Association,
I’m also a member of the local chapter, the Roanoke chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of
America and participate in some of their things that we do here for veterans and to help
veterans, fundraisers and whatnot. I’m also a delegate to the Virginia State Council that
meets quarterly. I’ve enjoyed my VVA activities, but I love my Americal Division
activities. Of course, the most rewarding thing about that is—well, there’s all kinds of
rewarding things, but one great benefit is the scholarship fund that the Americal Division
veterans have. I was appointed treasurer of that because my friend, Bob Short is the
chairman. We work together on that and do a lot of good there, I think. The Association
does a lot of good for children.

RV: Do you want to talk about what that scholarship fund is for those who will
be listening to this, reading this in the future?

TV: It’s a part of the Americal Division Veterans Association that has a board of
trustees and a chairman and a treasurer. We raise money all year long, but mainly
through a raffle that’s held in the spring and then solicit applications from basically the
children and grandchildren of the Americal Division veterans who need scholarship help
for vocational or regular academic training. (Coughs) Excuse me, I’m sorry Richard.

RV: That’s okay.

TV: Last year in Kansas City we received, I think, twenty-seven applications and
gave something like twenty scholarships in the amount of thirty-thousand dollars.
Anyway those scholarships are important because they’re a tremendous investment in our
children’s future. So I’m very proud to be a part of that.

RV: Looking back at Vietnam again and talking about that, could you think about
the United States in general for a moment and what kind of lessons do you think the
United States learned or did not learn from the Vietnam War?

TV: I think the need for an all-volunteer military was a lesson that somebody
learned. I don’t know that the nation’s learned it, but the military learned it and
apparently some leaders have learned it, and that’s, I guess, the most important lesson
that we could have learned. I just think that’s very important, to have a military that’s all
volunteer. I think the country could do better for those folks—better pay, better
conditions, better everything. But in general, the military is a good place to be now.
Whereas back in the ’70s it was—I think it wasn’t as good a place to be. It wasn’t as
good a career as it is now.

RV: Is there anything else that you think we learned from that or, again, did not
take away from it?

TV: I hope we learned the lesson of walking away from our allies. Well, I’m not
sure that we have learned that as a nation. I don’t think we’re capable of staying united,
being united long enough to do what needs to be done. Maybe we are. I don’t know.

I’m not pessimistic about that, I just—I probably watch too much news.

RV: Do you think the comparisons between the war in Vietnam and the war in
Iraq are relevant and accurate or possible to make?

TV: No, I don’t. There is no war in Iraq now. The war has been over for a long
time. That’s not to say that the insurgency isn’t dangerous and powerful but we’re not
fighting a war now, we’re fighting terrorists.

RV: Okay. Do you think that Vietnam contributed to the United States
“winning” the Cold War?

TV: Actually, I do. I think that’s a good question. Well, contributed—

RV: Or I guess I should say, Tim, and ask the question in a more fair way. How
did, if it did, did it affect the Cold War?

TV: I think in the way the country felt about itself after Jimmy Carter allowed or
created a need for a Ron Reagan and the turnaround that Reagan gave the country as far
as how it felt about itself back then is a remarkable thing. It changed away from this
defeatism and breast beating and self-loathing that we had during the Carter years back to
patriotism, again I think, on a much wider scale and that was a good thing. Certainly that
contributed directly to the defeat of communism. I don’t know that the war itself wore
them down any. I don’t think it did. In fact, it might have encouraged them. It might
have encouraged the communists, but it set the stage for Ron Reagan and the things that
he had to do or got to do. That’s definitely a positive outcome.

RV: How much did it mean to you for Reagan to make that statement, I can’t
remember the year, early ’80s, and it might have been at the dedication of the Wall or
revolving around the dedication of the Wall, when he stated that the Vietnam War was an
honorable war, that the cause was honorable? The results might not have been what we
wanted but we had the right intentions.

TV: Well, he’s speaking the truth, I think. So for Vietnam veterans to hear that,
that was a wonderful thing because there had been this, either an air of nothingness and
then through Carter this self-national abuse. It was a policy of—I don’t know, it’s not a
policy—this attitude of anti-Americanism that statements like you just quoted from Ron
Reagan changed attitudes. It changed perceptions and what he said is true and needed saying.

RV: Do you think, Tim, that Vietnam is still with the United States today? I mean, we have those people comparing it on television, but in a more personal, national way, do you think that Vietnam is still with us?

TV: I think it is. I think it’s—the problems associated with it, the things it did to our national cohesion and unity, those wounds are going to take a long time to heal. I think they will, but some of it is lessons to be learned and shouldn’t be put away, should be remembered. I think the results of abandoning South Vietnam, the death toll, the things that happened to real people is overlooked. That lesson there, maybe it’s guilt, maybe it’s the people who caused us to walk away from them and abandon them don’t want to see what that result is. But that history there is hardly ever talked about, hardly ever seen. I think there should be more emphasis placed on that. I think it should be taught in school. “Here’s what we did and here’s what happened.” I’m sure it’s not. The more I think about what’s taught in schools—I don’t know what’s taught in schools about Vietnam, but my opinion would be that it’s probably pretty scary. I think most Vietnam veterans really resent the stereotypical attitude about the war and the warriors and that’s probably being carried on in school today.

RV: Tim what do you think the misconceptions or the myths concerning the American soldier in Vietnam are?

TV: All the drug use. I mean, there’s a myth about all this drug use. You know, *Platoon*—soldiers killing soldiers, raping civilians constantly, you know that just isn’t the way it was. That Oliver Stone image is just a bunch of crap.

RV: In what way? The drug use and the fragging, the lack of discipline, perhaps?

TV: Definitely, excuse me, definitely. I mean there was only one good guy in the movie and he was murdered.

RV: Have you had any contact with the Vietnamese here in the United States?

TV: At fast food stores and whatnot. But none really as far as, “I was in your country,” and a discussion of that. I never have. I’ve never had the opportunity.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today? The country, not the war.
TV: I think I’d like to go back and see it. I don’t know that I’ll ever have the opportunity but I’m sure it’s more modernized and things are improving and changing. But I really don’t know much about it other than it’s a, excuse me, Communist regime. I guess I have this opinion that Americans are pretty well received. You know they’re looking for trade and tourism and whatnot, so that’s probably why I’d like to go back and see it.

RV: Where would you go? What would you do?

TV: I don’t know. It would be interesting to see [LZ] Professional. I’ve heard it’s just abandoned, and the hill is eroded just from having the bunkers on top, the dirt itself, the hill itself has just eroded, I’ve heard. I don’t know that I could hump to the top, either. I guess I’d like to just tour around and maybe see the touristy stuff.

RV: You just touched on Platoon, the movie. Have you seen other movies on the Vietnam War? What is your opinion of them, if you have?

TV: Apocalypse Now. Actually there was a lot of hype about that. You know I think with Frances Ford Coppola being involved and all of the hype about the making of the movie, I had a high anticipation of it really being a great movie. I have to admit, it’s one of the stupidest movies I’ve ever seen in my life. I went back and watched it again, just to make sure it wasn’t me and it just—I mean, I guess it’s all allegory and art but it’s not a good war movie.

RV: Can you tell me why? What specifically? I mean not to get you to remember scenes, but what bothered you most about that? Because this is a common thing with Vietnam veterans actually, this movie.

TV: I guess the way the characters are portrayed. I mean everybody’s crazy as hell. They’re all nuts. (Laughs) Yeah, all the characters are portrayed as being insane, or various levels of being insane. It just wasn’t a good story. I don’t know what I expected. Full Metal Jacket is interesting. I see that as two movies. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that movie or not, but the first half of the movie is the Marines in training with R. Lee Ermey as the drill sergeant. That half of the movie is splendid, a very tragic ending and whatnot. I don’t know that reality in a movie is a good thing but it’s just so well done. It communicates, I think, a lot about military training back then. The second half of the movie, when they actually go to Vietnam, is kind of stupid.
RV: This is supposed to be during the Tet Offensive and they’re in Hue.

TV: I can’t remember the detail. But I see it now and halfway through I always change the channel. So I don’t know that I’ve watched it through in years. But the first half of the movie is interesting and entertaining, although tragic.

RV: What about other movies that come to mind? I mean, there’s *The Deer Hunter, We Were Soldiers, Coming Home*, et cetera.

TV: *We Were Soldiers* has got to be one of the greatest movies I’ve ever seen, I think. That’s just very powerful. It looks right. It doesn’t gloss over anything I don’t think, other than the troops don’t keep enough interval. (Laughs)

RV: (Laughs) That’s a good observation.

TV: It’s because, you know, people wouldn’t get their face time on the screen, I’m sure. It wouldn’t film good having everybody fifteen, twenty meters apart. But other than that, it just seems almost too real. It’s like being there.

RV: Was it a good thing, or a bad thing, or an indifferent thing?

TV: Well, certainly not indifferent. If it doesn’t kill you it’s good for you. I guess (laughs) through deduction, it’s a good thing. It’s certainly a good movie, and I don’t know that seeing all that realism is—well, it’s not bad, so it’s good. It chokes me up to watch the movie but it’s a well done movie.

RV: Okay. What about books on Vietnam? What have you read? Or have you tried not to read about it?

TV: I haven’t read many—I can’t think of any histories. [I did read *Why Didn’t You Get Me Out* by Frank Anton, and *Vietnam Vignettes* by Lee Basner.] I’ve read novels. But as far as an actual history or something very serious, I haven’t. I like to read for pleasure, so I read novels. A fellow named Nelson DeMille wrote a really excellent novel called *Up Country*. His character—the author was an infantry platoon leader in ‘Nam and the novel is a novel, but he brings some important feelings and events and whatnot to the book. I mean his experiences contribute to making the book a good read.

RV: Have you ever read any of Tim O’Brian’s books?

TV: Tim O’Brian.

RV: *The Things We Carried*, he’s written about, I think eight or nine historical novels. I’ll send you those titles.
TV: Actually, I think I did read one. I can’t remember the name of it but it
involved—can’t remember the name, I did. It’s actually—I guess it’s more of a history
than a novel. I’m not sure if it was Tim O’Brien or not but it was about—who was in it?
I’ve lost the details of it.

RV: But you have read—and I find it interesting that you’ve read novels, not
trying to read history books that kind of delineate everything about the war into different
issues and different interpretations and different camps. Is there a reason why you
haven’t looked at the history part of this in any more detail than you have? Besides the
fact that you said, “Yes, I want to read for pleasure.” You’re not technically reading the
history to get the history.

TV: I think just that read something serious or read something light or read
something for entertainment. Probably one of these days I might find some histories and
read a little bit more. That’s probably something that I should put on my to-do list.

RV: Well, let me ask you this. If you walked into a classroom, a high school
classroom or a college classroom, what would you tell the young generation today about
the war?

TV: I think I’d try to give them the same impression or leave them with the same
understanding that Ron Reagan made: that we went to the war with honorable intentions.
We may not have conducted it the best way that we could have and certainly the outcome
wasn’t what we wanted to happen, but we went there for honorable reasons and ninety-nine percent of the people that served, served honorably and well. I think yeah, just that.
I think trying to defuse all the stereotypes would be a very difficult thing to do. But I
think just making the point that there was good reason to do what we did and it was part
of the worldwide war on communism. Not to mention that fact that we had a treaty that
said we would do that, a treaty with South Vietnam, that we would protect them if they
were invaded.

RV: Well regarding this oral history interview and regarding talking about the
war in such detail and your experiences in such detail, how has this been for you?

TV: Other than this head cold I’m working with now, it’s been a marvelous
experience. I think it’s cathartic for me just to be able to talk about it. It’s just good for
my inner being maybe to say some things or describe some things that I’ve thought about
and haven’t talked about in a while. Some of it I have talked about but also it’s good to
be a part of making a, hopefully, a factual and truthful history from my perspective of my
experiences and leaving that for future generations. That’s a good thing and everything
I’ve seen about the Vietnam Project is worthwhile and respectful of the people who
served there so I’m proud to be a part of it, very proud.

RV: Well, thank you. Tim, is there anything else that you would like to relate?
Anything that you would like to talk about that we have not covered? There’s one more
thing that I want to ask you.

TV: There’s probably something, Richard, but I can’t think of anything right
now. There might be a hundred things.

RV: Well, you’ll certainly have the opportunity to add those things into the
transcript as afterthoughts when you get that. Have you been to Washington and the
memorial there?

TV: Yes. Actually I kind of avoided the Wall, like everything else, until the
Americal Division had their reunion in Washington in 2002. I got to go there for the very
first time with all my buddies and families. It was a very emotional experience for me.
The older I get, the more emotional I am. I can leak with the best of them.

RV: What was the experience like?

TV: It was just very moving. Just seeing those names, and seeing the Wall itself,
and seeing all the people, it was a very powerful and moving experience.

RV: Was it a good experience?

TV: Oh, it was wonderful. It’s definitely a healing Wall. I’m losing words here
but it was very positive for me. It was good to be there with comrades in arms. I’m glad
I went.

RV: Have you ever been to one of the traveling Walls?

TV: Actually, I had seen a traveling Wall here in Roanoke a few years before
that.

RV: What was that like?

TV: It was interesting, but it didn’t have the impact of the real Wall and I don’t
know why. It might have been the circumstances of who I was with and how I felt at the
time. I don’t know. It just didn’t have the emotional impact that the Wall does. Part of
the reason is all the people and all the stuff that people leave there. Even now, every day,
they police up stuff, mementoes and things that people leave. It’s very moving.

RV: Do you think it’s an okay thing to be doing, sending two traveling Walls
around the United States or should we just kind of leave it for Washington?

TV: Oh, I think the traveling Wall is fine. I mean, a lot of Vietnam vets don’t
like the Wall. I find it hard to believe that there’s the controversy there, that there was.
Maybe it’s going away now but man, what a wonderful job people did to put that
together.

RV: Well, Tim, any other comments that you’d like to add?

TV: Richard, I can’t think of a thing.

RV: Okay.

TV: There’s probably a thousand things that I’ll—well, I don’t know. I guess
we’ll have to wait and see.

RV: Yes.

TV: But right now I can’t think of anything that hasn’t been said.

RV: Well, I really want to thank you for all of the time you’ve spent doing this
over the multiple sessions and for dedicating yourself to preserving the history of the war.

Thank you very much.

TV: Well, Richard, you are more than welcome. It’s been a pleasure for me to be
a part of that and to work with you on this. I’ve enjoyed every step of the way and just
honored to be a part of that history.

RV: Thank you, Tim.