Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Don Cuneo. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collection Library Interview room. It is Monday, November 18th. It is almost 2 p.m. Central Standard Time. Mr. Cuneo, you are in Santa Rosa, California.

DC: I was born April 3, 1946 in San Francisco.

RV: Did you grow up in San Francisco?

DC: I grew up on the peninsula in a city called Burlingame.

RV: That’s not too far away from the city.

DC: It’s right in the same area as the San Francisco airport.

RV: Okay. So how would you describe your childhood? Was it a normal childhood or does anything stand out?

DC: Can you call me Don?

RV: I’d be glad to. Yes, sir.

DC: No. I had what I would consider a normal childhood. My parents; my dad was an insurance broker, and my mom was a housewife, although she worked for him on
occasion. There’s my sister and myself. There were just two of us. I never wanted for
anything. When I was old enough to understand, I’m going to guess probably 6, 7, 8,
years old, it was instilled in me that anything I got I had to work for.

RV: Was your father responsible for that or your mother or both?

DC: My dad. My mom pretty much backed it up. I think throughout my formative
years, my mom was probably more influential than my dad. He was gone quite a bit for
work. He also was very involved in the Shrine, which took him to different parts of the
country. I had a real good childhood. My parents were excellent parents, and if I’m half
the man my father was, I’m a lucky guy.

RV: Was your sister older or younger than you?

DC: She’s three and a half years older.

RV: Did your parents emphasize to you education and going to school and all that
as part of your growing up?

DC: Yeah. They tried. With my sister it worked real well, with me, it didn’t work
that well.

RV: Okay. Can you explain?

DC: I had more interest in peripheral things than school. I did enough to get by. I
think from the time I was a little kid, I wanted to be a soldier. When I was about, I’m
going to say 8 years old, my dad and I were coming back from San Francisco. He took
me to his office for a day. That was kind of an annual thing.

RV: He worked in the city.

DC: In San Francisco, correct. He took the train, Southern Pacific, everyday to
work. We were coming home. I’m saying 8 years old. I was probably younger than that
because there was a Marine on the train that was just back from Korea. I ended up talking
to him, and he ended up giving me a marksmanship medal. I also had a cousin who
married a fellow that was just getting out of the Marine Corps, and he gave me the collar
insignias, the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. So from that point forward, being a Marine was
my goal in life. That’s what I always figured I was going to do.

RV: So that came at a very young age. Did you maintain that feeling through
middle school and high school?
DC: When thoughts of playing baseball and football and chasing girls weren’t around, if anybody asked me what I was going to do I would tell them I was probably going to go into the Marines.

RV: What kind of reaction would you get?

DC: The usual. “Oh, okay.” That’s like a young kid saying I’m going to be a lawyer or a doctor. When it came time when I was in high school that I had to make a decision on what I was going to do, there was no question. I wasn’t college material at that time.

RV: Did you work during your youth?

DC: I got my first job when I was 16. In California, that was minimum age. I worked at a grocery store bagging groceries.

RV: In high school, did you work?

DC: Yeah. That was it.

RV: Did you do that all through high school?

DC: Yes.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

DC: Football practice. That’s hard to say, because I went to get through. I was good at math. I wasn’t so good at English yet I ended up majoring in English in college. I was not a student. I saw my high school grades, and quite frankly, I was surprised I made it through.

RV: You obviously played sports.

DC: Yes. Football, wrestled. Wresting was probably my best sport.

RV: So, going through high school and making the grades you did and the focus you had, I guess, outside of the classroom as you said, you were certain you were going into the Marine Corps when you graduated?

DC: Correct.

RV: The military influence in your life came from the gentleman on the train and then your cousin’s husband?

DC: Correct.

RV: Was there anybody else in your family that had military experience?

DC: No. I was the first person in my family to ever go into the military.
RV: How did your parents feel about it? Were they supportive?

DC: They weren’t really excited about me going into the Marine Corps to the point that my mom tried to get our family doctor to say that he didn’t think I was physically capable of doing it. There was no Vietnam at the time. Of course, that just made me want to do it a little bit more. But they tried to talk me into doing something that was a little bit easier, another branch of the service. But I wasn’t listening.

RV: Why were they so against you going into the Marine Corps versus the Army or Navy?

DC: I don’t know. Just the difficulty of it all. Other than that, I don’t know.

RV: So when you graduated high school, you had no thoughts of going to college or did you look into it?

DC: No. I joined the Marine Corps on a delayed entry program in April of my senior year, which would have been 1964. I was sworn in, and it was just a matter of waiting until August 27, 1964 to head off to boot camp.

RV: What did you do during that time before you got to San Diego?

DC: I worked at the grocery store until, I think, July. I worked at a place up in this area, the Bohemian Grove, which is actually fairly well known. It’s a two-week retreat for a lot of people that make policy and movers and shakers in government. I worked there with another guy running the local store that these people would come in and buy the things that they needed for their encampment.

RV: Why did you choose the Marine Corps versus another branch of the service?

DC: In my mind, it was the only way to go. It was the best.

RV: Where did you get that information? Is that something you just picked up from reading?

DC: Yeah. Pretty much and word of mouth. I had met people, guys that had graduated from high school before I did. I had a very close friend of mine, one of my beer drinking buddies in high school who was a year older than me went in the Marine Corps, and when he came home with his uniform and everything, that sealed it for me.

RV: So you do your basic training in the Recruit Depot down in San Diego.

DC: At MCRD.

RV: That was beginning August ’64?
DC: I started in August. I had a six-week break because I came down with pneumonia.

RV: When did that happen?

DC: About a month after I got there.

RV: Okay. Tell me about your first impressions when you first arrived there at San Diego at the training depot. [laugther] Now, its funny you laugh because I get that from almost every Marine I interview, when I ask that question, they start laughing.

DC: They take you from one minute you're in the civilian world and the next thing; you've got this guy that looks like the biggest ogre you've ever met. Probably three or four of them screaming and yelling at you and it was mass confusion. Of course, your first thought is, “What the heck did I do?” It was just, what was I doing here? They just kept you moving, and eventually you got into the stream and started swimming.

RV: How did you get into that stream? What did you do?

DC: The first few days are a blur. You tend to hang on to the other people you're there with because you're all in this thing together. Conscious thought I don’t really think happens. I think you just react to things. I simply reacted by jumping when they said to jump, and moving when they said to move. Eventually, after your first week, and you realize that these people aren’t out to kill you, no matter what they say, that they’re actually there to teach you, you get into the program and relish the training. There was so much going on everyday. You were constantly busy. You would get up and you had X amount of time to go in and do your hygiene stuff, and then it was off to breakfast, and physical training, and one class after another. Eventually, it became part of your everyday survival with the goal in mind. You’ve got X amount of time until you're graduating and that’s your goal. The goal also, and it’s one big thing with the Marine Corps, was that everybody graduated together, therefore you were on a buddy system with everybody throughout boot camp. There were people that were a little bit quicker as far as things went. We all have our strong points, and there were some people that were a little bit slower than others and you kind of had to pull them by the belt and help them along.

RV: How did you adapt to the military lifestyle?

DC: Once I got out of boot camp and there as a second phase called Infantry Training Regiment, and then you got to home for a few days, and I came back and I went
to radio school in San Diego. That was from February, say March of ’65 until July of ’65.
I adapted well. I was quite capable of obeying orders and paying attention to things. I had
a little bit of the rebel in me. But as a young PFC, you pretty much when somebody told
you to do something, you towed the line. Right after radio school I went to Vietnam.
Actually to Okinawa, and then several months later, the battalion went down to Vietnam.

RV: Tell me about your basic training as far as any incidents that stand out in
your mind. I hear from a lot of Marines that it was either very, very regimented and there
was not a lot that stood out. Just hard training. No special incidents. What stands out in
your mind when you think about your basic?

DC: The first thing that stands out is the cultural mix. I wasn’t used to that. Kids
from different backgrounds, and I’d never been around Blacks and Hispanics that much.
The close proximity. Seeing how different people from different parts of the country
were. That was kind of an eye-opener for me. Also, probably the rifle ranges is the thing
that stands out most because I’d never fired a rifle before. I’d fired my dad’s shotgun, but
never a high-powered rifle.

RV: How did you do?

DC: I remember the very first time I fired it. They told me not to close my eyes
and not to yank the trigger and to hold the thing into my shoulder. So I promptly closed
my eyes, yanked the trigger and it scared the crap out of me. After that, I was fine. I
qualified as a marksman the first time, and after that you had to do it every year. I was a
sharpshooter after that. It was just a matter of learning something and getting a little bit of
experience with it.

RV: Did you consider the training you had good or adequate?

DC: It’s lasted until today. They do a tremendous job in tearing somebody down
and building them back up and instilling certain things. I don’t think I would be the
person I am today without that.

RV: What would you consider the most challenging aspect of that training?

DC: Getting through.

RV: Just making it through the course.

DC: Just making it through.

RV: Do you remember the faces and personalities that were there beside you?
DC: Not really. I remember one particular person named Danny Chenault, he was a little bit older. I was 18 and he was in his mid-twenties, and he’d already been in the Army, and was kind of the guiding force of our platoon. He was the guide and was also the honor graduate, and pretty much what he said you followed just because you knew he had the experience. He was a little bit older, but as far as other people, I don’t.

RV: What kind of training did you have? I know you had the PT and you had weapons training. What else did you do?

DC: A lot of close order drill. You had your hand to hand combat which was just a few hours, and you had bayonet training which was the same thing, the pugile sticks and the football helmets and stuff, obstacle courses, more drill and ceremony stuff. The manual of arms with that big heavy M-14 rifle. Military history classes. They didn’t give you a lot of stuff. It was basic survival stuff. Other than with the rifle, they didn’t get into stuff like land navigation, map reading, or use of a compass. Those sort of things you picked up when you went on to your other school. It was basically turning a young person into a Marine.

RV: How long did it last, the training? You said you got pneumonia and you went home.

DC: No. I didn’t go home.

RV: You stayed there.

DC: No. I went to Balboa Naval hospital in San Diego, and I was there for six weeks. Then I immediately went back to boot camp. I started in August and I graduated in February. What’s that, four, six months for me?

RV: What other weapons did you train on besides just the M-14?

DC: We had the M-14 rifle in boot camp. The second phase, ITR, you got a smattering of other weapons- the M-79 grenade launcher, the M-60 machine gun. They also, at the time had the Browning automatic rifle, which wasn’t part of the Marine Corps arsenal anymore, but you still trained on it. Hand grenades.

RV: This is all in your ITR training.

DC: Yes.

RV: That was in February ’66.
DC: Yes. That came right after boot camp. We graduated, got on cattle cars and away we went.

RV: This was at Camp Pendleton?

DC: Yes.

RV: Tell me about that. You told me about the weapons. Which of those weapons were your favorite? Which did you prefer?

DC: Well, I ended up with an M-14 rifle so I’m going to have to go with that one. The M-79 grenade launcher was pretty cool. It looked like a little sawed off shotgun and if a guy knew how to use it, it was a very, very effective weapon. You got a few hours to play around with these things and they’d have a range. Maybe you might get to fire one, and then that was the end of training.

RV: What else did you do at your advanced training?

DC: That was pretty much it. It was a follow up to boot camp. They treated us the same way. That’s about all I can remember of it.

RV: How much contact did you have with your family during your training starting back in San Diego and then Camp Pendleton?

DC: Letters. My mom and sister came down for Christmas, and I was allowed to leave with them. Other than that, just letters.

RV: Did they change their mind at all about you being in the Marine Corps after they had seen you at Christmas?

DC: Well, they had to. They didn’t have any choice.

RV: I guess not.

DC: Its just, Don’s going to do it and he’s surviving, so it’s okay.

RV: Your training that you received, basic and advanced, were these guys veterans of Korea or any other conflict that you were aware of?

DC: Not that I’m aware of. I don’t remember anybody saying, “I’m a veteran, pay attention to me.” Just before I went in was when the Gulf of Tonkin incident happened. While I was in boot camp and ITR, there were rumors that something was going to happen in Vietnam, but it really wasn’t until right towards the end of radio school that we actually sent people over there. Nobody really had any idea that it was going to blow up into what it turned out to be.
RV: Do you remember any particular incidents from your ITR training?

DC: You mean concerning Vietnam?

RV: No, just in general. Anything stand out in your mind about it?

DC: No. It just kind of was there. You went through it. Nothing special stands out at all.

RV: Were your parents able to come to your graduation from those two schools?

DC: No.

RV: So after you leave Camp Pendleton, you go back to San Diego?

DC: Back to San Diego to communications electronic school is what it was called.

RV: Now how did you choose that or get assigned to that?

DC: Within your first week at boot camp, you took a battery of tests. I forget the name of them. Today they have the ASVAB test, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test. People that are going in can pretty much choose ahead of time. They know what they’re qualified for. With us, we didn’t know until the last week of boot camp where we were going to go. Then they paraded us all out there and started reading off orders. Most of the guys in my boot camp platoon went into the infantry 0311. I ended up going to radio school. My MOS was a 2533, which is a radiotelegraph operator. That MOS no longer exists. But radio school itself was 14 weeks of learning the Morse code, and then a couple of weeks of learning voice radio and the different pieces of equipment.

RV: Were you good at it?

DC: I was average. As far as the class went, I was right in the middle. I came out of there having to copy and send a couple of words more than the minimum requirement. There really weren’t that many that were outstanding or that many people that were terrible at it. We all kind of were within a couple of words of each other.

RV: How long did your radio school training last?

DC: 14 weeks or Morse code, and then 2 or 3 weeks of radio procedure and equipment.

RV: What did you know about U.S. policy at the time regarding Southeast Asia because we’re getting to the point where United States involvement is really going to take a big leap forward in the Spring of ’65.
DC: I really didn’t know a whole lot. It was going to be an adventure. We all wanted to go.

RV: Why did you all want to go?

DC: Because there were bad guys over there and we were Marines. Remember, this gets instilled in you through boot camp. It was in our minds that that was what we were there for, and if the United States wanted us to go somewhere, we were more than willing to go and fight the fight.

RV: Did you know exactly why you were going when you got your orders to go?

DC: Well there were communists trying to take over the world and we were going to stop them [sarcastic tone].

RV: One other question about your training, was there anything about your training that you wish had been done differently or you had gotten more training in once you had gotten to Vietnam and kind of got involved on the ground? Looking back on that training, was there something that stood out that you wanted more of or didn’t get?

DC: When we got there, we pretty much had OJT because nobody really knew what to expect from the top down. You can't teach a young kid what reality is about. You can say that this is what can happen, but until you experience it first hand you don’t realize the enormity of it. So, no. I think the fact that they had beaten into our heads, adherence to orders was probably the most important thing, because the rest of it was just trial and error and unfortunately that whole fiasco was.

RV: When you finally go into Vietnam, how much did your training help you?

DC: When I’m going to back up here. I got out of radio school and we had a bout a week’s leave and number of us had been given orders to go to the 3rd Marine Division, which at the time was either in Okinawa or Vietnam. We were told we would go to Camp Pendleton, go to a staging battalion and probably be there for anywhere from two weeks to a month before we would go to Okinawa and join the 3rd Marine Division somewhere. This was the time of the first build up. I got to Camp Pendleton on a Friday evening. Saturday morning, a large number of us were called and sent to 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines on Saturday, and we were on the U.S.S. Magoffin and sailing out of Long Beach harbor on Sunday.

DC: We spent three weeks on ship to Okinawa and my first unit was 3/1- I spent September, October, November, and December in Okinawa training up to go to Vietnam. So a lot of the stuff, we trained for in Okinawa to prepare for Vietnam. We had a lot of people that had just come back from there doing the training. We went up to the Northern training area. I did jungle training, rappelling, ambushing, a lot of the things that we would need in the way of field craft to prep us for Vietnam.

RV: How did you feel when you got your orders to report to Pendleton, and then you knew you were going to Okinawa and then probably, eventually to Vietnam?

DC: I was ready for it. Again, I was in the Marine Corps and that’s what I was in the Marine Corps for. I didn’t have any second thought about the thing.

RV: When you were in Okinawa doing the training, any change there or was it actually getting you more fired up to go?

DC: Yeah. More fired up. I think the reality of the thing when the Ia Drang Valley with the Cav happened? Of course, we got *Stars and Stripes* and *Stars and Stripes* gave the government side of the story. But we had heard some things were going on, and I can remember very clearly one afternoon seeing a couple of C-130s, I believe they were, with red crosses on them, flying into Okinawa. There was one and then a little while later, another came in and then another and probably a dozen in all. We realized where they were coming from, and what was on those planes, and that it really could be serious business. That was November. They mounted us out at least twice where we had everything ready to go and were actually on buses and then called us back.

RV: Do you know why they called you back?

DC: They just weren’t ready to send a battalion down there. That’s all I know on that. We left in mid January and went down to Subic Bay in the Philippines and trained down there for 10 days.

RV: What kind of training there?

DC: Offloading. We did an amphibious landing. The plan was to send us over the side of a ship. I was on the U.S.S. Paul Revere. So we practiced an amphibious landing on one of the islands there and I don’t know the name of it. That was pretty much it.

RV: When you knew you were definitely going into Vietnam, how did you feel about that?
DC: I was ready to go.

RV: Where did you land in Vietnam?

DC: It was Operation Double Eagle, Double Eagle 1. It was in Quang Ngai Province south of Chu Lai. It was a big operation in concert with some other battalions that were there. We sent some people in by ship in a blocking force, and I went in on helicopter.

RV: You mean you went right into the field?

DC: Yes.

RV: They dropped you right into the field?

DC: Yes.

RV: You were a radio operator?

DC: Yes, I was.

RV: How did you get that job? Because of obviously your radio school training.

That was your designation.

DC: I was in a communications section within the H&S Company of the battalion, and a number of people were, what they designated as battalion radio operators. They worked in the tactical operations center. Some were sent out to the different line companies to be the radio operator, handling communications between that line company and the battalion headquarters. I was with a team--that I was to handle--It was called tactical air control party, and we were to help with air support. We did train for that in Okinawa as well. Bring in helicopters, talking to helicopters. The basic piece of equipment, I hope I get the nomenclature on this right, you had a PRC, which is, well its pronounced “prick.” Portable Radio Communications, which means you could carry it on your back. We had a PRC 41 and we had a PRC 47. I think it was the 47 that was about a 60-pound radio. It was a two-man pack. The radio itself went with one guy and all the other stuff went with another guy. Of course, being the smallest person, I got to carry the radio. The other, the 41, I believe it was, was a UHF radio that was used to talk to the helicopters. They eventually put all of these into the PRC 77, I believe it was or 25. I believe it was the 25 that evolved into the 77 and a much smaller radio, and it made me very happy. We left the back of a helicopter, myself and two other guys and an officer who was a pilot, and we went in with a line company, one of the infantry companies.
RV: Had they given you any special training because you’re a radio operator and maybe more susceptible to being targeted by the enemy forces to cut communications?

DC: No. I don’t think anybody really realized that an antenna was a target at that time. You had guys that had been there for a while that would tell you that when you were walking along, don’t leave the big whip antennae up. Use the little tape antennae and lay it down on your shoulder so its not a target. But there was no actual training as how not to be a target.

RV: What was your impression of Vietnam the country when you first arrived there?

DC: I thought it was backwards and I thought they should learn the American way of life. It never occurred to me that maybe they didn’t want to. It was hot, lots of bugs, huge mosquitoes. I concentrated more on my job which was one foot in front of the other and getting from point A to point B. Most of what we saw there was out in the countryside. So the people we saw were your local farmer, and I guess what they, at that time, called peasants. I can remember sitting up on a hill on evening and just before dusk, before sunset, looking out and just seeing this beautiful scenery in front of me with the green from the rice paddies and there was a hamlet out there underneath these palm trees and thinking, “God, this is gorgeous.” Then all of the sudden the reality hit that it may be gorgeous but it was really unfriendly.

RV: How much contact did you have with the Vietnamese civilians?

DC: Personally, not a whole lot. The little kids ran around and stuff. Actually sitting down and talking to anybody, the only time that happened was—now I left 3/1 and went to the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines in March of ’66, and we left Chu Lai and went up North into the Hue/Phu Bai area before heading further north. When I was in Phu Bai, a lot of these little road beer houses that were made out of tin cans and stuff, I went up and I stopped in one, and I was sitting around drinking beer, and this Vietnamese comes up to me and told me that I looked like I was intelligent and he wanted to talk to me. He introduced himself as Victor. He then explained to me or proceeded to explain to me-well actually he asked me first why we were there. Of course, I went on to tell him to save him from communist aggression and then he went on to explain to me that maybe
they really didn’t want us there. About 25 years later it struck me that maybe Victor was
the enemy.

RV: I was going to ask that. An interesting way to introduce himself!
DC: Yeah. And the guy spoke better English than I did. We really didn’t have a
whole lot of contact with the civilians. We weren’t able to go out in the village and
actually spend time with them. When I think about it, the majority of my time was spent
actually out wandering around looking for trouble.

RV: What do you mean by that?
DC: Well, operations. Time in the field.
RV: So tell me about Double Eagle 1, too. This is your first two operations.
DC: Not a whole lot happened. It went on the same time that I think it was
MASHER/White Wing went on for the Cav. Probably the most exciting time was we had
a firefight with the Cav right towards the end of it.

RV: With the Cav?
DC: Yeah.
RV: Friendly fire deal?
DC: Yeah. They thought we were bad guys, and we thought they were bad guys
and there was absolutely no communication. It’s funny. Joe Galloway, I’ve been part of a
veteran’s forum that he was on for a number of years, and we’ve emailed back and forth
and he was there with the Cav when that happened. So I can actually say that I was in
Vietnam with Joe Galloway. But, it was just one of those things that young kids out there
and inexperienced, nighttime. Things moved. Bushes turned into monsters. You were
scared to death, and you knew that these guys were going to sneak up with a knife
between their teeth and do you in. So, somebody got excited and started shooting, and
somebody got shot at and started shooting back, and then we found out it was each other
and we were on the same side.

RV: How long did that go on, that firefight?
DC: I’m going to say probably ten minutes. It seemed like an eternity but it was
probably no more than ten minutes.
RV: Were there any injuries that you know of?
DC: No. Not that I know of.
RV: Was that your first action or did you have other combat before that?
DC: Double Eagle was really kind of a nothing operation as far as where I was. I’m going to say that that was probably the high point of the whole thing. We did have one of our radio operators and he wasn’t with me. He was with another company and got wounded from a sniper. It was basically a lot of walking around and not really accomplishing a whole lot.
RV: So basically you were doing recon patrol.
DC: Well, we were actually supposed to find the Viet Cong. It was a search and destroy mission. Patrols are always involved in that sort of thing. They were elusive when they wanted to be, and if they didn’t want to be seen, they weren’t seen. There was nothing where they would stand and fight. That didn’t come until a little bit later.
RV: Your first week or so in the field, how did you feel being there in a war zone?
DC: Oh, it was exciting. I can remember sitting there one night just thinking to myself, “Wow, I’m a real live veteran.” It was, for a young immature kid, it was an adventure. I think the whole time I was there, it was pretty much an adventure. I never once considered that anything physically bad was going to happen to me.
RV: Even with people being wounded around you and things happening?
DC: I never thought about that. I did some pretty stupid things. I call them stupid now. I did some things there that they were just reactions. Again, training. There was a tremendous bond amongst us, taking care of your buddy. You just did things. You didn’t think about the consequences.
RV: Can you give me some examples of some of the things you said that were stupid?
DC: You know, getting out and running in the open when somebody got hurt and trying to help them. The rest of it was firefights and nothing conscious. You know, you just reacted to things. There were numerous times where, and this goes back to the radio and then antenna, where I was sitting in one spot and moved and as I moved, a bullet landed right where I was sitting or close to it. That happened several times. It’s real difficult to think of instances.
RV: As a radio operator, was this a company size search and destroy deal?
DC: Generally, the smallest unit I was involved with was a company, yes.

RV: So you were attached to, say the captain, or the leadership of the company.

DC: Well, our team would be attached to the leadership of the line company, yes.

RV: So you had a lot of direct experience with observing and talking with the leadership of the companies. How did you find their leadership, overall, in general? These would be your immediate supervisors.

DC: The company level and down, I thought, was excellent for what we had to operate with. When I say what we had to operate with, there wasn’t a lot of knowledge as to what our real mission was. This goes back to, we were inserted somewhere, we went somewhere and we were to find the bad guys, kill them, and that was accomplishing the mission. I don’t remember once being told why we were doing anything.

RV: Even on a specific search and destroy, they were not that specific with you?

DC: No, not at all.

RV: Was this true for the rest of the guys?

DC: Absolutely. There was no ultimate direction to the stuff we did. We were there to kill as many as we possibly could.

RV: What was your first experience with real combat besides the friendly fire deal?

DC: My first experience would be on operation Double Eagle II. We were up in an area around Tam Ki. We were getting ready to dig in for the night. As we were going through the village, I ended up getting picked up by this little puppy. This is an instance, a stupid instance, also.

RV: He kind of adopted you?

DC: Well, he ended up with me so I guess either he adopted me or I adopted him.

We were getting ready to dig in for the night, and we were outside of a village. As we were getting ready, this Vietnamese male came walking up the path past us and then about five minutes later came walking back down and he didn’t have anything on him. We didn’t think anything about it. Shortly after that, we got mortared. What had happened was he had paced us off. Here I was digging a hole, and this puppy was bouncing around and everything and when the first mortar hit and the guys that got hit
started screaming, somebody yelled, “Incoming, get down!” My first reaction was I
grabbed my helmet and put it over the puppy.

RV: And not your head.

DC: No. Not my head. Fortunately, it was only about three or four rounds. We
had several people injured to the point where the next morning they had to be medevaced
out. Nobody was killed. But we did get to listen to these poor guys all night long. I think
that’s when reality started to hit. Shortly after that was, in the early part of March,
operation Utah, which was our first encounter with North Vietnamese regulars and our
first major operation where stuff really, really happened. I think we were attached to
[with] H and S Company at that time and kind of on standby because I was part of H and
S Company anyway. But to go wherever we were needed once we got out there, we got
out and were told the LZ was going to be hot, went in on H-34 helicopters.

RV: Where were you based out of?

DC: Chu Lai at the time. We got heli-lifted in, no sooner got in than bullets
started flying all over the place. 3/1 got chopped up pretty bad. I think we ended up out at
Kilo company or Lima company. They ended up losing a lot of people. We had a number
of people out of the communications that were injured. One of whom was a real close
friend of mine, because I was there to help put him on a helicopter to get him out of the
field and he ended up coming back to the States. That was the last I saw him until two
years ago when we got together at a reunion, and he passed away last April 30th. At least
I did get to see him again. But that was pretty daunting.

RV: The NVA.

DC: Yeah. They were NVA. We had been told before we went in just before we
got on the choppers that we could expect to see people in brown uniforms with blue
piping, I think is what they said. And that these were hard-core, what they called hard
core North Vietnamese. There was a lot of stuff that was going on. When I was, well
when there was a lull in the fighting, I was the guy that got to call in medevacs for a
bunch of our people. There were some NVA soldiers that our docs were taking care of
that had been wounded and we were treating them. It was an eye opener, the fact that a
large number, and I couldn’t tell you how many of our Marines had been killed. It made
you realize that this was serious business. I think that’s when I helped carry my first
American casualty that was stiff as a board off to the side and it went into a big pile.
Well, not a pile. That’s not right because we lined them up side by side. But there were a number of ponchos with our boots sticking out of them.

RV: What were your general impressions of the Viet Cong and then also of the NVA?

DC: They were good. They used tactics just like we did. They weren’t afraid of us.

RV: Both the VC and NVA?

DC: Well, the VC was a different story. Those were the guys in the conical hats and the black pajamas that you never saw. Quite frankly, most of the stuff that I was involved in after operation Utah was strictly North Vietnamese. The only time when we were on search and destroy missions, there would be prisoners taken. They used to call them VC suspects. There were a pretty good number of those guys. But they weren’t fighting it. They were just scared to death that something was going to happen to them. The haircut was the give away.

RV: What do you mean?

DC: Well, if a guy had a real close-cropped haircut, he was a soldier. If he just had the regular, I don’t know how to explain it, not a military haircut, then you knew the guy was probably Viet Cong. Most villages you went into, people between the ages of 13 and 50- well, no, 50 was old for them- say 40, they weren’t around, because they were off doing either ARVN or they were Viet Cong.

RV: So the NVA presented a much tougher fight.

DC: Oh, they were professional soldiers. We realized that they were as dedicated as we were and probably more so. They were tough.

RV: What would you consider their strengths?

DC: They knew the ground. They had better discipline than we did.

RV: Better than the Marines?

DC: Yes.

RV: In what way?
DC: Fire discipline. The ideas was, we could shoot off 50 rounds and we were bound to hit something and they would use the three to five round bursts. Their camouflage was excellent.

RV: What was it?

DC: I can think of one instance, they used the foliage around. They blended right in. I can remember an instance looking out and I saw the side of a hill move. That’s because it was them. They didn’t make a lot of noise. As far as the real intangibles of field lore, I think they were probably better than we were. We were noisy but we had a lot of firepower. You could hear a Marine company coming from a mile away.

RV: Even though you were trying to be quiet. Or were you trying to be quiet?

DC: I don’t really think we cared.

RV: You knew you could call in the fire support and you had overwhelming force.

DC: Yes. And that’s was pretty much what it was, too. If you found something that you thought could be a problem, if you didn’t have air you dropped arty on it. If you didn’t have arty, you dropped air on it. We didn’t have a whole lot of helicopter support. We didn’t have gunships and stuff like the army did. I think the Marine Corps at the time I was there was still fighting with a lot of equipment from Korea. Noise discipline in an infantry company is real difficult because you’ve got so much equipment and so many people. You break it down to a smaller unit and then, yeah, you can control it. But when you’ve got anywhere from anything over a hundred people marching around out there together, it’s going to be noisy.

RV: What would you say were the weaknesses of the NVA soldiers?

DC: Lack of weaponry, sophisticated weaponry. They didn’t have a lot of artillery. I don’t remember RPGs, rocket propelled grenades until just towards the end of my tour. Of course, they had to hoof all this stuff down from the North on their own backs. I think that we had more sophisticated communications. I don’t know that their commo was that good. Since you asked me that question, boy you threw me there for a second, but they weren’t innovative. They weren’t flexible. If their original plan didn’t go right. That was one of our strong points, was that we could invent a battle in the middle of a battle. We could handle change and they couldn’t. If they would attack you and the
attack didn’t go the way that it was supposed to and it got stalled in some way, they’d
mill around and were easy pickings.

RV: Did you feel that you guys had enough supplies, everything that you needed
in the field?

DC: You get used to being the poor stepson. I never had a pair of jungle boots the
whole time I was there. We were issued in Okinawa, as much stuff as we could get and
we went down there with broken stuff. As I say, I had two pairs of jungle utilities and
once I wore those out, I never got another set. Anything that, if you broke it, you usually
either had to take it off of a casualty or go without.

RV: Even your weapons?

DC: Yeah. That was kind of a no-no. You didn’t want to take the equipment off of
somebody that had been hurt. That was bad juju. Yeah. Weapons, if your weapon got-
you could get a new weapon from supply back at battalion, but you had to go get the
damn thing. But you’d pretty much pick up out in the field whatever you could use and
make it work. Our supply system sucked.

RV: How often did you get resupplied in the field?

DC: Food and water was on a daily basis for the most part. You usually walked
out on the field carrying enough to last you for several days. As far as clothing goes,
never. You could buy it on the black market in places like Danang a heck of a lot easier
than you could get it through supply.

RV: Why would an American military man have to buy his own uniform on the
black market and not get it from his own government?

DC: That’s a good question. There was a black market going.

RV: You’re buying it from other Americans or from Vietnamese?

DC: You’d buy it from Vietnamese on street corners. I saw it one time when I
was in Danang. I had to go to Charlie Med and myself and another guy were there. You
had to cross the river there. It wasn’t the Perfume River, Danang River or whatever the
hell it was. There were these vendors out there and they had brand new jungle utilities
and we couldn’t get them. We were further up North then. We were up in the Dong Ha
DMZ area. You wanted to buy them and they were like 5 or 10 bucks for whatever you
wanted which was a vast amount of money. A guy named Dave Fanaro and myself both
helped ourselves to a set of jungle utilities and jungle boots and started to walk off and
we told the Vietnamese (of course we referred to them as gooks at the time) but we told
him stick it where the sun don’t shine that they belonged to us in the first place and we
couldn’t get them. MPs ended up coming into this thing and I remember the one looking
at me and saying, “Hey, man. I’m really sorry, but you’ve got to give it back to him.” So
we did. The other thing that sticks out in my mind an ice cold can of Falstaff That I could
have bought for like five bucks or two bucks from somebody on the street corner and we
couldn’t even get cold beer. So there was funny stuff going on and that got documented
later on. You know, back in those days, a supply sergeant was a pack rat. And I’m not by
any stretch saying that all of them were dishonest because the supply chain is long. What
didn’t get to us up in the Northern Provinces very easily could have stopped somewhere
when it came in DaNang. You only got what somebody wanted to give you. It was really
difficult during that time to get new equipment or especially clothing.

RV: Did you think it’s because it was early on in the American effort or was it
because of the general deal there?
DC: I think it was the general thing. I have no idea how it was later on after I left.
We had plenty of stuff over there. We’d been there for a year and a half when I left. I just
think it was a matter of stuff was going other than where it should have gone.

RV: How prevalent was the barter system in getting equipment and things that
you needed?
DC: I couldn’t answer that because I never did it. There were guys that would go
out and get stuff. I think every war has a large number of those people that they can just
go out and scrounge things, but as far as trading for stuff, I was never involved in that.
Anything we got, we got through our own chains or we made due.

RV: How did your equipment function besides your weapons, but the other things
that you carried?
DC: Pretty well. I don’t ever remember--you know, radio batteries, they’re life
wasn’t very long, but I don’t remember ever getting a piece of equipment that didn’t
function. We had old stuff, but it was well taken care of. My rifle, and I had an M-14, but
I never had a problem with it until it got blown up and that’s another story.

RV: Go ahead and tell me that.
DC: Well, this happened August 26, 1966. We were in an artillery base just outside [9 miles west] of Dong Ha at a place called Cam Lo. It just so happened that, whenever us as a FAC team went out with one of the line companies, we would help the company and battalion radio operators with radio watches because it just kind of split the load a little bit more. I had the, I’m going to say, until midnight watch, and then my partner, Dave Fanaro was supposed to come on after me. Just as it was starting to get dusk, we had guys out on our perimeter that started tossing grenades and saying that they thought they had movement, and they were told, “No, no, you’re just hearing things.”

Anyway, about the time my radio watch was to end, I just decided that I wasn’t tired, so I was going to take Dave’s watch as well, and I had to go to the bathroom and I left the radio, and I walked back probably a hundred feet and I did what I had to do. There was a bunker there where the radio was. Just as I got back by the bunker, all hell broke loose. What those guys had heard on the line was in fact the bad guys. We basically got overrun that evening. It lasted until probably three o’clock in the morning. We ended up, we had “Puff the Magic Dragon,” I called him. I was the guy on the radio the whole night. We got “Puff the Magic Dragon” and the flare ship up and they saved us. Our own mortars fired so many illumination rounds you could actually see them glowing in the dark. We had one guy, a guy named John Joyce who just that afternoon I had found out was from San Francisco and we were going to get together and BS about home, and he got killed and he was awarded the Navy Cross.

RV: For that particular firefight?

DC: Yeah. It wasn’t a firefight. This was a major pucker factor involved type of a thing. They were all over the place. We ended up with probably around 80 or so up and inside our lines dead the next morning. Anyway, my hooch had a satchel charge thrown into it without me there, of course. It blew up all of my gear. I had a pair of jungle utilities hanging out to dry. They got blown to shreds. My nephew has those to this day. But my rifle got blown to smithereens and I had to find another one.

RV: What did you do to find one?

DC: I just found one. I didn’t go looking for it. I don’t remember if somebody handed me one or if I just saw one laying around and picked it up. I spent most of my time on the radio. I really didn’t need the rifle, but they’re always nice to have when
people are shooting at you. The funny part about this came several days later. The next day, all of the equipment and stuff that was unusable was bundled up and sent back to Dong Ha, and of course my rifle was part of it. They checked serial numbers against names when these things came out, and nobody had heard from me and all of the sudden, somebody got the word that Cuneo’s rifle is here and he must have been one of the guys up at Cam Lo that got it. Probably three, four, days after that, I went, me and another guy got in a jeep and headed back to get radio batteries and I walked into the communications tent and one of the guys took a look at me and turned white as a ghost and actually fainted. He thought I was dead. Another guy came up and touched me. [Laughter] What was really neat about this is that I didn’t realize how much these guys cared for me. They thought I was dead.

RV: These are the guys you’d been talking to on the radio.

DC: Yeah. These were guys I knew because they were all part of the communications section. Remember I was attached out. But, yeah, these were guys that I knew. That was rather touching.

RV: One thing that, when I’ve read about and seen the movies or heard stories of radio operators talking on the radio in the middle of a firefight, how do you do that with all of the chaos around you?

DC: You know, I was one of those that I would talk just as we’re talking right now.

RV: You had no problems hearing?

DC: Then you just ask them to, “Say again.” But somebody had told me somewhere along the line that if I’m talking on the radio and I get excited, the people around me and the people on the other end are going to do the same thing. I don’t know what caused it. Part of the thing was, when we were out in the field, and I let everybody know this, if I had to carry the radio, I got to talk on it. Something would just click with me, and I would just calm down. At least my voice would calm down and I would talk very slowly and I would enunciate things so that they got it the first time as opposed to having to ask me to say things [over again]. With stuff going off around you and everything, it still wasn’t that difficult to hear. Like with the telephone, you had the mouthpiece right close to your mouth and the other guy had the earpiece in his ear.
RV: Did you prefer to be on the radio or off the radio?
DC: On the radio. If I carried it, I got to talk on it.
RV: That’s why I asked that. It sounded like you wanted to be in communication.
DC: Oh, absolutely.
RV: Did you feel more in control of your destiny?
DC: Yes and I felt like I was doing something. If I had a choice between talking and shooting, I was going to talk.
RV: How much authority did you have to get before you called in arty or air or just in general, did you have to ask your superior officer, say, “Here’s what I want to do,” or did you have control over it?
DC: No. I was usually told what to do. This instance at Cam Lo, I had to take it on myself because I knew that we were in trouble. When I called in that we were getting hit and I asked for the flare ships and the gunship. For the most part, calling in airstrikes was the officer’s job to do. We worked in tandem to do that.
RV: When people see radio operators in movies in Vietnam, are they realistic? Have you found them to be that?
DC: I can't say they’re not. Usually, and I’m just trying to kind of rack my brain here, usually when you see the radio operators in the movies, they’re just there and Mel Gibson or whoever picks up the radio and talks into it. For the most part, I think that was true.
RV: The officer would pick it up and talk?
DC: Yes. Usually the radio operator was the burro and just stood right next to the officer or the platoon sergeant who would do the talking. If they had enough confidence in you, then they’d let you do it. Have you seen *We Were Soldiers*?
RV: Yes, sir.
DC: Okay. That was pretty right on. That was shot here in California and a lot of the people that were in that movie were recruited from the local Cal Guard units. They shot it down at Camp Roberts and at Fort Hunter Liggett where the terrain and everything fairly matched what those guys had had. It was up until the end there when they did that big charge and the helicopters popped up and the cavalry coming to the rescue thing, it was pretty good.
RV: I remember a scene where the radio operator, I guess, had called in a strike with the napalm, and it had gotten close and killed friendly troops. How often did that happen?

DC: That was a short drop if I’m not mistaken.

RV: Yes it was.

DC: That happened more often than it should have, where either targets were missed or something else was hit. I’m not going to say I saw a whole lot of it, but I can think of a couple of instances where, one where a 500 pound bomb hit a tree and detonated, and we had a company pinned down at the time that walked into an ambush and it took out a few of the guys. I also remember an instance fairly early in my tour where some napalm was dropped on an ARVN unit in air because somebody screwed up either the coordinates or they mistook the unit for being something other than they were. But, once is more often than it should happen. Another thing, that stuff was all done by eyesight. We didn’t have the precision computers or the laser stuff that they have now. Your target was on a clock system and you would envision a clock with the target being the center. They’d have to break out their map and figure the coordinates and give it to [the pilot]- and I’m using error as the example here- and when the guy dropped it, if he was long, in other words, he had overshot the target, then you’d bring him six o’clock x amount of meters. And if he was off to the left then you’d bring him to three o’clock, which would be to the right using a normal clock. So human error really did enter into this stuff. As far as the pilots went, if you gave them good information on the ground, those guys were tremendous.

RV: Really.

DC: Oh, yeah. From the jet jockies to the helicopter pilots, these guys, they feared nothing.

RV: Did you have good communication with these guys?

DC: Oh yeah.

RV: Did you ever get to see them in person later?

DC: No.

RV: They were just a voice.

DC: Yes. Just a voice.
RV: And of course, the result.
DC: You don’t know how many beers I still owe people. [Laughter] It was funny.

I’d been out of the Marine Corps for probably a year, and I was living in South San Francisco and this guy was selling stereos door to door and knocked on my door and we started talking and he said, “Your voice really sounds familiar.” And as you can tell, my voice is not a normal. I have a distinct voice. I said, “Oh, yeah? Have we met before?” And we started putting two and two together, and he had been a radio operator with one of the helicopter units in Chu Lai that I had used for Medevacs and other things. So we had talked at one time, and here we were meeting in the middle of South San Francisco. Who’d have thunk it. As far as actually meeting the pilots and stuff, no.

RV: Saying that they were fearless, what was the bravest action that you witnessed while on the ground in Vietnam or a number of events, not just one?

DC: I’m going to have to say, because I can't think of one instance of just watching somebody go through something. You didn’t do that. I think the bravest guys that were there were the corpsmen; the individuals. For the life of me I can't think of an instance of some guy running out in the middle of a battle and doing something heroic. Things just happen and people did things because they had to. You pulled your own weight and you worried about the consequences later.

RV: What would you do with people who did not pull their own weight in your company?

DC: You got rid of them.

RV: How’d you do that?

DC: Usually, the Company Gunny would send them off to the rear somewhere; send them to another company. Not too many instances of that. I remember in particular just one. That was a guy that had gotten a hold of some marijuana, which was not prevalent when I was there.

RV: I was going to ask you about that.

DC: It was there, but it wasn’t that prevalent. And this guy was told that he wasn’t to do this anymore, but he went ahead and did it, and he was given a choice of either requesting a transfer or something nasty was going to happen to him. He ended up with a broken leg is what happened.
RV: From battle.
DC: No, from the butt of an M-14. He went and asked for a transfer and he was told, or his squad leader was told that if I let this guy do it then everybody’s going to do it. They just took him and he ended up with a broken leg and left.
RV: Made sure that he got out of country.
DC: At least out of the local vicinity. For the most part, people pulled their weight.
RV: Speaking about the drug and alcohol, how much of the drug use did you see?
DC: None.
RV: Was that because you were a Marine or was it because it was simply the time period?
DC: I think both. I know there was stuff going on in the rear. Anything that I can think of that happened that would be alcohol related. I’d heard that you could get, they called it the “zoom”.
RV: Alcohol or marijuana.
DC: Marijuana. I’d heard that you could get that, but I never smoked pot until I got out of the Marine Corps.
RV: How about alcohol use?
DC: Whenever we could get it. It wasn’t that often, at least not in my case. There were no fraggings. Discipline was pretty well maintained. But this had an awful lot to do with the time element when I was there as well.
RV: You never heard any discussion of fragging or anything?
DC: No.
RV: One of the big issues of the Vietnam war that was brought out from time to time during the war and after the war was the atrocity rate. Did you ever witness anything like that?
DC: Never.
RV: On the side of Americans or the enemy.
DC: I remember going into a village right after the Korean Marines had been there.
RV: The ROK troops.
DC: Yes. We were told not to drink water out of the well because they had just fished some people out of there. Most villages had their own well or two. But, I know they had gone in there and they had taken some fire, and their edict was that if we take fire everybody pays for it. I was involved in a couple of instances where we burned a village down. I think that classifies as an atrocity now that I think of it. At the time, it didn’t.

RV: Why was that not.

DC: We took fire from it, and the people had been told that if something like this happened, you’re going to lose your village. This was, I want to say, pretty early on in my tour. I can remember us being outside, and all of the villagers that were there were all huddled together and they wailed all night long as the village burned. It was pretty sad now that I think of it. At the time I didn’t. I just wished they’d shut up. Other than that, I never saw what would be considered an atrocity.

RV: Did you ever encounter any race issues?

DC: No. You know, on that subject, most of the people that I served with over there were Caucasian. Blacks were definitely a minority and Hispanics were most definitely a minority.

RV: Do you know why that was?

DC: I don’t know. The times more than likely.

RV: Probably the draft.

DC: Now, remember the Marine Corps didn’t get a lot of draftees.

RV: Well, I’d like to ask you a couple of larger questions about general life in the field. What was that like for you?

DC: Life in the field was pitch a poncho, depending on how the weather was, if you were going to be in an area for any extended length of time, which was usually more than a day. We tended to be in one place and then move the next day, just because if you stayed in one place too long, you were asking for trouble. When you say life in the field, do you mean how did we live?

RV: Yes. How did you live?

DC: Spartanly. You had your C-rations, you had the clothes on your back, a change of socks. We didn’t wear underwear.
RV: On purpose.
DC: There was not reason for it. I had a pair of boxer shorts that I wore and they finally rotted off. You didn’t need it. You didn’t wear socks because you didn’t need them. [Later remembers that they actually did wear socks.] But it was, you’d hump as much as you had to during the day. It was hot. Usually, in the evening you found a place where you were going to stay overnight and laager, what we called laagering and you would dig in. Sleep, get up the next morning and do the same thing.

RV: How did you deal with the heat?
DC: You know, that’s a good question. I never had a problem with it. What I’m about to tell you, this kind of pissed off one guy that I was talking to via Internet. We were up in the DMZ, and it was a real hot day and we had been humping up some hills, and we had a bunch of people that were going out with, you know, heat casualties. The officer, our forward air controller, I have been in touch with him for probably the last eight years, but he later told me that he was about ready to pass out that day himself, but the only reason he kept going was because of us not dropping out. I can remember we got to the top of this hill and called in helicopters, and I can remember when they landed, opening up my shirt and the breeze or actually the heavy wind from the helicopter blades, how good it felt. It had to be the battalion commander had come in, and he made a comment to Jeff Sewell who was our forward air controller about how myself and Dave Fanaro, we hadn’t dropped out and we looked like we were fresh. He goes, “You’ve got to give these guys a nickname.” We ended up being called super grunts after that. It never affected me to the point of, and I don’t know why, maybe just because I was skinny. But I never had a heat injury, and I don’t remember drinking large amounts of water either.

Excuse me just a second.
RV: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Don Cuneo. Today is November 27th. It is approximately 10:05 am, 2002, Central Standard Time. Don, you’re in California, and it’s just after 8:00 in the morning there and we had stopped recording earlier from our previous conversation last week and we’re going to continue now. Since we last talked, Don, you said you had written down some notes on some things that we had previously discussed and some extra things. So why don’t we just start with some of your reminiscences that you’ve written down that you would like to mention.

DC: Sure. You had asked me about reasons for joining the Marine Corps, which I stated. My dad had a very close friend. My dad was very big in the Shrine here in San Francisco as was his friend. This gentleman, Ray Luckel was a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps. I had not met him prior to enlisting. He was highly decorated. He was a Marine Raider in World War II in the Georgia Islands, a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross, which is pretty high up there. He was at the ceremony when I got sworn in. There were, I guess, five of us all together, and my dad was there and Colonel Luckel was there. He also served to be a reason for making it through boot camp. He was one of the guys that when it came time to quit I would think about, when the thought of quitting, not when it came time to quit. When the thought of quitting, say during a run when you were really tired or something, it was a motivator to just keep going. I wanted him to be mentioned in this.

RV: Sure. So you’d kind of picture him in your mind and what he had done for the country and things like that.

DC: Oh, absolutely. How could I come home and face my cousin or him or my buddy Pat Conner if I didn’t make it through boot camp? And there were times in boot camp when you wanted to say, “screw this” and go home.

RV: What else have you written down there that you’d like to talk about?

DC: Oh, boy. There’s a whole bunch of stuff plus I’ve got a copy of some things that I had written out and I think I sent you. Where did we--

RV: We were talking about life in the field and what it was like for you, basically, how you lived, how you dressed, things like that, and I had a couple of questions to follow up on that about basic things. One question that I ask veterans a lot that I think is
very interesting, is tell me what the day time was like in the field versus what was the
night time like in the field.

DC: There’s a great book out and it’s been out for years. It’s called *The Things
They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. Daytime in the field. Daytime in the field, was usually,
that was the time we moved. It got extremely hot. Temperatures in Vietnam would reach
the high 80s to 90s really early in the morning and by noon it was well over 100. If you
were going somewhere though, the daytime was the time you moved. Our load probably,
I’m going to say anywhere from 30 to 60 pounds, depending on what you were carrying
and depending on what the mission was at the time. Movement was almost always on
foot. We were heli-lifted. Operation Utah, March of ’66, we were heli-lifted into that.
Operation Texas, which followed just a couple of weeks after that. After that, most of the
stuff, well operation Hastings was done in helos also. But most of the stuff we went on,
we moved on foot up hills, on the side of hills, through rice paddies. Vietnam’s kind of a
conglomeration of different types of terrain. The Chu Lai area was sandy until you went
inland, and then it got a little in the mountainous area, but not a lot of jungle. As you
moved further up north, we went from the to Phu Bai, Hue/Phu Bai, and again close to
the East, well it would be the West here. The East and the South China Sea, why, it was
flat land. Then as you moved in, of course, the A Shau Valley, the mouth of that is just on
the west side of Hue/Phu Bai. It got mountainous there. But then going further up north,
we went up to Dong Ha, and right up there is Con Thien, Route 9 which goes out to Khe
Sanh, Cam Lo, a lot of flat ground, a lot of scrub. Then the Rockpile is out in that area.
Not a lot of jungle out there. There were areas with a lot of foliage, but not the type of
jungle that you see in the movies. I never went through anything like that, and I probably
walked around half of the countryside from Chu Lai north at one point or another.
Nighttime, when it started to get dark, you dug in. I can almost with 100% assurance say
that I never was on an offensive operation after dark. You would find where you were
going to stay for the night, if you hadn’t already gone back to wherever your base camp
was, dig in, and sit out the night. If something happened, something happened.

RV: What did it sound like at night? I guess it depended on where you were.

DC: Yeah. Well, if you were sitting in a hole on the perimeter and I did that.

Being a radio operator, I would more than likely be on radio watch somewhere, so my
sounds at night were radio static. I did spend a couple of nights sitting in a hole on the perimeter. Of course, everything was amplified. Every sound you hear sounds like gargantuas walking out there. Bushes move. You’re nerves are on end. You’re tired. You have to force yourself to stay awake, but for young kids, it’s a scary time. It was a scary time. Nighttime wasn’t something you looked forward to.

RV: Did your fellow soldiers feel the same way?
DC: Oh, sure. If anything bad was going to happen, it was going to happen at night.

RV: How confident did you feel with your defensive perimeter set up and your men there? Did you still feel vulnerable or were you relatively confident that you could handle what would come to you?
DC: I never felt not confident. I think we all pretty much felt that if something happened, we would handle it. I never felt vulnerable.

RV: Can you describe how you would actually set up your defensive perimeter for the night?
DC: That was a tactical thing that I really wasn’t involved in the set-up. Of course, your perimeter went all around your position and it depended on how many people you had. Generally the command post, which was where I would be, was either in the center or very close to the center of that. Depending on the size of the unit that I was with, anything from a company to a battalion. Not that we ever operated at 100% strength. You’re talking maybe 100 to 200. I’m trying to think how big a line company was in those days. We would operate at anywhere from 50 to 40% strength almost at all times. So you’re looking at an area where you’re going to have maybe 50 to 100 people ringing it. Cut that in half because you’re going to have two people in each foxhole. You’d set them up so that, what they call interlocking fields of fire, so that if anything happened, one position’s shooting could overlap another. The M-14 was capable of firing on automatic, so besides the M-60 machine guns that were there, you had the additional firepower of the M-14. Barbed wire. Anti-personnel devices would be booby-trapped hand grenades. A favorite trick was taking an empty C-ration can and putting pebbles in it, and then attaching it to the barbed wire so if somebody was trying to sneak through, they’d set that off. Trip flares. There were some pretty ingenious devices set up.
Anything that would allow you to know that somebody was out there and moving around was fair game to use.

RV: So you were set up mainly in the middle because you were command post.

DC: Yes.

RV: Did you feel safer there?

DC: I don’t know if I mentioned before. I don’t remember ever not feeling safe. Not that I was overconfident or anything, just that you were there. It was a job. It was up to the command to make things safe, and you just went along with the flow. They were the guys that were presumably tactically proficient, and then you just did your job inside.

RV: You’d mentioned in your questionnaire about some of the weaponry you guys had. One thing that you had on your side were tanks, and you mentioned that they were ineffective in many instances. Why did you feel that the tanks were ineffective?

DC: The terrain. They just were not effective in the soft ground. They broke down a lot. They threw tracks and then you’d have to sit there for a couple of hours while they fix the thing, and that was uncomfortable because you were sitting ducks. There’s real fine sand and fine, fine dust in Vietnam and it would get in the tank engines and just render them useless. Tanks are good for flat ground, and they’re especially good in an urban environment where they can just blow the crap out of things. But for movement out in the field, in my opinion, they were more of an invite for trouble than they were a help. I’m going to go to an instance, August 23rd of 1966, we were at Cam Lo. Let me get this right. We were up in the Cam Lo area, which was about nine miles west of Dong Ha, right off of Route 9. It later was part of what became known as Leatherneck Square. About five miles, I’m guessing here, South of Con Thien, and we went on an operation up towards Con Thien, and we had tanks with us. The company commander of Alpha Company was a First Lieutenant by the name of William Hartley. When we went off on this operation, and this was standard. They broke the command group in two. Your commander would go with one group of people. Your executive officer would be with another group of people. That was in case something would happen to one of them, the other would be there to assume command. The XO was a guy by the name of Jerry Galvin. Jerry was a Second Lieutenant, probably been in country two months.

RV: How old do you think he was?
DC: Jerry was, at the time, let’s see. I was 20, so 23 or 24. He was from my home area. When we put two and two together, we found out that we knew people in common. He was a San Mateo County in California; a deputy sheriff. So he was a pretty mature guy. Bill Hartley was a mustanger, a guy that had been previously enlisted. I’m going to back up a little bit here, because the story to this has been with me ever since that day.

We pulled into Alpha Company’s position the night of the 22nd and as was SOP, standard operating procedure, those of us that were radio operators helped the Alpha Company radio operators on their radio watch. I had been out with Alpha Company a couple of times before, and I knew who Lieutenant Hartley was. I didn’t know him real well. He knew who I was. I took over the radio watch and he came walking in and walked up to me and said, “Hi. My name’s Bill,” which kind of dumbfounded me for a Lieutenant to be walking up to a Lance Corporal and say his first name. He told me that his radio operator was about to rotate back to the world, and would I be interested in taking over that position and being his radio operator. I said, “Well, when would this happen?” He said, “Immediately, like tomorrow.” I thought about it and I finally told him, I said, “Look, I’m really happy with what I’m doing, and I get to travel all over the place with the battalion and I’d just as soon stay there.” So, his radio operator and him and his entourage went off and we were with the XO up around a place called the churchyard, where there was this shell of a church that had been bombed out. It wasn’t bombed but there had been stuff going on around there. We got ambushed, and his tank was hit with an RPG and Bill Hartley was killed. The radio operator was either killed or very, very badly wounded, which would have been me had I agreed to do it. One of the things, and I wasn’t there but I heard this story, and I heard it again that day, and I also saw it again in an email with a buddy of mine. Hartley was almost blown in two by this RPG, and yet he managed to somehow miraculously stand up, wave a bandana and tell people to get down, that we were being ambushed. I don’t know what happened other than that. In that time, the battalion commander came out, and when we got things going, we decided to head back to Cam Lo, and I got the casualties up on tanks and started to go back. We got ambushed at least two more times, had a tank break down. There was little or no communication with the tank commanders.

RV: People inside the tanks?
DC: Yes. We were outside. They were inside. We had little contact with, being able to talk to them.

RV: Couldn’t you raise them on a special radio frequency?

DC: If it worked. If they were buttoned up, there was a telephone on the back of the tank, and you could use that for communications, but if it didn’t work or they didn’t want to hear it, what could you do? You bang on the turret, on the hatch cover, and if the guy is busy, he’s not going to hear that.

RV: Why would they not want to talk to you?

DC: That’s a good question. Funny things happen when you’re adrenaline is going. We used to call it a pucker factor. I don’t know if it was that or a concern about losing their tank, realizing that they were in a real bad situation. I don’t know. I’m not saying they were cowards, because I don’t believe they were. I think on that particular operation, I don’t think it was well set up. I’ve seen things many years afterwards. I’m surprised that there wasn’t a lot of attention to detail as far as planning for contingencies and if things were to happen. I mean, we had people riding on the top of tanks.

RV: Weren’t they really good targets up there?

DC: Oh, absolutely. Especially at that time, we hadn’t seen a lot of rocket-propelled grenades, and the North Vietnamese were getting new armament and stuff that could handle an almost immobile object like a tank. Like I said before, it was a sitting duck. After that, somebody mentioned tanks and you didn’t want to go with them. If a tank broke down, it usually meant having another tank or retriever come pick it up, which also meant that somebody had to stay and guard the tank. It took time to get that retriever out there, which meant a squad or platoon could have to spend the night our there alone. That wasn’t a good idea.

RV: Do you want to continue talking about the 22nd, 23rd of August?

DC: Once we got back to Cam Lo and they did a head count, we found out that we had left one person back there. If my memory serves me right, it was a guy named Heater. We sent people back and they found him. He had been executed. He had been wounded previously. One of the things, and we had mentioned Jerry Galvin. When it was learned that lieutenant Hartley had been killed, the officers of the company were kind of standing around, and I was privy to what was going on there. Jeff Sewell who
was my FAC, was talking with, let me think here for a second. What the heck was that
lieutenant’s name? There were two lieutenants. One was a first lieutenant. Jerry says he
was a second lieutenant, but I’d swear he was a first lieutenant, who normally should
have taken command, didn’t want to.

RV: I’m looking at my notes here, Lieutenant Smith and Roach?

DC: Smith. Yeah, Smith and Roach. Jerry Galvin walks up there and says, “Okay,
guys. I’m ready to take over,” which really blew me away. Because he was a brand new
2nd lieutenant just ballsy as heck walking up and confident. And Jerry took over that
company for another several months. He was the commander as the 2nd lieutenant, and
did a heck of a job. Those were the kind of guys you had over there. People stepped in,
stepped up, and did what it took to help the rest of us survive. We went back to Cam Lo,
as I said, and I just lost my train of thought.

RV: You were going back up to the Church Yard area, is that correct?

DC: Well, we were up in the Church Yard area when this happened.

RV: So you were making your way up that way.

DC: Correct.

RV: You mentioned here in the notes that you emailed me that sometime either on
the 24th or early the 25th, you caught or someone caught a North Vietnamese or Viet Cong
by Highway 9 in Cam Lo, and he had a map of the area where all of you guys were,
exactly. All of your locations.

DC: After the 23rd, we went back to Cam Lo. It was, at the time, a forward
artillery position. We had tanks there as well. Things were pretty quiet. I’m going to say
on the 24th there was a Vietnamese that was caught and he had, and I saw the thing. He
had a map of the way our area there was set up, with color-coded markings for, they were
like if I remember correctly, blue and yellow and green, marking the different positions
on the perimeter, marking where the command bunker was, where the FDC was. The
setup was over a pretty good-sized area. There was, like I say, there was an artillery unit
there. There was tanks. We were the security for the place. It also covered a portion of
both sides of the highway. That gave an indication that something was going to happen, it
was just a matter of when.

RV: How do you think this guy got that map or got that information?
DC: By watching us. We employed Vietnamese. And you couldn’t tell who was a
good guy or who was a bad guy. But we employed one guy as a barber, and he came in
and smiled at us all day long and cut hair. They used those hand scissors, or hand shears.
You had people that came in and did laundry. They could just walk up and down the
road, and they could be dressed as a popular forces or as an ARVN, and just put things in
memory and then write them down. It was their intelligence. These guys were very good
at that. We knew something was going to happen. It was just a matter of when. I’m
looking here at my notes now too. The night of the--That was the 24th-- The night of the
25th, as it got to be dusk, there were people out on the perimeter hearing noises. There
was a grenade tossed, and I was over at the command bunker. I was on radio watch. I can
remember Gunny Winebar. This guy was something else; a big guy. He was probably no
more that six foot two, but in my memory he was about six eleven. Big gruff looking guy
from Kentucky or West Virginia; put John Wayne to shame. But he and Lieutenant
Galvin were there, and I can remember them yelling out on the perimeter, “Hey, knock it
off. You're just hearing things. There’s nobody out there.” This went on for a while.
Things quieted down. My radio watch was supposed to be over at about, I’m going to just
say midnight for lack of a better time. My buddy Dave Fanaro was supposed to take over.
I wasn’t tired, and I just decided that I’d just let Dave sleep. I had to go to the bathroom. I
was both hungry and had to go to the bathroom. And behind the bunker where I was, was
a supply tent. It was flat terrain. As I recall, it was a fairly clear night. Part of protocol
was that, as a radio operator, you didn’t leave your radio. Nothing was going on. We had
rigged the radio to where it had about a 50-foot extension to it, to the handset. I had to go
to the bathroom. So I walked out, and I was standing there doing my thing. I’m sure I was
very well silhouetted against the background.

RV: Did you have your handset with you?

DC: No. It was where I could hear anything if anything happened. I was probably
20 feet away from it, 30 feet away from it. But I did my thing and I looked over at the
supply tent. And thought, well, if I go over there and rummage around, it’s going to take
me a few minutes, so I better not. I went and I picked up the handset and started walking
back towards the bunker and the shit hit the fan. These guys were inside our perimeter.
They had satchel charges. When things first started going off, I dove and picked up the
radio and immediately called battalion headquarters and told them we were under mortar and small arms fire. I kind of took everybody down there by surprise. They made me repeat what I had said and I did. All around and inside that bunker became a mad house. Jerry Galvin showed up in his underwear and glasses. Lieutenant Roach showed up and when Jerry asked him, “What’s going on at your perimeter?” his answer was, “What perimeter?” Mass confusion, a lot of screaming and yelling, a whole heck of a lot of noise. Jeff Sewell showed up. I was the guy on the radio. He told me to call battalion and ask for flare ships. About this time the 81-mortar section was firing off illumination rounds so we could see what was going on. Sergeant Vale Tuliafano was the 81 mortars section chief. He is now either a representative or a senator from Samoa. He was also from my local home area. He was from South San Francisco and we had spent a lot of time talking about people we knew in common in stuff. He was a big Samoan guy. We called him Sergeant Tooly. He had those things going to the point where the tubes were glowing red. I seem to remember him telling me that they fired off close to 100 rounds. That’s a lot.

RV: Yes, it is.

DC: Within moments [20-30 minutes], we had Puff the Magic Dragon and Smokey Bear on station. I think I mentioned this last time that they told us they had a back up behind them in case they ran low on fuel, and that they’d be with us all night long. They weren’t going to leave us, which was kind of a morale booster. They lightened up the night for us. We got things under control, and the next morning, it was a huge mess. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like, well I know I’ve never seen anything like that before and I’d been in a few actions where things had gotten hot and heavy. This was just unbelievable. There were bodies, there was equipment, there were body parts, weapons, you name it, just laying all over the place. It looked like something you would see in a movie except it was real. The smell when the sun came out and started to warm things up was just overwhelming. There were official military records. The official military history of this thing is kind of funny because it says that we knew that they were out there, and we channeled them through our wire into an area where we could take care of them, and a couple of them had snuck through ahead of everybody. And we missed them and they’re the ones that caused the damage. It’s in a book by Jack Shumlinson.
I’ve shown it to, you know, photocopied the article, and showed it to a couple of the people that were there, and everybody, myself included, had the same reaction, which was, “That’s not how I remember it.” They’d gotten inside our lines and we basically got overrun. Our losses were not great. We lost 8 to 12 people. We had a guy named John Joyce who was from San Francisco, who was killed. I had met him just that afternoon. Dave Fanaro had been out talking to him, found out he was from San Francisco and introduced us and we had said, “Hey, we’ll get together and talk about the Bay area.” He was killed. He was awarded the Navy Cross. We had, let me think here, Floyd Graves, I think was his name. One of the stories you read about, you hear about. When this thing first started, Floyd and whoever was in the hole with him apparently a satchel charge or a grenade went off right in front of him. One was wounded but operational. The other guy was blinded. The guy that was wounded wasn’t able to operate the machine gun. The blind guy was, so Floyd Graves was the one that was temporarily blinded, and his buddy told him where people were coming and he just pointed the machine gun in that direction. There was a lot of individual heroism that went on out there that night. Gunny Winebar got together a group of people, and had them all lay down. When the word comes out that you get in your hole and shoot anything that moves, you know you’ve got a problem. When that happened, he got a bunch of people out there, had them get on the ground in the prone position and shoot anything that moved. They eventually swept the area, and we organized a counter attack. I also know that he kind of on his own took off and said, “I’ll be back,” and went down to one of the tank positions, found. I’m going to use the term gook. Found some gooks on top of the tank trying to break into it. We had people inside. Well, he calmly took care of the people on top. I heard one of the tankers talking about it the next morning. He said he’d be very, very happy to buy Gunny Winebar a beer for the rest of his life. Just stuff that. Guys going out and setting up a landing zone casualty area while things were going on. It gets crazy. You can't tell who the good guy is and who the bad guy is. Jeff Sewell was saying that he was out there rummaging around for something and heard a noise a few feet away from him and said something to the guy and the guy answered him back in Vietnamese so he shot him. Just weird stuff happens and people do things that you don’t expect them to do. But we made it through the night. Like I said, the next morning was just unbelievable. When they put all of the weapons
that were found on the ground together, there was one and it was an AR-15. We had
heard about the new weapons coming in, and what the Army had and everything. We still
had the M-14. This particular AR-15 had a sticker on it from the 174th; I think it was the
174th, no 173rd Airborne. I remember somebody, and I believe it was Gunny Winebar
making a comment that it looked like it was a weapon taken off of one of our people, and
this group turned out to be part of the 124B North Vietnamese Regiment, but that they
had been operating down in the Central Highlands where the 173rd Airborne was. But we
had this large cache of weapons, and they were layed out on two cots, and at the time, it
was one of the biggest caches out of battle that had been gathered in the Marine Corps’
time in I Corps.

RV: Do you remember what kind of weapons they were? Were these the
Vietnamese weapons?

DC: Yes. AK-47s, SKS. There were a couple of, I’m trying to think here. I want
to say there were a couple of satchel charges, but that doesn’t make sense because those
things would still be [live]. There were remnants of satchel charges laying all over the
place because they came in canvas bags. I’m just going to say AK-47s and SKS and other
things I can't remember what it was.

RV: How did Dave Fanaro make it? Did he do okay during the night?

DC: [Laughter] Dave Fanaro comes running over to the radio stark ass naked.

Dave is very, very fair complected, almost to being an albino. I’m looking at a picture of
him right now as we talk. I’m in my den here looking at my wall. He comes running over,
and he’s got nothing on and almost glowing in the dark.

RV: This is in the middle of the battle.

DC: Yeah. Right after it started. He says, “What do I do? What do I do?” I said,
“Well, go get some clothes on.” So I ended up loaning him my boots and he ran back and
got his clothes, and then he and the other guy in our team, Eddie Mantha [went out]. The
bunker had been hit by a satchel charge. It was a big, thick sandbag bunker. It didn’t do
much damage to it, but we had a two-niner two radio out there. I was still able to
communicate, but it wasn’t as easy as it had been a few minutes before. So we knew
immediately what had happened. So we drew straws to see which one of us was going to
go out there and put the thing back up. I lost the first time, so I went out, and that’s when
I found out you could put up a two niner two [alone]. Are you familiar with that?

RV: I’ve seen pictures of them, but why don’t you go ahead and describe it?

DC: Well, it’s a tall multi-directional antenna, and it’s got tubes. There’s all kinds
of different ways of setting it up. They still use it today. The nomenclature on it has just
changed a little bit as its body parts have gotten better. As a matter of fact, just last week
I helped to set one up, and it’s amazing how much you remember these things. But
there’s like three guide wires involved that have to be staked down if you’re going to set
it up according to the way the manual says, and it’s supposedly at least a two man
operation and usually a three to four person operation to do it properly. I found out very
quickly that one person with one hand can set them up. Its called field expediency. We
got the antenna going. Dave and Eddie went out and they’re the ones that went out and
set up a casualty area and found a place and found a place where if we had to bring
helicopters in in the dark, we could do so. Dave Fanaro was something else. He’s had his
problems in life since he got out of the Marine Corps, but I’m still in contact with him,
and he was a bulldog. He would go out and he was nosey. He would find things out, and
if he came back and he told you something, you could just about rest assured that it was
fact. He also had a penchant for looking at body holes, bodies that had been hit. He liked
to go over and look and see all the stuff. He was a guy that you could count on him. Dave
made it through the night. He got semi-dressed and felt that if he got killed, he was going
to be okay because he had some clothes on, gave me back my boots. He did well and he
made it.

RV: Don, how did you do through the night?

DC: I operated. I didn’t realize. You find out things about yourself. I had been
told long before that if you got involved in a nasty situation, other people were going to
react to your reaction. I was just barely 20 years old, and I wasn’t the most mature kid in
the world, but I was one of those that when the shit hit the fan, I just went down a notch. I
forced myself to speak very calmly to people around me. Being on the radio, people
looked at me as being the hub. I took directions from the commander. I took directions
from Jeff Sewell, but how I presented them over the radio to the people back at Cam Lo
definitely made a difference I think. I knew the guy at the other end, or both of them.
There was a guy named Gene Jordan, who I’ve also seen since that time back in Kansas City. Then the battalion commander’s radio operator came up and that’s a guy name Roy Stafford. I just kept as calm as I could. I kept the communications going. When I had to go, and I had to go outside with my radio handset and tell the flare ship where to start dropping it’s flares, and kind of look around to see if anybody was coming our way or how things were going, I did okay. I was congratulated afterwards by the battalion commander for having done a good job.

RV: That’s significant.

DC: Oh, it made my whole career to have your battalion commander tell you you’re a good Marine. That’s super. That happened. A bunch of VIPs were flown in. We kind of regrouped and cleaned up the mess. There were a whole bunch of dead bodies. They somehow got a grader and another piece of heavy equipment up there to dig a mass grave. Some people got the job of moving the bodies or what was left of them over, and they just buried them en mass. That was two things. Number one, it got rid of most of the carnage that was out there, but number two, it also served as a reminder to the local populace of what happens when you mess with the good guys. That was part of the psychological warfare aspect of it. There’s got to be stuff like that all over their country, I’m sure. But we continued to operate out of there a little bit wiser. We didn’t get hit there again, but the next night we thought we were. We were probably probed again but nothing major happened. We moved from there a few days later. I remember we were going out on a sweep in the local area, and we ended up going into a valley. We went to the Rockpile right after that, and I’m almost positive now it was from the Rockpile area that we did this. We found a Vietnamese base camp, and it was complete with, it was in a heavily foliaged area, and they had tiger cages there for prisoners, bamboo cages that were maybe three feet high and maybe four feet five feet long. It wouldn’t allow a person to stand up. There were cooking fires. There were warm ashes which means that somebody had recently been there. This scenario was repeated throughout an area a 1,000 yards long as we walked through it. Of course, we searched the area, didn’t find anything. We knew that somebody had been there. I noticed what looked to me, and probably a couple of hundred yards away, sunlight gleaning off of a rifle barrel. You know how you take a mirror and flash it in the sun? It was that sort of, that’s what I saw. Nothing was
done with it, but I know it wasn’t one of our people. I just have a feeling that we were
being watched. You just kind of had that eerie feeling that somebody was eyeballing you.
We got through that and we were all a little bit nervous. I can remember [after] we were
walking up on this knoll, and we’d come out of the underbrush and we were back in the
sunlight. And we were walking along, and from the opposite side of this knoll, we had
the air cav, the Army’s air cavalry. They had a lot of helicopter assets and some of their
people were up in our area and we were getting assistance. Their helicopters were flying
support for us and just on the other side of this rise, all of the sudden, this light
observation helicopter, they called them loaches (LOHs). It’s the small helicopter. News
crews use them nowadays. They’ve got the bubble. This thing pops up and I’m walking
along and I just stop dead in my tracks. There’s these two guys. One guy was forward
and the other guy was in the back. Here’s this guy with this helmet and everything on,
and he flashes me the peace sign and his chuckle went on the radio because they were on
our frequency and he said, “Did I scare you?” And I looked at him and I said, “Man, I
thought you were the biggest [f’ing] mosquito I’d ever seen!” Stuff like that happened.
You had your moments of terror. This isn’t an original statement. I read this somewhere.
You had many moments or boredom interspersed with moments of stark terror, but you
also had a lot of funny things that happened; things that you remember. And this is one of
the things that I remember.

RV: What do you think was the most humorous thing that you did see?

DC: Two instances come to mind. The first happened in Phu Bai where we had
wooden four holers, which were toilets. All it was, was a plywood building with a bench
to sit on and four holes in it and a roof and it was over a big pit. They didn’t have the
half-gallon or the 55-gallon drums cut in half at that time. About once a week, corporals
would come in, and they’d pour gasoline in to the pit and they’d burn all the crap that
was in there, all of the waste and everything. Nobody gave a thought to what these swains
were doing to the underside of the plywood. Well, one night in Phu Bai, we hear this guy,
well we hear a rifle shot and a scream about the same time. Now we were in a real secure
place. Nothing was going to happen, but your fear is somebody got inside the perimeter.
So we all go running over to where we heard this, and we could still hear the guy yelling.
What had happened was, wherever you went, you had to wear your helmet and take your
rifle. He had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, went in there, sat down, was putting his rifle down, apparently didn’t have the safety on, and when he sat on the seat, it gave way because it had been burned out, and he tumbled down into about two feet, probably about three feet of waste and stuff. So anyway, we pulled the guy out and that was pretty funny because he had crap all over his legs and we made him stay outside that night. When we were up at the Rockpile, we were away from the Rockpile probably 1,000 meters, but the Rockpile was this big massive rock formation that was down in the valley, and it was just militarily a point that if you were up on top, you had to have. We had a radio relay team up on top, and then there were Vietnamese in the middle of the mountain mass, and we were all around it. This is right in the middle of the DMZ. We had come back from a sweep, and I’m trying to get this thing right. There had been, there were a couple of officers that weren’t particularly well liked. One of them had, and this is right out of MASH. One of them had had a one holer built strictly for officer use. It just sat there where you couldn’t miss it. We had come back, and was probably, and this was right in the battalion command area. I was probably 50 yards or so away from there, and set my radio down and Jeff Sewell, Lieutenant Sewell comes over to me and he says, “Get on the radio.” There were two jets up and they were doing what we called haloing. In other words, they were just circling around up there, and Jeff calls them and asks them, and I don’t know what kind of planes they were. I’m going to say F-4s. Jeff calls them and asked them if they had a mission. They said no they were just haloing. He says, “Well, could you buzz my area here?” The guys says, “Sure.” He says, “When I give you the word, would you hit your afterburners? I’m going give you a target.” So the guy’s up there and Jeff basically puts him over this shitter, and the guy comes down and the first one came in, and I don’t know if you’ve ever heard a jet when it dives and then it goes back up and hits its afterburners. I mean, it’s deafening. There’s vibration and wind. He had this guy hit the afterburners, and the second one comes in and he moved him over to where he was going off right by this shitter. The guy comes down and Jeff says, “Okay. Hit your afterburners.” And this guy did, and the shitter with this particular officer inside of it just fell apart, at which point Jeff hands me the radio set and says, “I’ve got to go.” I’m left holding this thing. That was funny.

RV: What did the officer do?
DC: I didn’t get in any trouble for this. He knew what had happened. I remember him glaring. He got angry. I went the other way. I pretty much just took my radio and packed up and moved elsewhere. The guy’s name was Captain Donnelly. Nothing came of it, nothing major. But it was funny because for about five minutes there, I was left holding the bag.

RV: Okay, Don, if you want to continue, we’d mentioned these night in August, this time in August ’66. You had an interesting experience we talked a little bit about last time about you being KIA.

DC: Yeah. This happened at Cam Lo. When we had set up our sleeping areas, I had set my up right outside of the command bunker, figuring that I’d have a nice short commute to work. I had all my stuff in there. When we got hit on the night of the 26th or actually the morning of the 26th, my rifle had been. It was in my hooch leaning up against the bunker, and it got hit with that satchel charge that hit the bunker and got completely blown to smithereens. When Dave Fanaro went out to get his clothes and stuff, I told him to go grab my rifle. He came back and he said, what rifle? It was in pretty bad shape. I had grabbed another one. There was a couple of guys that had been wounded, one of whom we didn’t realize how bad he was, and he ended up dying that night. To this day, Jerry Galvin says that that’s the one thing that haunts him is that he didn’t know how bad that kid was hurt because the kid never complained. I took his rifle. Unbeknownst to me, when we gathered up our stuff from our casualties the next morning, put them in a big pile, and sent them back to Dong Ha. I didn’t realize that they took the rifles and matched up the serial numbers against names. Word gets around, and I had been with the battalion for six months or so and people knew who I was, and my rifle went in and they matched up the serial number and word got out that something had happened to me. We were only six to nine miles away from Dong Ha, but hadn’t been in there. We went in maybe once every two weeks to pick up resupply of batteries and whatever else we needed. A couple of days later, I went back in with Jeff Sewell and Jerry Galvin, and when I walked into the communications section’s tent, there were a bunch of guys sitting around, and I walked in and I got these really funny looks. One guy actually, and I think it was Eddie Mozjis, came up to me kind of stuttering, and started touching me and fainted. Eddie Mozjis was from; I want to say Brooklyn. But he had the
accent you see in the movies, the Brooklyn accent, and was a really animated guy. Real
good-looking guy. I can remember he had these kind of bluish green eyes that caught you
whenever you looked at him. He was fairly new in country. There was another kid named
Lapinski, who eventually got wounded and sent home. They just came over and they
were acting really funny, and of course Mozjis goes out like that and I go, “What the hell
is going on?” He told me, we thought you were dead. We finally put two and two
together, but they hadn’t heard anything and apparently one of them. Dong Ha had Delta
Med. Charlie Med was Danang and Delta Med, was up at Dong Ha. They had sent
somebody over there to see if I had come in and been wounded. When everybody was
accounted for up there as far as they knew they had no more casualties coming in, they
just took it for granted that I’d been killed. So that was kind of humorous. They found out
I was a live person, and I think what got me the most was I realized how much those guys
cared. You don’t think about stuff like that. You go and do your daily stuff, and you bitch
and moan with each other and you don’t realize how much you do care for each other,
and it’s something that lasts a lifetime. I’ve hooked back up with Jerry Galvin, and Jeff
Sewell is one of my closest friends to this day even though we don’t see each other that
often anymore, we’re constantly in contact by either email or telephone. Finero I talk
with on the phone. Roy Stafford, Gene Jordan, these guys are, even though we don’t see
each other that often, the bond is there, will always be there, and we experienced
something together that not too many people ever experience. Great guys.

RV: You had mentioned in your notes that you had emailed me that you had
moved around a lot. You bounced from unit to unit.

DC: Correct.

RV: How much did that prevent you from forming relationships with the men you
served with?

DC: Well, I’m going to back up to late March, early April of 1966. I was always a
pretty gregarious guy, especially when I had a couple of beers in me. I’m taking a
swallow of coffee here. We were on Operation Texas. I had just been transferred from the
3rd Battalion, 1st Marines to 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, and hadn’t been there 24 hours
when the com chief came over and said, “Hey, you have TACP,” which is tactical air
control party “experience, don’t you?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, I need somebody for
a FAC team.” I said, “Sure.” This is when I met Dave Fanaro by the way. We put
together a FAC team in about 15 minutes that lasted for quite a while, and we got
attached out to Delta Company, 1/4s Delta Company, and we got further attached to the
2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. Now, 2/4 was one of those units that we called them an “ah,
shit” unit. By “ah, shit” that means that whenever we heard that we were going to go
anywhere near 2/4, we all said, “Ah, shit!” They had a propensity for walking into stuff.
2/4 took humongous casualties over throughout 1966 and 1967. They were always
involved in something. I’m in the 9th Marines, the walking dead. Its almost like bad juju
followed them. I can picture this right now in my mind. Chu Lai has this real, light, fine,
sand, and we had these tents that were right on the sand, and you’d roll the sides up to get
ventilation, and there was this brand new guy who had just come in country a day or two
before. He wanted to go with us. I said no. He was too new. Dave and I both sat there. I
didn’t realize it, but this was going to be Dave’s first operation, but he’d been in country
several months [weeks]. We told him you need to go and find out what’s going on before
you actually go out and go where bad things happen, simply because you need to get a
little bit of experience. This kid somehow went and talked to the communications chief
and Delta Company needed an extra radio operator and he wanted to go, “where the
action was.” That was his exact words. I think the kid’s name was Jim Pace. I think that
was his name. We got together, Dave, myself, and the FAC on that operation was a guy
named Captain Pat Rupertus, whose father was a three or four star general somewhere or
an admiral or something. Anyway, we went out to Delta Company and we got heli-lifted
into some really nasty stuff. We went into a hot LZ. We’re not sooner out of the
helicopter than stuff was flying all over the place. The kid that wanted to be where the
action was got 50 yards out of the helicopter and caught a bullet right between the
running lights. There was some nasty stuff that went on. I can remember when we were
cleaning up the battlefield and the radio operator that he was going to replace walking up
the hill holding the helmet with this guy’s brains in it just mumbling to himself. He was
worthless after that. We sent him back. He just kept saying, “He just said, ‘Ow, that
hurts’.” That had a profound effect on me. Either later on that day or the next day,
because we were in this area for a couple of days, it was the same area that operation
Utah had been in a couple of weeks previous to that, which was our first meeting with
North Vietnamese regulars. There was a village. There was a path. In the path was a dead North Vietnamese, and his body was allowed to sit out there for, it had to be two days. I guess we had to be there three days. With the heat and everything, this body yellowed and bloated to where it was hideously out of shape. We had to walk by it a couple of times when we would go down this path and into the village looking for the bad guys. Right outside there was a well. I’m going to get to that in a second. After the body in the path got to the point where it just had to be removed, the Company Commander said, “Somebody do something about that.” This one guy--Every fifth round was a tracer round. Tracer rounds would put this, they had an incendiary in them and they’d put out this red tracer as the bullet flew. This one grunt says, “Okay,” and fires a tracer round into this body down the path and the damn thing exploded from the gases, I mean to the point where it sounded like an explosion, and there wasn’t much body left. My first thought on that was, “Bodies do that? Jeeze.” Later on when we’re out around this well area, a shot rang out. It was a sniper, and right over by the well we hear, “Corpsman up.” And this kid was down, and corpsman was over there and working on him and Dave and I ran up, and this kid had been shot in the thigh.

RV: This is the guy who shot the Vietnamese body?

DC: No. This was somebody entirely different. I just threw the Vietnamese body part in there. I’m getting to a point here. It was kind of a numbing thing that that could happen to a human body and that somebody could just so casually shoot at it and blow the thing up. Reality is starting to set in. This kid was down. He’d been shot in the upper, inner thigh area and the bullet had severed his femoral artery. We must have spent, it seemed forever. The corpsman was trying to get this artery and tie it off. I ended up trying to get the artery, I mean, literally had my fingers inside this guy’s wound. We must have worked on him for an hour in reality. You couldn’t put a tourniquet on it because of its location. We’d get the thing, the corpsman would get ready to clamp it off and it would slip out again. We kept telling this kid, “You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be okay.” Eventually, the corpsman got the thing tied off and we called in a medevac chopper there. The landing zone was about a quarter of a mile away. A couple of guys put him in a poncho and took him over to the LZ. Apparently something happened along the way. Either they dropped him or something happened. It re-opened the wound. We
got a call from the helicopter as it was flying over that the kid had died. About that point, I started to shut down as far as, first of all, this haunts me to this day because I don’t know this guy’s name. He deserves more than just to be remembered as somebody that got killed, and the fact that I had promised him he was going to live and he didn’t, but I’ve got to live with that one.

RV: It sounds like you did everything you could, though, in your power.

DC: I know that, but still. It’s called survivor guilt. It’s just one of the things you learn to live with. I’ve asked from the Internet there’s a couple of forums and websites, and I’ve asked if anybody could tell me what this guy’s name is and I’ve never gotten an answer on that. But I kind of got to the point then when I realized that I didn’t want to get real close with a lot of people. I stayed close with Dave Fanaro, and I was close with Jeff Sewell, but for the most part, I liked being out and away from where everybody else was. We had more freedom that way. We didn’t have the petty crap that went on. If you were in a garrison area, we used to call them lifers. (If you’d asked me then if I’d ever turn into one, I would have had you committed.) They always had details for doing stuff, and when you were mobile like we were, you were able to be gone from that. We had to go back every now and then and pick up resupply stuff, but other than that, we pretty much stayed away and stayed with the line companies. It wasn’t one line company. The Forward Air Control teams were kind of a valuable commodity throughout I Corps. I not only was with each of our line companies. An infantry battalion has four companies in it. There’s Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta in the first battalion and then Echo, Foxtrot, Golf and Hotel in the second. Then your third battalion will go up to Mike company. Why they’re called line companies other than the fact that they’re out on the front line, I don’t know. Now, it’s also important to note that at the time, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines did not have a Charlie company. It had been detached from the battalion, and was used as what was known at the time as a combined action company. Then they later, these were the guys that went and a platoon would live in a village with the locals and get to know them and protect the village. It had a different name later on down the line.

RV: This is the CAP program, the Combined Action Platoon?

DC: Now, what was that again?

RV: The CAPs?
DC: I spent time, most of the time was either Alpha or Delta Company, but also we spent time with our Bravo Company. We were attached out to the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines. I spent time with the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines. We kind of got to go all over the place. Wherever somebody needed air support, if there was a Forward Air Controller out there and his radio team, why, they wanted them and so we’d get to go.

RV: Was there any noticeable tension between the draftees and the lifers?

DC: I didn’t know any draftees. The Marine Corps hadn’t started drafting people then. Are we talking the fragging stuff?

RV: That, but any kind of tension. Fragging, yes, on the extreme side.

DC: I think we talked about this last time. I never ever saw any fragging or even talked about it. There was always tension between the younger enlisted people and the lifers. That was just inherent to the Marine Corps. You still did what they said. You knew you were young and smart and knew everything, and they were old and experienced and therefore stupid. In any military organization when you get a large group of people together and a large group being anything from 20 or more up, you’re going to have little details that have to be done. Cleaning things that don’t necessarily need it, anything to make busy work for guys that aren’t busy. Those were the things that being out all the time were avoidable. But as far as tension goes, nah.

RV: You mentioned the medevac choppers that would come in, dustoff guys?

DC: They kept people alive. Those guys were magnificent. If they knew somebody was hurt and needed to get out of there, they would come in anytime day or night. They would come in under fire, take chances. These were H-24 helicopters. These weren’t the Hueys that could just zip in and zip right out. These were the old things that looked like pollywogs. They were tremendous. Fortunately, I never got medevaced out on one, so I don’t know what they did inside. But they were lifesavers. Are we working up to something here?

RV: No. Just talking.

DC: Okay. I thought I was being prompted to something.
RV: No. Nothing at all. Why don’t you tell me about base camp? What was life at base camp like?

DC: Excuse me just a second. Base camp—there was Chu Lai. Phu Bai was, I guess you’d call a base camp when we were there because it was hardback tents and Hue, you never went into Hue. We went through Hue on the way up north. It [Phu Bai] was about three to five miles southeast of Hue. I never was really in a base camp. When we were in Phu Bai from April, and that thing brings up another instance here that I’d completely forgotten about. When we left Chu Lai and the unit moved up to Phu Bai, Dave Fanaro and I ended up going, but we didn’t go with the unit. We ended up going up on a Navy, I think they’re called LCTs with a bunch of equipment. Ourselves, Dave and I and three or four other guys, and this craft pulled into Danang. This was maybe the second, third time I’d ever been in Danang or would be in Danang other than to go home and to go on R&R. The riots, the anti-American riots were going on at that time. We got to ride through from the docks out of Danang looking at these signs saying, “Americans go home,” and nobody threw anything at us that I can remember, but there were people that were giving us signals with their middle finger. Apparently, at this time, there was something over by the Danang airbase that was going on between the Marines that were there and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the ARVN. There were factions split amongst them. We weren’t involved in that but it was just interesting driving through downtown and seeing all these banners up and kind of realizing that maybe we weren’t as popular here as we thought we were. Maybe they didn’t want us here after all. When we were in Hue [actually Phu Bai], which is probably the closest I ever came to being around something you’d consider a base camp, myself and a couple of other guys out of the com section ended up on top of a hill. We called it the crow’s nest. It was Hill 180. It sat off of the Phu Bai area, the base, by a couple of miles, and that whole area was kind of flat and you sat up on top of this thing and it was like you were sitting on top of the world. But it also faced the mouth of the A Shau Valley. As you looked out there, you could see the beginning of the A Shau Valley, which was not a nice place to go to. The A Shau Valley was bad news, and at that point in time, nobody wanted to go in there and nobody went in there. That’s where Hamburger Hill was. Of course, the A Shau Valley is a long valley. It runs miles, but we were right up at the one end there. There was a small PX there [in Phu
Bai], probably a trailer where you could go in and buy shaving gear and stuff. You had your Vietnamese barbers. By the way, I forgot to mention, when we were talking about the battle up at Cam Lo. The following morning, one of the enemy dead that we found was our barber who, and I heard this later, was a North Vietnamese light colonel.

RV: That had to be disconcerting.

DC: It was amazing. You realize that these people are everywhere, and you couldn’t put a face to them. I sat up on that hill, had to be a month. As a matter of fact, I got promoted from PFC to Lance Corporal up on top of that hill. You had your barbers. I remember being able to get out walking around. Did we talk last week or did I just mention this to you offline about the little shack where they served beer that I went into?

RV: No. Tell me about that.

DC: They had these on the corners and the Vietnamese were very industrious people, and they knew that young Marines liked to drink beer and bullshit, and somebody put up this corner bar, if you will, made out of beer cans. They used to flatten these beer cans out and use them to cover buildings, wood, plywood and they’d attach the beer cans to them. Anyway, there was this bar there, and I was out waltzing around, and went into this thing and was sitting there having a beer, and this Vietnamese walks up to me and told me that I looked like a smart guy and could he talk to me. He introduced himself to me.

RV: Yes. I do remember this story. You did talk about this a little bit. Go ahead.

DC: Well, he introduced himself to me as Victor, and said that he was a student in Hue. I’m trying to picture him right now and I can almost swear that he had on a red and white almost Hawaiian like shirt. But we talked and he kind of asked me what I thought I was doing there, and being just barely 20 and thinking I knew all kinds of stuff, I proceeded to make a fool out of myself and tell him how we were there to save him and his countrymen from communist aggression and how they needed us and all of this. Then he proceeded to say, “Well, did it ever occur to you that maybe we’re happy with our life and that we don’t want to be Americanized, and that maybe we don’t really care who’s in charge?” It really kind of set me back. It took me about 25 years to put Victor and Victor Charlie together. Like I said, I can be a little bit slow sometimes. I’m willing to bet, and this is another putting a face to something. He was probably one of their subversives
who was there to kind of try and put a damper on our morale. He got me thinking. I
started seeing things in a different light as far as were we really accomplishing
something? Is that me or you. I think my phone battery is starting to go.

RV: That’s you.

DC: Okay. I started thinking, maybe this isn’t what our government was trying to
make us believe it was. These are the thoughts that. I won’t say turned me against the
war, but made me realize that I didn’t want to stick around there. I think I’m losing my
telephone. {Cuts off}
RV: This is Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Don Cuneo. Today is December 13th and it is 10:40 am central standard time and I am in Lubbock and Mr. Cuneo, you are in Rhonert Park, California. So we had left off. You were relating some stories that you had told and you had basically transferred up to the Rockpile area. Why don’t we pick up there and talk about some of your activities in that area?

DC: Okay. The very first part of September, the whole battalion had turned over the responsibility of Cam Lo to I think it was the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. We went up to replace them at the Rockpile, which was, I’m going to say probably 10 to 12 miles down the road and you hung a right. We went down there on Route 9 via six by trucks and other vehicles, and then from Route 9 to the Rockpile we walked in. Our exact location, I can't tell you. We were probably 1,000 meters away from it. It still stood out. You could see the cracks and crevices in the side of the precipice, is that the word I want to use? Of course, we’d heard stories from other people as far as the activities that went on there. We set up our battalion headquarters and the line company set up where they were going to be, and dug in. We knew that it wasn’t going to be friendly up there. We didn’t realize how bad it was going to be. I’m thinking that we probably got up there around the 10th or 11th or so of September, and my reason is that we went out on a sweep on the 16th of September.

RV: Is this a company size?

DC: Well, we were with Bravo and Delta Companies. Myself and the FAC team were with the Battalion Command Group, which included lieutenant Colonel Black Jack Westerman. He was the battalion commander, and of course, his entourage. We got to--I know we were sitting up on a knoll, and both Bravo and Delta were going to continue on and sweep the area, which was known as Mutter’s Ridge and the Razorback. We were up on this knoll, and we had some people from Alpha Company, I believe with us, and then we were going to head on back to the Rockpile. As we’re sitting up on this knoll and we’re watching the tail end of. It had to be Bravo Company because they were in trace of Delta. We watched them walk in and all of the sudden, the loudest noise I’d ever heard in my life. They walked into an ambush. It sounded like a concert of chainsaws. We were all sitting there kind of BS-ing and minding our own business, and this thing went off and
everybody just stopped. Jaws dropped and everybody looked towards the sound. This went on for 10, 15 minutes.

RV: Now, were you guys above that area?

DC: Yah. We were away from it. By the time the ambush was sprung, they were a distance away from us. It’s important to know that we were never involved in the ambush, but we were kind of the go between as far as getting them help. We spent three days on top of that hill relaying messages, making sure that they got resupply. It went through from us to a radio relay unit that sat atop the Rockpile and then back to Dong Ha to get them the things that they had to have to survive plus air support plus medevacs that really never got in. We knew something [bad] had happened. Battalion Commander of course got on the radio, a lieutenant at the time (or was he a captain?) Dan McMahon was his name. In reading and talking to other guys that were involved in it after the fact, Dan was the second in command. I guess the Bravo company commander was senior to him, and he kind of lost it. Wasn’t able to give quick and concise direction to people, and Dan McMahon just took over for him. I can remember him on the radio just being as collected as you can be in a situation like that. One of the comments he made kind of with a nervous laugh was, “Well, we got them where we want them.” That’s the old Marine Corps comment from Chesty Puller in Korea. They’re all around us. They can't get away now. We listened to this thing. You could hear the pops when we were talking on the radio. I had direct communication with the forward air controller. He was a first lieutenant by the name of Jim Hollman H-O-L-L-M-A-N. He called for resupply and he asked for some battle dressings, and stupid me, I said, “Well, how many do you want?” He said, “Send me a gross.” At that point I realized that things were not real good on the ground there, that people were really hurt. They tried to get a Medevac chopper and an H-34 and it got shot down and the crew became grunts. They eventually had close air support almost right on top of themselves. I can remember particularly, them dropping a 750 pounder and it apparently hit a tree or something and detonated, and a couple of our guys got hurt or killed. It was nasty. They were surrounded. Two companies surrounded by at least a battalion. It was off and on for two and a half days, and finally we got people in there to pull them out. We had gone back to the Rockpile, and they had decided that they had walked into it, they were going to walk out of it after they’d gotten their
casualties and everything, the people that couldn’t walk out taken care of. When they
came through the perimeter at the Rockpile, guys just stood up and looked at them. What
could you say? Those of us that had been out there on the hill kind of moved up and the
guys that we knew, we hugged them and just said, “Glad you made it.” It was a real eye-
 opener as to what we were going to go through up there because from that point on,
almost on a daily basis, we got mortared, and then we started getting rockets, which we’d
never, I’d never seen before.

RV: Which were worse to you, the mortars or the rockets?

DC: The rockets made a lot of noise and you could hear them coming in. The
mortars just happened. Usually, you could hear mortars, you could hear the pumping off
in the distance. The loudness of it depended on the size of the mortar round. After a
while, you knew there was incoming until there was outgoing and what they sounded
like. But usually the first round of a mortar attack was unexpected. These guys had
observers out there. They hit a lot of stuff. They hit an ammo dump. If there were
antennas sticking out someplace, they were right on top of those. We lost a couple of
guys a day from that. We also lost a lot of people from booby traps.

RV: Tell me about those. What kind of booby traps did you see?

DC: Oh, man. I never stepped on one. You had your Bouncing Betty, hand
grenades that they’d string a trip wire to along a trail. They got smart to where they’d
booby trap a path and they’d also booby trap the sides so when something went off,
people jumped to one side of the road or the other, they’d hit another booby trap. The
stuff that I saw wasn’t real sophisticated, punji stakes set in foliage off to either side of a
trail. Punji pits which was a hole dug in the ground and these bamboo stakes were in
there. They booby trapped rifle rounds that they’d put it in a little cylinder and a nail
underneath it and you’d step on the thing and it would push the round down and the firing
pin would hit the nail and put a hole through somebody’s foot. As a matter of fact, we
even found, one time, it was either a 200 or a 500-pound bomb. This thing didn’t go off.
But somebody found it and it was still somewhat buried, and it had been booby-trapped
and we had to send in some explosive ordnance disposal guys from the engineers to go in
and make it so it wouldn’t blow up.

RV: Do you remember how it was booby-trapped?
DC: I don’t. I know that we were all told that we were going to be staying a good
distance away and these guys went in and did their thing and then they came back out
down the trail. The one thing that I did notice about them was that their hands shook. I
remember commenting to somebody, “Look, his hands are shaking.” One of the guys
looked at me and he turned around and he winked at me and he said, “Yeah, and we drink
a lot, too.” They were real good at taking anything we left behind and using it against us.
One thing that we would do, whenever we were in an area and going to move out, we
would crush and chop up our C-ration cans so that they couldn’t use them. C-ration cans
came in various sizes and one of the tricks that we used, I know I did, the B-3 unit cans
were the larger cans and ham and lima beans which wasn’t everybody’s favorite meal.
They called them ham and mos or ham and mother fuckers. You could take, and I hope I
get the nomenclature right, and M-60 hand grenade, or an M-26, that was it, M-26 hand
grenade, pull the pin on it, slide it right into the can, and then what you’d do was take and
put some dirt on it maybe, bury it a little bit on the ground. There was enough grease
inside, it was almost like a 40 weight oil, where that hand grenade would slide right out if
somebody picked the can. But we would leave these behind when we left an area. We
knew that the bad guys would be coming in right after us to kind of sift around and find
stuff. You would hear those things go off.

RV: Did you start trying to not leave things behind or just trying to destroy
everything you left behind?

DC: You can’t carry your garbage with you, and so that we would destroy as best
we could. If there was any ammunition or anything we couldn’t carry that could possibly
be of use, you’d use a theramide grenade on it. Usually, our trash we would bury and
burn. We would burn it first, then bury it. But we would leave stuff around intentionally
that somebody might find, like I mentioned, and picked the thing up. We booby-trapped
our areas when we left them.

RV: That was going to be my next question. How much of that did you do?

DC: I’m not going to say we did it every time we left an area. Of course, you
didn’t stay in one place for very long. If you were out walking around, you stayed
overnight or you might dig in early in the afternoon and then move when it got dark,
because you always knew people were watching you. It depended. If we thought we were
being observed, then yeah, we’d leave some booby traps. It eventually got to be a game, and you’d leave it if you felt there was going to be somebody. If you felt your odds were good about getting somebody. We kept score. A sense of humor in a situation like that gets pretty morbid. We were at the Rockpile for a long time. I’m going to say at least six weeks, operating around there. Like I say, we got hit everyday. We didn’t have a lot of sustained action after the ambush. I actually think that was the last real big one that I had any involvement in. Mostly sweeps and search and destroy type stuff, little firefights here and there and snipers.

RV: How did you deal with that, the issue of snipers and you’re the radio guy? DC: When it happened, it happened. When we were walking around, I would take; I always had what they called a tape antenna when we were on the move. You had three basic antennas. You had the big RC two-niner-two, which was a multidirectional antenna that you set up in a permanent place. It wasn’t real mobile and it was bulky to carry. Say like at Cam Lo, we used that to communicate back to Dong Ha. When you were on the move, you had a long whip antenna, which was probably ten feet high. It folded up in little sections, but you didn’t use that unless you absolutely had to on the move. Once you set in for however long you were going to be in a place, you would set that up. But being on the move, you would use a little whip antenna. It was real flat up in the DMZ, so radio communication wasn’t that much of a problem. I would take my tape antenna and I would just fold it over and hook it to the [front] strap of my backpack and make as little a target as possible out of it. Snipers, I know there were more than a couple of times, and I think I mentioned this before, where I would be sitting somewhere, move and a round went right to where I was sitting. But I never thought about them. I was never paranoid about being sniped at. If it happened, it happened.

RV: Did they tell you that officers and radiomen were targeted more often? DC: Yes. Officers didn’t wear rank in the field and you didn’t salute an officer in the field. We knew that the radiomen and the corpsmen were prime targets. Corpsmen didn’t wear that Red Cross on their arm after the first couple of months in Vietnam. I never saw one wearing one that I can remember. When you were in the field, everybody was the same, to the point where officers went by their first names. We were out walking around somewhere, and this just flashed on me, and we were getting ready to dig in one
night, and we started getting our radio guy--There were gooks on the radio net. That’s what I’m trying to say, that spoke English. Not very good, but they got on there and, “Marine, we’re going to kill you tonight. You son of a bitch.” Stuff like that.

RV: How did they get a hold of a radio? I guess, just taking it off one of the wounded soldiers.

DC: Yes. Just take that thing.

RV: Just tune in and do it.

DC: Pardon me?

RV: Just tune in and start talking.

DC: The PRC 77 or 25, I think it was a PRC 25 that we got in June or July, was real easy to operate. You didn’t have to calibrate it. You just took it and it had a dial on the top and you dialed in a frequency and listened. That’s what they would do. They would just get on there and listen until they heard some traffic. I’m sure they had ways of finding out what units they were dealing with as well. But the battalion commander came over when he heard this and got on the radio and got on the radio and said, “Alright you son of a bitch, come and get us!” I don’t remember if he said we’re the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines or not, but he kind of lost his cool. Of course, who are you to tell a battalion commander, “Hey, sir. That’s not what you’re supposed to do.” Right after that happened, one of the more bizarre things that occurred to me, took place and it was the rains. It started to rain and it started to rain. Jeff Sewell and I were no more than two feet apart and could not see each other. He reached out and he goes, “Don, are you still there?” It rained so hard that you could actually take a shower in it. I mean, literally. And I’ve done it. It rained so hard that you could actually break out your soap, strip down, and dance around in the water, get soaped up and rinse off. And it was warm, it was a warm shower.

RV: How often did it rain?

DC: It depended on the time of the year. During the monsoon seasons, quite a bit. When the rain let up, I actually spent that night sleeping in the water. I can honestly say that once the water warms up to your body temperature, its cozy.

RV: You’re talking about when you’re sleeping on the ground.
DC: On the ground. There was no way to stay dry, so you might as well enjoy it as best you could. But I actually did that once.

RV: Don, let me ask you, going back to the Viet Cong being on the radio, did you ever talk back to them?

DC: That was the only instance that I ever heard any actually on the radio, actually talking. But to answer your question, if that were to happen, no. It wasn’t our job to communicate with them in any way, shape, or form. I did get jammed at times. Jamming is when they would make noise in the background so that you couldn’t carry on a conversation. We did a lot of stuff in the clear. By that I mean you had security systems. They called it shackling, where you’d use codes to send radio messages. We never did. We did coordinates and stuff in the clear. I can remember only a couple of times of actually sitting down there with the codebook and unshackling a message from anybody.

RV: Was that common, you think, in general or did it depend on where you were?

DC: I think that if you were out in the field, it was more common to just ignore what they call proper radio procedures. If you were back at one of the big, say Dong Ha or Danang, then you went by the book. But when you were out in the bush, you didn’t have time to do stuff like that and you didn’t have the patience. As people became aware of the physical effects that it had on people, your patience was thin and you couldn’t remember to do stuff like that. You remembered in short spurts, and most of the stuff you did was reaction. I think that the reason that a lot of guys have difficulty remembering where they were and what they did was because of that fatigue factor.

RV: Were you tired all the time? Do you remember it that way?

DC: You were always tired, but then you got that shot of adrenaline when stuff started to happen, and then you’d immediately be alert. Zombie like, sure.

RV: You described yourself earlier in our conversations that you were pretty calm and collected in a firefight when you had to work that radio, do your job. Was there ever a time where you were rattled?

DC: No. No. I wouldn’t let myself. That was one thing that I just somehow managed to ingrain in myself, and that was that when the shit hit the fan, I was going to
calm down. No. Honestly. Scared, hell yes. But get rattled in front of the other guys, no
way.

RV: Let me ask you about leadership in country. You mentioned, we were talking
about that ambush previously, that someone had to take over for another officer who kind
of lost it. What about the leadership, the American leadership there in the field, basically,
because you were around that leadership cadre most of the time, as part of the radio
group? How would you rate that leadership in Vietnam?

DC: At the level I saw it, in my opinion, it was very, very good. They were
concerned about the lower ranking Marines. They took good care, as best care as they
could. I’m not talking just officers, I’m talking senior NCOs down to squad leaders,
concerned about their troops. As far as being aware of the overall situation, I don’t think
anybody was. I think there were times when there were some pretty stupid things done,
and we go back to the market place [actually church yard] when Lieutenant Hartley was
killed, and we had tanks that were just rolling around out in the open with people on top
of the tanks. I think at the time I was there it was all a learning experience. Tactics, I
don’t believe were the smartest. We made a ton of noise whenever we went anywhere,
but that happens with a large unit. It’s the leader’s responsibility to make sure the
individual soldiers and Marines are as physically fit as they could be. They did a good job
of that. Our corpsmen were spectacular. I can never say enough of the corpsmen and the
way they took care of the guys. Colonel Westerman tried to make it mandatory that
whenever we went anywhere the lowest man on the totem pole had an idea of where we
were going, not necessarily why, but what the mission was going to be about. Back in
those days, you didn’t question orders. If somebody told you to jump off a building, you
were supposed to do it. Not that guys would. The lower enlisted people, and actually the
enlisted people really didn’t need to know all that much. That was the thought pattern. He
kind of went against that and made sure. There’s what they call a five paragraph order,
and it tells you the wheres and the whys, who’s going, when you’re going, an idea of
what the mission is, and we got those off and on. The commander would give it to the
company commanders, and the company commanders would disseminate the information
down. It got diluted the further down it went, to the point of, well, we’re going over there.
Colonel Westerman tried to make that a little bit more informative. We would think of
alternatives to what the plan was if something bad were to happen. Because whatever your plans were, they all went down the tube the first time a round went off. So we would plan contingencies for stuff. Overall, I think it was decent leadership. Hindsight’s always 20/20 and looking back on it and knowing more now being a career soldier, I can see a ton of mistakes, but we didn’t know any better.

RV: What would you have done differently as far as tactical maneuvers there?

DC: I’m not the guy to ask that question. When I was there, I wasn’t in a position to deal with tactics.

RV: But you certainly observed. You were a part of it.

DC: But I was one person on the ground, and I had not training in tactics, and it was a different type of a battlefield than what we see today. I think that I would have made, gosh, boy, you caught me off guard with that question. I would have had more forethought on things. I wouldn’t allow troops to just rush in without reconning an area first. But also, you’ve got to keep in mind, and we talked about and we just mentioned this earlier, body counts. Body counts were big things.

RV: Tell me about that. What did you think about that policy?

DC: It was a farce. One of the first questions that would be asked when a firefight or a battle was over was, well, what’s the body count? If there were pieces of bodies, you guessed at stuff. If you had ten bodies there, then you had ten sure bodies, but then they also had an estimated body count. If you dropped a bomb on something or if you, we went into, it was around the Khe San area. There had been an arc light, which was the B-52s, and those things were something else. It happened, it was probably five miles away from where we were and the ground underneath us was jumping the whole time that thing was going on. You look on the horizon, and it was white from all of the bombs going off, not at the same time, but one would go off and another one would go off as it’s light was going off. It was amazing. We went in there afterward, and all it was was just big craters and we found a couple of body parts. We were told to make an estimate of how many we thought were killed. 20? Is that okay? They’d negotiate. Well, do you think it could be higher? Well it could be.

RV: Who was they?
DC: Higher headquarters. Who you were talking to on the radio. We would report to say, the battalion, S-3 or the S-2 would get on the horn and be talking to the company commander. They dropped 10,000 pounds of bombs, which it was a hell of a lot more than that. That should have killed 15 people. Do you think there were that many? Finally, you’d just go along with anything just to get them out of your hair. I would say that body counts were probably 10% accurate. I think that somebody did a final figure on the estimated number of people we killed, and it was like three times the population of North and South Vietnam [combined]. So they weren’t accurate, but they sure made higher ups think that a unit--The more bodies you had, the higher the body count, the more effective you were. You get to the point where you just give them what they want and let them be happy and who’s going to know the difference anyway?

RV: Did you ever find commanders in the field inflating body counts to make it look better?

DC: Oh, absolutely, all the time. All the time. I don’t remember a company commander that I was ever around that I thought was more concerned with his career than his Marines. I think that the over inflation of stuff was probably more prevalent in the Army than it was in the Marines. But, I mean, we did it too, but ours were guesstimates and sometimes a little outrageous, where a duck or a water buffalo became a Viet Cong. There was the comment, if they’re dead, they’re Viet Cong. If it was a civilian casualty, if they can't tell you they’re not, they are. It affected us too.

RV: Did you and your men there in the field, we talked before we started recording about ____’s book and about kind of the almost tongue-in-cheek way that he and others came to view the war. Did you guys out there in the field just start questioning why? Obviously, you’re Marines and your taking orders and you do your job. But were you questioning why are we doing this? This makes no sense. We just took this place, now we’re leaving it again. Was there anything like that going on that you could tell?

DC: You know, in my mind, and I was young and naive and impressionable, I knew it wasn’t right, the way we were going about things. I can remember we were coming from Cam Lo to Dong Ha to pick up some ammunition and radio batteries and stuff, and I was riding along with Lieutenant Galvin, Jerry Galvin, who I’ve run into since. He was Police Chief in Vallejo, California and then went on to Toledo, Ohio and
then to Albuquerque. As we’re riding back, he asks me, Don, what are your plans for the Marine Corps? I said, “Well, I’ve got a little less than a year to go, and I’ll probably get out and go to college. He said, “No. You do get out. This war’s fucked up.” And made some other comments along the line. That shocked me coming from an officer.

RV: Right. What year was this? Do you remember?

DC: 1966. This was in probably mid October of ’66.

RV: Do you remember what else he said or why he expressed it that way?

DC: The gist of it was that, what you just said. We had no rhyme or reason for what we were doing. There was no set pattern, it was just be here, leave here. We were investing bodies in territory that we gave right back, and we’d go right back and do the same thing all over again. That was proven in the hill fights, and all that that was going on in the DMZ at that time. Hamburger Hill, I think, is an ideal example of just sacrificing people to just secure a piece of land for 15 minutes and leave it. When I was there, Khe Sahn was not a combat base yet, and, boy, that was a beautiful area. That was really nice. We were told the stories of how Vietnamese, did they have kings? The kings would go up there to hunt tigers and other animals and it was just lush green. That was gorgeous.

RV: They had emperors, I guess, is a better way to say it.

DC: Vietnam was all so beautiful, but it sure wasn’t worth 58,000 lives. We went, and we’re getting right towards the end of my tour here. We did one more sweep with tanks. It was monsoon season. To get to where we were up around the Rockpile, you kind of had to go up this grade. I’m not going to say a hill, but it was actually, we were atop a hill. This is something that stays with me today. It was funny, but it wasn’t funny type situation then. The ground was so chopped up from tank treads and people walking on it, it was just mush. You really couldn’t walk on it. So we were going up the hill to get into our perimeter, and I was up on top of a tank, and there was a tree off to the side and somehow, a branch of the tree got caught by the turret or the barrel of the cannon on the tank, and it snapped back and when it went back to it’s original position, it hit me. It hit me in the neck. Now, this wasn’t a big branch, but it hit me in the neck and it made a slapping sound. The sound of a bullet hitting skin is a slapping sound. When it hit me, and it did knock me off the top of the tank, but when it hit me, my whole –you know you
hear about their life going before them, I don’t know that that’s true, but my first thought was, “Oh, shit. I’ve been shot.” As I was going off the tank into the mud, Burlingame, California went through my mind. Hillside Drive in particular. I landed in the mud and all the guys started laughing and going, “Ha, look at you!” Of course, the tank kept rolling until somebody banged on the turret and told them to stop. I was covered with mud.

When I got up and they saw the look on my face, guys realized that I had just had an experience. A couple of days after that, again we were coming back from being out on a sweep, and this could have been a week to ten days later because I think we were out for a while. As we were coming back into the perimeter, we got mortared. People were yelling, “Incoming, get down. Get down!” I had my radio on and, I think I had it off, and I just kind of slung it over my shoulder and I walked right through this mortar barrage.

I’m not saying mortars were going off right next to me or anything, but they were going off, and I just walked back to my hooch and put my radio down and sat down and it stopped. It was either the comm officer, no it wasn’t the comm officer because he was a jerk off. It was the company commander the H&S company commander came running over to me and asked me if I was insane. He said, “Do you realize you should have gotten down in all this?” I looked him right in the eye, and I was past the end of my tour at this time by a couple of weeks. I told him, “They’re going to get me no matter what, so it really doesn’t matter.” Within probably ten minutes, he comes back with the battalion surgeon, a guy named Wertz. The Doc asked me a couple of questions, and I told him the same thing. “I don’t care. They’re going to get me and it’s just a matter of time, and if they do, they do. If they don’t they don’t.” That was our attitude. That afternoon, I was on a chopper home. They got me on a chopper, sent me to Danang, I was in Danang.

Actually, I went to Dong Ha, grabbed what stuff I had there. I was immediately on a chopper to Danang. I was in Danang maybe two days. I was on a flight to Okinawa, was there a day and was on my way home.

RV: You didn’t request that.
DC: No.
RV: They just said, that’s it. You’ve had enough.
DC: I think that’s what they decided.
RV: Had you opted for another tour?
DC: No. For some reason, there was a lot of stuff that in movements from
different areas got lost; personnel records, medical records. My medical records from
there were never found again. They’d make a jacket on you and when orders came in,
then they came in. Mine just happened to be a little bit behind everybody else’s. Some of
it had to do with the position I held. They didn’t get a 2533. That was my MOS number,
to come in and replace me. I presume that’s what it is. I don’t know that for a fact.
RV: Do you remember why you felt that way?
DC: Why I felt what way?
RV: Well, when you told your officer, the commanding officer and the surgeon
that you knew you were going to get it.
DC: When that thing happened with the tree branch, I just figured it was a
premonition. All in all, I was in country probably 10 months. It was just a matter of time.
I keep saying that, but that was the mindset, was that eventually they were going to get
you, and if they didn’t you were going to go home. I never thought that I was going to be
killed, but I was fatalistic also. I can’t say I ever really thought that until that happened,
with the tank and the tree branch that I could be killed. But I think subconsciously, it
struck me then and I was ready to go. I wanted to get out of there.
RV: Did you ever see anybody that just simply lost it, mentally?
DC: The only one I can--There was a guy in Phu Bai who one afternoon was
either drunk or had gotten a hold of something who was running around the
communication area. We had a captain named Donnelly who nobody liked. This guy
particularly didn’t like him and he had a .45 pistol, and he was saying he was going to go
get him. There were people out running around trying to catch the guy and eventually
they did. I’m sure he got sent somewhere for psychiatric evaluation. Guys actually lose it
in the field? No. Not that I can recall. I did see a corpsman one time. Operation Texas
who when we called “corpsman up” he looked and he looked again and he said, “Oh,
shit! They’re shooting people down there,” and immediately went into almost like a
seizure. It could have been heat related. I remember that this was his first operation, his
first time out in the field, and I think it was more nerves than anything else because I
never saw that guy again. Other than that, I can’t. It more than likely happened, but I just
wasn’t aware of it. I don’t remember ever medevacing anybody for a psychiatric thing, but then they could just call it heat stroke, too.

RV: Were you ever wounded?

DC: Yes and no. By that, was I ever actually awarded the Purple Heart and got all the paperwork for it? No. When I first went over with 3/1, the rule was that if you weren’t in the hospital for 48 hours, you weren’t wounded. I got little minor, I got an eardrum blown out. I got a couple of little nicks along the way, but nothing major, and you didn’t leave your unit unless you lost an arm or a leg or were absolutely immobile. You didn’t want to. Nobody told you you had to stay. It was just your mindset. You didn’t leave your guys. To answer your question, not officially.

RV: Did you have a problem with not being recognized as not getting wounded?

DC: No. There were guys that got hurt a hell of a lot worse than I did.

RV: I know. I just had to ask that question if it bothered you over the years.

DC: No. No.

RV: What did you think of the indigenous troops, the ARVN, the Vietnamese Marines?

DC: I thought they were worthless.

RV: Really.

DC: Yeah.

RV: Tell me why.

DC: They knew that we were going to be fighting the war for them, and they were just happy go lucky, bouncing around. If they were out in the field they were… I saw an Army advisor come in on Operation Utah, and he couldn’t get his troops to do anything. They were supposed to cover one of our flanks and they didn’t. When we were up [north], after probably May of ’66, we never had them around us anymore. They didn’t want to fight. Those guys didn’t care who ran the country. They went to whatever side was going to take care of them the best. If they knew where the enemy was and they had to go on an operation, go on a sweep or something, they’d go the opposite direction if they had the opportunity. I also heard stories about deals being made. You leave us alone, we’ll leave you alone.

RV: Really.
DC: It wouldn’t surprise me if that happened with American troops, too. If your recon told you that there were a group of bad guys over here and let’s say to the East, and you had a mission to go on a patrol, why go east when you could go North, South, or West? I think that when a guy came in country, there was all the excitement of wanting to be where the action was, I think after you were in it once or twice, the novelty wore off.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians?

DC: With the exception of Victor that we talked about, I never really had much of a conversation with anybody. We’d see them when we were out moving around, and they would wave at us and stuff. But to be able to make a sound comment on them, I really didn’t get to know civilians that well.

RV: Was that on purpose or you just didn’t have the opportunity?

DC: Just didn’t have the opportunity.

RV: Did your unit have any pets?

DC: We had, I told you about the puppy. When we were in Phu Bai, one of the guys got a monkey somewhere, a spider monkey I think it was, and kept it in his hooch. The story I heard, I wasn’t there. The monkey would, if it got agitated or excited, it would throw shit. Apparently, a mid-range officer, meaning either a major or a captain came in and did something to agitate the monkey, and the monkey gave him his opinion. Apparently, the monkey had very good aim. They ended up taking it and releasing it back wherever they got it from. But as far as, you mean, like the Army mule?

RV: Well, yeah, anything.

DC: No. Water buffalo hated us so we couldn’t get anything like that. Water buffalo could smell Americans. I don’t know what kind of an odor we gave off, but a water buffalo would smell an American soldier and you had to watch out. Those things were huge. They’d come after you.

RV: Maybe they were communist water buffalo.


RV: How about wild animals, Don? What did you guys encounter out there in the field?

DC: I never saw anything. I know there was an instance where one of our recon patrols bagged a tiger. That was in, was it up at the Rockpile? I think it was when we
were up around the Rockpile. They bagged a tiger. There were rock apes. I never saw one, but I heard them throwing rocks and stuff. They’d scare the hell out of you at night. Viet Cong rock apes. [joking] One instance, and I want this to be in here. I mentioned that I was on a Vietnam veteran’s forum and there was a guy that I emailed back and forth with, a former Marine who had been the same MOS as a radio operator as myself, a guy named Bob Thomasson. As a matter of fact, he graduated from radio school maybe a class or two ahead of me. I met him up in Reno [in 1999]. We went and saw “The Spirit of the Dance” which is an Irish, kind of a “Riverdance” takeoff. Afterwards we were sitting around talking, and Bob said, he was part of a radio company, communications company or battalion and he’d never gotten out to the field or anything. We started talking about the Rockpile and he goes, “Oh yeah. I was out at the Rockpile.” I said, “I thought you never went to the field.” He says, “Well, I never went out like you guys did. I didn’t do anything spectacular.” I said, “You were at the Rockpile?” He goes, “Yeah. I was up on top of the Rockpile.” And we started putting dates together. It was Bob Thomasson that we were talking to when the ambush happened. He was the guy relaying our messages back to Dong Ha and getting the actual stuff to us.

RV: So you guys actually talked on the radio and didn’t even know it.

DC: You betcha. He racked his brain and remembered our call sign, which was “Permission” but he definitely remembered relaying messages to the guys in the big ambush. I finally looked at him and I said, “Hey, pal. You may not think you did much, but you probably saved my life and the lives of a lot of other guys.” That kind of made his day. I think he said, “Wow. I really did do something.” He’s kind of an unassuming guy anyway. But I don’t know what my point was in that.

RV: You just wanted to get it in. That’s an interesting story.

DC: Just another Marine doing his job, and didn’t realize how good a job he’d done.

RV: Were you able to take any R&Rs?

DC: I went to Hong Kong.

RV: Tell me about that.

DC: Four days and five nights. I was drunk most of the time. The first night I was there. I stayed at the President Hotel. They give you this lecture, and the first thing I did
when I went up to the room was I called room service and had them bring me a bottle of Seagram’s Seven and 7-UP or ginger ale. I don’t remember, and I asked for eight bottles of San Miguel Beer. I filled the bathtub up. I got a bunch of little plastic cups and made myself about a half a dozen Seven and 7s, put them around the outside of the bathtub. I put the San Miguel beer and the rest of the ice in the bathroom sink. I got in the hot bathtub and watched all that red dirt soak out and got drunk while I was doing it. I’d hooked up with some other guy there, and we decided to go have dinner. When I knew I was going on R&R, I’d had all these delusions of all this great food I was going to have. I can remember thinking of scrambled eggs and the stuff that we were used to eating. I ended up, the first meal I was going to have there was a Crab Louis. They brought this thing in this big goblet and I took one bite and my stomach went into a knot. It was so used to C-rations. That’s pretty much all I had there. I couldn’t eat it. It was that way the rest of the time I was there. I would take a bite of food and my stomach would just reject it. The first night I was there, I got a hooker. The second day I was there, I went into this place and ended up, and I don’t want to call her a hooker although she was, her name was Linda. Spoke real good English, probably better than me. She was with me for the rest of the time I was there. I had to pay mama san 20 bucks a day or something like that. She took me, we went to Tiger Balm Gardens and rode the ferry, and I was on the Kowloon side and we went over to the Hong Kong side and just kind of walked around. I bought some clothes. She was right there with me and made sure that I didn’t get ripped off. We went and she went and got her sister, her little sister and her name was Ling if I remember correctly, and we went and we saw a movie. It was a James Bond movie and I don’t remember what it was. The only thing I remember was it was in Chinese with English subtitles. That’s really weird. I had a good time. We went out and we went dancing and whenever I hear, now I can't think of the name of the song, it was a Beatles song “Yesterday” whenever I hear that song I think of her in Hong Kong because that was a song that was real popular and it was played and we danced to it. But then I had to go back. That was in July. I got back. I got into Danang and there was a guy named Hill who was one of our radio operators and he, he was on his way out on R&R when I was coming back and he told me that it might be a good idea that I stuck around Danang for a day or two because the unit was getting ready to go on another operation. I went directly
back because I felt I should be there. That turned out to be Operation Hastings, which was the 15th of July in ’66.

RV: Did you feel you were rested and ready to go back or was that just impossible to achieve?

DC: I think I felt rested. I know I didn’t want to leave Hong Kong. If I’d had the opportunity to just stay there, I would have. Of course, I was 19 years old and I thought I was in love also. But I got back and it just pretty much. I was out of shape. It’s amazing how out of shape you get in five days. But I don’t know that I felt more relaxed. I jumped at every noise that happened in Hong Kong and then you go right back into it. I don’t really think five days of R&R does anything else but let you release some sexual tension if that’s what you want to do, and that’s about it. I mean, it’s nice to get away, but I don’t think it had any morale benefit for me.

RV: Did you try to keep in contact with Linda?

DC: No. I wrote her once or twice and she wrote back and then you know, that’s the way that goes. But no.

RV: Did you ever attend any USO shows?

DC: When we were in Chu Lai, Johnny Rivers and Ann Margaret. I got in at the very end of the thing. Not the end of the show, but when they pick people to go to this thing, somebody came out and grabbed a bunch of us and said, “Hey, there’s a USO show and you can go if you want to.” Somehow I managed to get a hold of a sniper scope, just the scope itself because I wasn’t a sniper. We were way the hell back there. They looked like ants. But when I put the sniper scope on them, you could see them; it was almost like they were right there. But Johnny Rives and Ann Margaret, and Ann Margaret has freckles on here chest.

RV: So you had a pretty good shot of that.

DC: Yes. I honed in right on that. That was the only show that I saw. I’m thinking that there might have been a couple of Vietnamese bands that came around. I can’t be sure of that, if they were like a USO show. I don’t remember ever having the Donut Dollies or any of those come around.

RV: What else would you do for entertainment?
DC: That’s a good question. We had movies every now and then if you were out of the field, every night they had a movie, but they were usually “Gunsmoke” and “Combat” reruns. I don’t remember any actual full-length movies. Nothing. There wasn’t a whole lot to do to entertain. You’d get amongst yourselves. In the rear, if you could get a hold of beer, that was great. But that was hard to come by. I never knew of any dope. I know I certainly never had the opportunity. I don’t know if I would have done it anyway, to smoke pot or anything like that. You pretty much just made your own entertainment, with guys bullshitting, playing games. I know I had my mom send me a football when we were in Chu Lai. I don’t know what happened to that. It disappeared somewhere. I would say out of the ten plus months that I was there, I probably spent a month where I was actually in a designated base.

RV: Which one was that, do you remember?

DC: It would have been Chu Lai and Phu Bai, and that would have been it because, Dong Ha, I was never there. Just to visit. When we were at Phu Bai, I spent a month up on top of a hill, Hill 180, which kind of looked down into the A Shau Valley. Then Dong Ha, matter of fact, we went directly out to Cam Lo with Alpha Company and Dong Ha was just a place that was down the road, and we’d go to visit and then go back out to wherever we were. Then we went up to the Rockpile and like I said, was probably up there for two months.

RV: Were you able to keep up with news of what was happening back in the United States?

DC: Stars and Stripes. That was about it. We knew that there were anti-war protests going on. We knew that before I even got--Okay, I’m going to have to switch telephones. I’m starting to get the beep on this thing. Hang on just a second here.

RV: Okay. Go ahead. [two beeps]

DC: I switched. We knew that there were anti-war protests. Okay, I’m going to switch again.

RV: Okay, Don.

DC: [Beep] You there? Okay, I’ll take that one out here. [speaking to someone in background]. We’re switching telephones here. It was kind of a them against us thought that we were over there doing our thing, and people over here were protesting against us.
I don’t think many of us sided with them until we got back and saw how things actually were.

RV: Did you end up doing that?

DC: No. I came home and I never had anybody spit on me. I never had anybody call me names or anything, and I still had roughly eight or nine months to go. My duty station after Vietnam was 29 Palms. I never had anybody say anything derogatory towards me that I can remember.

RV: No bad reception at the airports?

DC: No. I landed at El Toro, and got into civilian clothes. The word was out that when you were going home not to wear a uniform, to wear civilian clothes. There were rumors that nasty things were going on to people. There was a rumor that some hippies had grabbed a guy at L.A. airport and took him out and hung him. There were stories. These were stories. The validity of a lot of what I’ve heard guys say happen to them. I wonder if that isn’t trumped up a little bit. In my experience, people didn’t want to talk about it.

RV: They didn’t ask you questions?

DC: I went home, surprised my parents because I hadn’t told them I was coming home.

RV: Let’s talk about that. Tell me what the flight back was like for you.

DC: We got in Danang on a purple Braniff. Of course, when we flew out over the coast, everybody started screaming and yelling because we had made it. One of the stewardesses asked one of the guys. One of the guys asked the stewardess what a mini skirt was like and she said, “Just a minute and I’ll show you.” She walked into a bathroom and she pinned her skirt up and walked back out. None of us knew what a mini skirt was. Boy, I’ll tell you, there were about 110 guys on that plane just going nuts. But we were polite about being that. Went to Okinawa and went through out-processing there, and its pretty much a blur. I don’t even remember what kind of plane I flew home. I flew into El Toro, which is a Marine Corps air station. I had a suit that I had gotten in Hong Kong, and I went and I put that on and then they gave us a ride, bussed us out to L.A. airport and I got a flight to San Francisco airport. I called my parents from L.A. and told them I was home and my mother about had a cow. I flew into San Francisco airport.
got a taxi, and the guy was pissed off when I said I was going to Burlingame, it was
going to be such a small fee. Then I tipped him 20 bucks and he about tripped all over
himself wanting to carry my luggage up or what I had. It wasn’t really luggage. It was a
sea bag. I saw my folks, my dad had a full head of gray hair, which he hadn’t had before.
It was kind of a neat time. My dog, who we’d had since I was eight years old, was on his
last legs, and I had been told by my mom in a letter not to expect to see him. He was
basically blind and yet, he was a little dachshund, and yet he managed to walk right up to
me and roll over. I went to San Diego a week later for about a week and he died while I
was gone.

RV: Sounds like he was waiting for you to come back.

DC: You can't convince me of anything differently.

RV: There was a girl that I had been writing to when I was in Vietnam. She was
the roommate of one of my buddies there. I ended up meeting her when I came home,
and that started an on again off again relationship that lasted for about 11 years. But a
buddy of mine and I drove down to San Diego, and a guy that I had grown up with was
going to San Diego State and we went over and stayed at his apartment, and John
Mctighe, and John introduced me to some of his friends as they came by the apartment.
One of them was this really good-looking lady and her name was Diane. John said, “This
is my friend, Don.” She gave me a nice coquettish smile and Mr. Happy started to react,
and he said, “Don’s in the Marines and he just got back from Vietnam,” and she just kind
of looked at me and said, “Oh, did you kill anybody?” That right then, I was
dumbfounded. I didn’t know what to say, and I started to realize right then that people
were [could be] stupid. I think a lot of the way guys; the way a lot of us were treated
when we got home wasn’t necessarily out of malice but probably more out of just
ignorance.

RV: Did it make you mad? How did you feel?

DC: No. It made you realize that there were some things you talked about and
other things you didn’t. I never denied that I had been in Vietnam, and there were times
when I wore my uniform out in public. There was an instance going up to San Francisco
to Broadway, and this where they had all the topless joints, and going into the Condor,
which was Carol Doda. I don’t know if you remember her. Carol Doda was one of the
original topless dancers, and she’d had silicone injections and she had these humongous hooters. She was the best known and then her competition in San Francisco was a lady by the name of Yvonne D’Angiers. They both made Playboy magazine and if you went to San Francisco, you had to go see Carol Doda. We walked into the Condor, myself and a couple of buddies, and they were civilians and I was in my uniform. I wasn’t 21. When I got to the front door, the bouncer took a look at me and said, “Hey, I want you to understand that I appreciate what you guys are doing.” Didn’t ask me for my ID, called the waitress over, said, “These guys, give them whatever they want.” They put us at a table right up front, wouldn’t let us pay for a drink the whole time we were there. Carol Doda actually came over after she’d done her act, gave us each a beer, and was very, very nice to us, and understanding that this was right in San Francisco, which was the height of hippiedom or the home of hippiedom. I had a couple of times, when I first got back to 29 Palms, I ended up being on a speaker’s bureau. I would go out to Lions Clubs and SIF groups and show a film. It was doing PR work for the Marine Corps. I did that for about a month and a half or two months. The downside to that was if you were on that you also had to do funerals. I got to do about a half a dozen of those. Whenever we would go out to the different organizations and stuff, the people were really nice. They’d ask questions, and nothing that would be embarrassing. There was no political stuff here. The funerals were something else. Those were no fun at all.

RV: These were Marines killed in Vietnam?

DC: Yes. We did one up in Riverside. This was January of ’67 and I had just been promoted to Corporal, and we did the funeral. I was the guy that when the flag was folded, it was handed to me and I, in turn, handed it to an officer who gave it to the family. After all this was done, this guy’s sister who was a really, really attractive lady came up to me and she said, “I just have one question.” I said, “Yeah,” and she says, “Why my brother and not you?” What do you say? Again, I was just dumbfounded and that was also the last funeral I ever did.

RV: How did you reply?

DC: I didn’t. What can you say? I just looked at her and turned and walked off or she turned and walked off. It just made me realize I didn’t ever want to do that again, and the hurt that that family had to feel. There was a lot of truth to her question. Why was it
him and not me? In traveling around, I can remember being on an airplane, and a guy just looking at my uniform and buying me a drink on an airplane. I never had anybody do anything negative towards me because I was in the military or because I’d been in Vietnam. After I got out, we were at a nightclub, and there was this girl that I dated in high school, and she was sitting at a table with two other girls and as I walked by she said, “Oh, Don.” And I turned around and saw her, and she asked me what I’d been doing and I told her I’d just gotten out of the Marines. She goes, “Oh, were you in Vietnam?” I said, “Oh, yeah. I was.” They immediately all turned their back on me.

RV: Really. Physically, literally.

DC: Literally turned their backs on me. Physically and literally turned their back on me. At that point, I realized that it was a topic that you didn’t need to bring up because nobody wanted to know about it. It was on the news every night and it was almost like if we don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist.

RV: How about with your family? Did they ask a lot of questions? Did you talk with them a lot?

DC: No. They were really good about that. Right after I got out and started going back to college I lived at home. I have to admit that right after I got back I started what I refer to as my 21-year drunk. I was literally drunk for 21 years after that. While I was living at home, my folks just kind of let me do what I wanted to do, up to a point. Finally, one night I came home and my mom was waiting up and she said we needed to sit down and talk. She made the comment that I was doing a lot of drinking and stuff. She said, “I know that you had some terrible experiences in Vietnam, but I think its time you put it all behind you and get on with your life.” That’s the only time I was sitting there and I broke down. My head went into her lap and I just started bawling and I told her I can't. I can't forget about it. Years later, my mom passed away in ’95, so a couple of years before that, we were sitting in her kitchen just drinking coffee and talking, and she told me that she thought about this often and she just had to say it that that was the stupidest thing she’d ever said to anybody in her life after she realized. I call it the John Wayne, Audie Murphey syndrome. Those of us that were baby boomers were brought up to believe that real men put experiences like that behind them and just went on with their lives and forgot about it. That’s what they did in the movies. We believed that, and my God, to
show weakness, you couldn’t do that. So you just bottled it up inside of you. You lived
with it and there’s people and I’ve talked to, guys that were in World War II that have
never talked to anybody about their experiences, and when you tell them you need to talk
about it, “Well, people will think I’m crazy.” Well, you tell them, “Hey, I think about it
everyday also.” I had one guy look at me and go, “You do?” Here I am, this guy probably
for 50 years has had that bottled up inside of him.

RV: How much did you keep up with the war after you came home?
DC: When I was still in the Marine Corps and I got home in November, so I had
about another nine to ten months, as much as we could get from what papers we had.
Most of our stuff was through *Stars and Stripes*, as much as we could from guys coming
back, and what we read in the papers and *TIME* magazine and stuff. After a while, I
wrote to the guys I was with for a couple of months, and then you kind of went your
separate ways. Once in a while, being on liberty, I would run into one or two guys that
I’d been over there with that came down say, to San Diego from Camp Pendleton. I spent
a lot of time in San Diego, even though I was up at 29 Palms. When I had weekends off,
I’d go down and stay at my buddy’s place. We didn’t have a lot of television out a the
base. There was one in the club and nobody had one in the barracks. We kept up with it.

RV: Don, before we move on with talking more about what you experienced
when you got home and your post Vietnam experience, let’s go back to a question I asked
earlier about Vietnamese civilians. I’d asked you what kind of impression you had of
them. You said you had not much contact. Is there more that you wanted to say about
that?

DC: There was an instance. My feeling on it is that they were human just like we
were. We’d been taught to kind of dehumanize them, and the instance that comes to mind
and it didn’t give me any great insight, but after we talked about that and I had a little
time to think on in, we were coming out of Dong Ha. We had talked about the Shell
station and the big Shell orange and red Shell sign. We came out of Dong Ha. We’d gone
down in a six by truck, the big two and half ton truck. I’d ridden shotgun so that they had
radio support if they needed it. I was sitting in the back and we went down there and
loaded up with C-rations and I’m sure there was some ammo there and a whole bunch of
other stuff. We had a bunch of big crates in the back. As we were starting to leave, one of
the guys that was riding along for security got up on top of the stack of crates. I
remember specifically telling him, you don’t want to be up there. Number one, you’re a
target and number two, you’ve got nothing to hang onto. He told me he was okay, and he
had a band on one of the pallets to hang on to. If that’s what he wanted to do, fine. As we
pulled out the main gate of Dong Ha and hung a left on to Route 9 and passed that former
gas station, the driver gunned the six by and I looked up and lo and behold, the guy that
was sitting on top of the crates wasn’t there anymore. I looked out to about my 11:00 on a
clock and this thing was surreal. Here was this guy floating in the air, still in the sitting
position. Things sometimes just go in real slow motion, and I watched the guy float out
there and this whole thing probably took three seconds to happen. He went out there and
then he hit the pavement and went bounce, bounce, bounce. We yelled at the driver to
stop and we got back there and the guy was still sitting down. When he landed, a number
of Vietnamese civilians that had been along the side of the road came running over. I
saw, I remember seeing genuine concern on their faces that somebody had been in an
accident and could really be hurt. Of course, we got there and we shoed them away, as
stupid as we were when they were just there to help. But, fortunately he was not hurt. He
refused any medical attention. We were going to take him back and he said he was fine,
and I’m sure he’s paying for that landing to this day. I saw genuine concern on their face.
That in retrospect makes me think that the majority of these people that weren’t in the
military were no different than we are. I’m sure through your travels over there, it’s a
different culture, but deep inside, they’re just the same as we are. We had dehumanized
them in our minds because of training, probably as a defense mechanism, and the
majority of the ones that I saw were the bad guys anyway. That brings me back to another
instance which happened fairly early in my tour. We were up around Tam Ky, and I was
with 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines at the time. We’d been out in the bush and we were
coming back, and I think this was Operation Double Eagle II. We came to a pagoda and I
remember there was a well there, and a really pretty open area with fauna and grass and
just something that gave you a good feeling to be in it, kind of a relaxing feeling. We had
an interpreter with us. Some of the villagers came walking out and they smiled at us and
nodded to us and, of course, probably keeping one eye on us and our weapons and the
other eye looking at who are these strange people. I always have had a pretty heavy
beard, and I’ve got hair on my arms. I’m not overly hairy, but I’m not not hairy either, and a bushy eyebrow. I can remember a couple of little kids and older people coming up and feeling my arms and tugging on the hair. We talked about getting dinged and not reporting it. We had been mortared the night before, and I’d taken a little piece in my wrist so I had a bandage around it. They came up and pointed at it and said, “VC, VC, number ten,” in their pigeon English. There was this absolutely gorgeous young girl that comes walking out. I can picture her now. She had the long dark hair that went down to the middle of her back. She was wearing the ao dais. I mean, she was worth three or four second looks. The interpreter saw me look and he goes, “Oh, no, no. She number ten.” I’m looking, I’m going, “You’re absolutely out of your mind. That girl’s beautiful.” He said, “No. She’s an old maid.” She was 16 years old, and she hadn’t been married yet so she was considered an old maid. Then I looked at her feet and all of this beauty had two of the ugliest feet I had ever seen in my life. I mean, she’d been out plowing the fields and stuff, I guess. They don’t wear shoes, and that happened. They just had a different lifestyle, and I think that with their history and all, they didn’t care who ran the country as long as they were able to do their own thing and live their own lives.

RV: That’s interesting you said that. It was almost a defense mechanism where you kind of had to dehumanize them. Is that something that was common amongst your fellow Marines that you had to kind of turn your mind that way in order to survive.

DC: Oh, Yeah. It goes hand in hand with, after you’d been there a little while, you didn’t get real close with people. Because if you saw the aftermath of a firefight or a battle, and there were Vietnamese with thighs blown open or missing body parts. Because we would, after a battle, if we found wounded Vietnamese, Viet Cong or North Vietnamese, our doctors would treat them after they treated our people. Then we would send them off, it’s kind of ironic, to a hospital to get fixed up, and then they’d turn them over to the South Vietnamese who’d pulverize them again. But the dehumanization meant that you were able to look at the wounds and not feel sorry for them or just keep on going. You had to have something like that to survive.

RV: Did you think they were capable, the South Vietnamese, of carrying on the war after the Americans left, the Vietnamization policy?
DC: I was surprised it lasted as long as it did. I thought that they’d crumble in a week.

RV: Why was that?

DC: Their army didn’t have a fighting spirit as we talked about before. They weren’t interested in fighting. They took advantage of a good thing. We were there. When you’re faced with really a no win situation, I think it’s hard to keep morale up within the regular everyday Army troops. They had elite units that from what I understand were pretty good. But there was a lot of graft and corruption. Their system was different than ours. Their officers, from what I understand, were able to take part of the soldiers’ pay and a lot of these guys really didn’t get paid that much or that often. The payroll would go down to the officers, and by the time it filtered down to the soldier, there weren’t enough piasters to feed a family. I also think that if they were in there, and there were different levels. There was the ARVN, the Army of Vietnam, and then they had what we called the Ruff Puffs, which were the popular forces. Those were the somewhat trained guys that walked around in pieces of different uniforms in small groups, and they guarded their own village or their district, and they were underneath the district chief. When you’re fighting in your own back yard and you’ve got your family close by and the shit hits the fan, what’s your first concern? Your family, and you're going to go be with them and protect them or get them out of harm’s way. It’s only my opinion. I don’t think that they really had the spirit to fight. I don’t think that where we weren’t there, I know I wasn’t there to fight for a cause. Maybe I was at first, but when reality set in, I wasn’t there to fight for anything other than my buddies and survive and make sure they survived too. That’s why American soldiers and Marines fight. They fight for each other. I don’t think they had that overall attitude.

RV: Your idea of why America was there and the value of the war changed during your tour?

DC: Oh, sure.

RV: In what way did it?

DC: Knowing that they really didn’t care if we were there or not. That was obvious. We were told that the South Vietnamese wanted us there, and it became readily apparent that it was the South Vietnamese government that wanted us there. In Danang
when they had the anti-American demonstrations that were there. I got to drive right
through the middle of that. You see banners up there in English that said, “Americans go
home!” you know, “Yankee Doodle Sucks.” You know that that isn’t just two or three
people doing that. I think very slowly. I don’t there was any great revelation. I just think
very slowly in my subconscious I realized, “You get through your time here and go
home, and let these people worry about themselves.” None of us thought it would last as
long as it did.

RV: Do you remember how you felt, April 1975?

DC: I remember it very vividly. Did you every read Doonsbury?

RV: Yes.

DC: There’s a BD on the 30th of April 1975 that the strip that day that shows BD
just sitting on the front porch of his house with his head down. That was me. I was either
in Eureka or San Diego at the time. From one end of the state to the other. I was at a
girlfriend’s apartment, and we were watching the news and that came on, and I just very
quietly got up and just walked out and sat on the front porch and cried. It was more
because I think that my thought at that time was that it didn’t mean anything anymore.
Not that I’d been a proponent of the war from the time that I’d gotten out, because I’d
been back for almost ten, well, eight years. Maybe what we did with these, and the people
that didn’t come home or the ones that came home different than they were when they
left, it had tarnished what they did in my mind. Not in mind, but in the overall picture. In
my mind, they’re heroes and they always will be. Yet we knew it was coming. You could
see it on a daily basis towards the end there that they were just coming down and we let
them do it.

RV: Do you remember how your fellow Marines felt? Have you talked to them
about this?

DC: You know, I really haven’t. I want to say that the general consensus that I
picked up from people was that we were all glad it was over for future people that had to
go over there although we’d been pulled out of there for almost three years. I don’t know.

RV: Do you think the United States achieved peace with honor as Nixon was
after?
DC: No. I think that we bowed down to public opinion. You can see this stuff. And I’m not a proponent by any means of us going into Iraq and I think that’s a huge mistake. But you can see the way President Bush and the government is trying to build support before they even go and do anything. I think all of this is a backlash from what went on in Vietnam. I think a lot of the way the American people live today is the legacy of the Vietnam era from 1965 to 1973.

RV: How so?

DC: You would pin me down on that one, wouldn’t you?

RV: Well, you can think about it. Just expand on it. I guess, we’re talking about the legacy of the war for the United States.

DC: I think a lot of families for generations were embittered by people that were killed over there. I think that where pre-1964, 1965, if the government said something was right, we pretty much took it for granted. People didn’t confront authority. That all changed during that time period. It’s gotten more prevalent. We’ve turned into a litigious society. Just about anything you do anymore, you can be challenged and taken to court. People aren’t as accepting. I think that the “if it feels good, do it,” idea took place then. A lot of the young kids we see now are either children of or grandchildren of people of that era, and those that didn’t do a turn around and get on with their lives and learn a work ethic. I’m talking about the people that still now think they're hippies. We see a lot of them up here that are transients, and their kids are that way. In my opinion, the American way of life changed in 1965 and not necessarily for the better.

RV: What kind of lessons do you think the United States learned overall or did not learn from the war?

DC: To have the public on your side. The way the Gulf War was run, I think was a real good indication of lessons learned. Then President Bush allowed the military to pretty much run it the way they wanted to. The media was kept out for the most part until things were done. You had two Vietnam veterans running it, in Schwartskopf and Powell. I think that they had realized that body counts and mass assaults for no reason aren’t the way to wage a war. As time goes by, we’ve always been somewhat concerned with world opinion, and now we’re more so. I think a lot of that had to do with what our image was.
during and after the Vietnam War. I also believe we tried to shine it up a little bit by pointing the finger at the Russians in Afghanistan. That’s about it.

RV: What do you think of the media coverage of the Vietnam War?

DC: Those guys had to make a living. There were some of the Joe Galloways—there were a couple of photographers, Sean [Flynn], what the heck was his last name? He ended up missing in action over there. He was the son of somebody [Errol Flynn]. There were several that were up front and honest and told things the way they really were. There were a lot of them that went along with however things were going at the time in the public opinion, because they had to sell their articles. If a publisher wasn’t going to buy stuff on the good things Americans were doing but he wanted stuff on atrocities, why, that’s what he was going to buy. I think a lot of it was biased, and with their own personal opinions, too. You know, you don’t necessarily write exactly what you see. You write exactly what you see, but with your own bent to it. I don’t think anybody can be unbiased in a situation where bodies have been traumatically torn apart, and people have been moved out of their houses and their houses are burning down and they’re out there wailing. People really aren’t themselves. I just don’t think anybody can give a good unbiased opinion on paper from that. I think pictures, yeah. But you glean from pictures what you want also. I think the media’s necessary. But I think also, the military has the right to sensor so that both sides of the story are given.

RV: Do you remember seeing any war correspondents in the field with your unit?

DC: We had, in Okinawa, Dickey Chappell had come out to see us, and she left us and went back to Vietnam and stepped on a land mine. I do remember a couple of guys, but as far as their names or anything, I couldn’t tell you.

RV: But they were there with your unit.

DC: Oh, yeah. We had people with us more than a couple of times, but they would be here and then they’d be gone.

RV: Looking back, Don, at your service, how do you feel about your service today?

DC: Do you mean Vietnam or an overall?

RV: In Vietnam, yes, sir.
DC: I feel very good about it. I’m very proud of it. I was with a bunch of great people. I pulled more than my fair share of the load, and even had my battalion commander pretty much tell me I was a good Marine. That’s the highest compliment in my mind I could have gotten. I’ve talked to guys that I’d been over there with, and I know they trust me, and I know they trust me because of that. I was just one of a group of guys that did something that not a lot of people wanted to do, a very small minority was willing to do. We got thrown into a meat grinder together, and we all pulled together and did what we had to do to get each other out. I’m very proud to have been a Marine. In my service with the National Guard, if you ask anybody in our battalion about the Marines, they’re going to point at myself and one other guy. It’s a part of my life that I would never change nor would I trade it in. If I had to do it again, yeah, I’d do it again, without hesitation.

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

DC: That guys can love each other. That—Wow, that’s actually a pretty deep question. The value of true friendship. I think that it had a lot to do with making me what I am today. If I’m involved in something, the people that are there know that they can count on me, and that’s about all I can say on that.

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

DC: I think I just answered that. Wow. It molded me into what I am today. It took a few years to come out the finished product, but I know that as bad as things get, they can’t get any worse than they were there. I’m one of those people, just like I was over there, if something in our everyday life goes wrong, I usually just kind of sit back with the attitude that it’s going to work its way out one way or the other, and we’ll just make it work. I think the Marine Corps and especially Vietnam made me a stronger individual simply because I have confidence in myself. I work well with others, but I also know that sometimes you’ve got to just take the job or whatever it is and be ready to do it yourself.

RV: Have you suffered from any post-traumatic stress disorder?

DC: I get 10% from the VA. I mentioned before that when I came back to the States, I started a 21-year drunk, and I did. I was from November of 1966 to January of
1988, I doubt if there was one day of sobriety. I was a, what’s the word I want to use?
Help me here.

RV: Alcoholic?

DC: No, no. Yeah, alcoholic, you bet you. But I was a productive alcoholic.

RV: You could continue on doing things. You were productive. You could do the things you needed to do.

DC: Oh, absolutely. But back in the late ‘80s or it could have been the early ‘90s.

No matter. A friend of mine in the Guard talked me into going and seeing a VA rep up in Ukiah, California, and I went up there. Years and years ago when I first came back, my uncle by marriage to my dad’s sister had been the head of the VA in San Francisco, and when I came back, my Aunt Jean told me it would behoove me to go to the VA and if nothing else, let them know who I was and talk to some people there. I asked her why and she said, “Well, whether you know it or not, you have problems that someday will surface.” Of course, I said, “No. I’m just fine. I’m not bothered at all.” Eventually, I thought I was absolutely insane. So anyway, with that in mind, I went down and I went and talked to a psychologist down at Fort Miley in San Francisco. I get 10% of disability. About 103 dollars a month. It’s not a whole lot of money, and its there. But I also, I did have them tell me that my adjustment—and the reason I got this right off the top was because I had gone in for alcoholic rehabilitation. I’ve been clean and sober now for 15 years next month.

RV: Congratulations. That’s great.

DC: Well, I don’t do the AA or anything. I never have. It’s just something I can't do, and it’s just something I have to live with. I think that my experience in Vietnam helped me to get over this thing, too. Strength of character, strength of mind. If you start something you finish it, and realizing what’s reality, and it’s just something I can't do. Because of that, I get 10%. Other than that, they’ve told me that I’m really pretty well adjusted and I’m very, very happy with that. I think I have. I think it took a number of years. I had a lot of stuff bottled up inside of me. There was a period of time where I thought I was the only lunatic in town. Joining the Guard, I started to meet some guys that had been over there, and began to find out that I wasn’t. These guys all thought the
same thing. I got involved with a couple of veterans forums. I want to throw a name at
you. Can we go off line for just a second?
DC: Once I learned how to use a computer, I got involved in some online veterans
groups, one on CompuServe where I met and emailed with Joe Galloway and a bunch of
other guys, some of whom I have met since then. One in particular, a guy named Jim
Sorenson who lives up in McKinleyville just north of Eureka. We met about four years
ago. It turns out that back in the ‘70s, I worked up in Eureka as a GMAC, General Motors
representative. There was a bar that I frequented, and he frequented the same place and
we’d actually sat probably three feet away from each other and bs’d together and shot
pool together and didn’t know each other. We certainly didn’t know that we were both
Vietnam vets. He was Special Forces during the early ‘70s. We all found out that the
majority of us had the same problems, that being that we kept stuff bottled up inside of us
for so long that it just eventually had to find a way out. For some it was alcohol, some
guys were able to [cope better;], maybe they were a little bit more mature and put it in a
different perspective. They might have had wives or something else that they could
confide in. But the majority of us didn’t, and it manifested itself in one way or another.
That’s not to say that my service in Vietnam turned me into an alcoholic because I think I
would have gone that route no matter what. But it certainly gave me a good reason to sit
and have another drink and ponder some of my buddies and some of the things. I can
honestly say that I have thought about Vietnam every single day since the day I left there.
I’m not embarrassed to say that. It was the major thing in my life, event of my life, being
under that intense pressure for as long as I was, the adrenaline rush all the time. That’s
cool. When I got out, I went back to college and that worked for a while, and I ended up.
I went to work and did some stuff, and then I went back to school. I ended up working for
years in the automobile finance field and working as a field rep and going out and
repossessing cars and doing collections and stuff like that. At certain times, you got into
situations where you got that adrenaline rush back. That was really cool. Overall, I’ve
had my ups and downs. I was married. That lasted about six months. I was 26 or 27 when
that happened. I bounced around from job to job, usually they would last two to three
years. I always did well. I got an AA degree out of Cañada Jr. College in Redwood City,
went to San Diego State. I never did graduate there. I’m about a semester short, or I was when I left. That’s about the only thing that I never completed in my life that I started. I got married at age 34 and that’s worked out well. We’ve been married for 22 years now. I’ve reconnected with a number of the guys that I was over there with, and they’re probably my best friends. We may not see each other everyday, but we keep in contact. Things have worked out well for me. Joining the National Guard, I think, was probably, and I did that the week before we got married. So Jeannie and I joke that I got married twice in two weeks. But the Guard started off as just, and I didn’t even know what the National Guard was, and we all know their reputation during the Vietnam War. It was still pretty much that way in 1980. But it’s evolved greatly since then. It provided me with an opportunity to get back in uniform and have the camaraderie that you don’t get in the civilian world. Then it eventually turned into a career when I went full time in 1985. I’m still active duty with them.

RV: What are your present duties with them now?

DC: I was a recruiter for 13 and a half years. I was an operations NCO and a combat engineer line company for three years, and now I’m the personnel NCO of the battalion, which is the 579th Engineers out of Santa Rosa, California. I’m an official staff weenie and proud of it. The Guard gave me a career, but it also got me sober. The Guard put me into alcohol rehab over at Travis Air Force Base in January 1988. They didn’t force me, they asked me. And I did it and it’s been a good fit ever since.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

DC: You know, I don’t pay any attention to it. I have no desire to go there.

RV: Why not?

DC: It just doesn’t appeal to me. I went to a reunion of 1/4 down in San Diego in September and this wasn’t the first time, but there were a couple of guys there that actually are involved in tours over there, and they were trying to talk guys into, not talk guys into, they were espousing how, what a good deal it was and how enjoyable it was. And there were a couple of guys that had gone over and come back and none of them had anything but good things to say. I have no desire to go there. I don’t feel any pull towards it. I don’t think I’d enjoy being there. Besides that, I don’t like to fly in airplanes or ride in boats. If I could drive there, maybe it’d be a different story. But I enjoy hearing people
like yourself that have been there, and it really does, it makes me wonder, Jesus what am
I missing here. I just have no desire to go there.

RV: You’ve done a lot of reading on the war. We’ve talked off line and on about
that. Tell me about some of the better books you’ve read.

DC: The first one I would recommend to anybody is *Field of Fire* by James
Webb. That’s actually the first book that I ever read. Its fiction, but that guy, he sure can
started it and couldn’t put it down. *Fields of Fire* I’ve probably read three or four times.
He really gets into the characters. The real stuff I’d recommend anything by Keith
William Nolan although the more recent ones he’s done aren’t as good as the first ones.
He’s got one on Khe Sahn. *Operation Buffalo* is an excellent book. That’s the story of
1/9 being pretty much wiped off the face of the earth. *Death Valley*, I think that’s the 7th
Marines. Eric Hammel is another good author. He’s done a lot of stuff. Nolan also did
*Into Cambodia*. I think he also did *Into Laos*. Eric Hammel is pretty good. He’s done
stuff from World War II to Korea to Vietnam. I’m looking at, I think one of the more
intriguing ones was Robert Timberg’s, *The Nightingale Song*. Have you read that?

RV: No, I have not.

DC: It’s the story of Vietnam vets that, as he puts it, he says there were three
types when they came back. There were those that were boisterous against the war. There
were those that went out into the hills and hid out, and then there were those of us that
were like good soldiers and we just went to ground. His point in the book is that the
metamorphosis time for Vietnam vets to come back out was when Reagan made the
speech, and in that he said that Vietnam was a noble cause. The Nightingale sings its
song one time in its life, which is the title. This happened in like 1984, and in looking
back, it almost parallels when I started to come out and feel a little bit more comfortable
in relating my experiences in Vietnam. Most of the time, it’s been to other soldiers, cops
that I’ve known. I’ve never really talked to it with my family. I don’t talk easily to most
civilians unless they're historians. But it kind of went along with what’s put out in *The
Nightingale Song*. *We Were Soldiers, Once and Young* is an excellent book. I’m looking
at my books here now, and a lot of different things on a lot of mostly Marine stuff is what
I look for, but I’ve also gotten into some Army oral histories. I like those most. A lot of
the stuff is just. There are a couple of books that are after action reports with a couple of
words changed. They don’t read really well. If somebody wants to start reading about it,
I’d start them off with *Fields of Fire*.

RV: What about movies, Don? What do you think about the Vietnam movies?
Do you go see them? If you have, which ones?

DC: Oh, yeah. From *Platoon* to *We Were Soldiers*, I’ve probably seen every one
of them. *Platoon* was okay. *We Were Soldiers*, if you cut out the final battle scene in
there, is pretty down to earth. *Hamburger Hill* was a good movie. There’s a flick, it’s
called *84 Charlie Mopec*, which when I first saw it, I thought it was a real documentary.
Then there’s a scene where there’s some blood, and you can tell that it’s really water. I
realized that it was a movie. *Full Metal Jacket* is the worst movie I’ve ever seen. The first
part about Marine Corps boot camp is right on. I went and saw that in Santa Rosa when it
first came out, and when the movie ended, because the second part just does a complete
180 from the first part, but when the movie ended and the lights came on, I know I stood
up and said, “Bullshit!” And all of the sudden, I heard my echo from about three or four
different places, and it was other vets that were in there too. I don’t think anybody was
crazy enough to go walking silhouetted against a flame singing the Mickey Mouse song.
But that was a terrible movie. *Apocalypse Now*, maybe that was just over my head. Some
are good. I don’t think anything can really touch the essence of Vietnam. *We Were
Soldiers* tried to get into what these guys were like as people. The other movies don’t.
They're more of sequences in a battle. Even *Platoon*, good versus evil. You really didn’t
get into what the guys were like. I don’t think you can do that because you can show the
horrors of war, and they do a real good job of that now, but like so many guys have said
that I’ve talked to about *We Were Soldiers*, you’ve got to understand that it’s Hollywood.
 Granted the two guys that co-authored the book demanded that they not be anti-military
when they did it and that they made it as truthful as they could, but they also had to give
in and let Hollywood have its scene, which is the last battle scene in the book, or in the
movie. Have you seen it?

RV: Yes.

DC: You know what I’m talking about then.

RV: The helicopter coming over.
DC: Yeah. Mel Gibson, I keep wanting to call him Kirk Gibson, he leads
great charges, but that didn’t happen. They just disappeared into the woodwork and then they
got the guys at LZ Albany the next day. But its real hard to, unless you talk to the people
like we’re doing, to really understand what a real person’s like on a movie screen. I think
all the movies I saw about World War II, and the movie The Longest Day, you know, you
see the guys coming up on Omaha Beach, and one or two guys fall down and you just
can't show the carnage and what propellants can do to the human body. Private Ryan did
a pretty decent job of that. I think the end of Private Ryan was what a lot of us as Marines
and I’m sure as soldiers, too, the only thing we wanted out of it was for somebody to tell
us we were a good man.
RV: Have you been to the Wall in Washington, Don?
DC: Oh, yeah.
RV: Tell me about that experience.
DC: I went there in 1995 or ’96. Jeannie and I drove back to Carrollton, Georgia
and picked up Jeff Sewell and his wife Beth. All four of us had a stake in the wall: me
and Jeff from the two of us being over there; Jeannie from her first love, and Tanya, and
Beth, who we call Bob. And the reason for that is her daughter had a real bad cold and
was saying “Mom” but it came out “Bob” and we picked up on that so we nicknamed her
Bob. Her brother, who was Jeff’s brother-in-law, had been killed over there. So we all
had a stake in the wall. We drove up. Along the way, we accidentally discovered the
North Carolina Vietnam Memorial, which is absolutely gorgeous. I highly recommend it
to anybody that is in, I guess you’d call it Southern North Carolina; I think it’s the second
exit. Its where the north and south lanes kind of crisscross. And it’s absolutely gorgeous.
If we did it in ’96, Jeannie and them in Black Mountain had had their get together. Maybe
it was after that. I’m just thinking out loud here. We went up and it was ’95 that we did
this. I can be an emotional person when it comes to this stuff, and as I get older I get
emotional easier. We all went up there and my reaction to it wasn’t one of emotion. There
was a definite feeling of being somewhere special. But I didn’t get teary-eyed or
emotional. What it told me was that I had handled my baggage a little bit better than I
thought I had. It could have been guys in The Wall telling me everything’s okay. There’s
a magic there. Now I had seen the moving wall a couple of times prior to this so, even
though it wasn’t the real thing, the thought process behind it is. Knowing that the people
you knew that aren’t with us anymore are there and memorialized as they should be. We
left there, and I’m glad I went. I hope I get the opportunity to go again. I think it’s a place
that anybody that was there needs to go see. The guys that put that thing together ought to
be canonized. I mean, they’re saints in my eyes. They really did something beautiful.
RV: What would you tell the younger generation today about the Vietnam War?
DC: We didn’t lose.
RV: Anything else.
DC: That we were people just like them. Times were a little bit different. We
didn’t question it as much as people do now. But I also think that the military explains
things better now than they did then, and these kids are a hell of a lot smarter than we
were. But, number one, we didn’t lose. We thought we were doing some good for the
world, and it turned out that it really wasn’t that way, but still, we pulled together and we
pulled for each other. That’s pretty much what I have told kids in the past. I’ve gone into
classrooms as a recruiter, and not for recruiting purposes, but to give my perspective as a
Marine in 1966 to classes for history teachers. I would explain to them what we did. One
of the first things that I would say is that my first rule is you don’t ask me if I killed
anybody because you have to understand I was in a war. After that, pretty much any
question is fair game. Kids took it pretty well. Some of them always want to know the
gory details, and they’re usually the ones that aren’t interested. I tell them, you look at me
as a human being and understand that I went and I did these things and here’s how I did
them and here’s what we did. I also explained right at the very beginning that if you
know of anybody that was in Vietnam, you’ve got to understand that all of our
experiences and the way we look at it, can be different depending when we were there
and where we were when we were there. Because you could take a guy from each of the
different areas and the I Corps in the Central Highlands and in Saigon and down in the
Delta and put them all in a room and if they were all there in the same time period,
they’re all going to have different experiences as far as what weather was like, the way
the units they were with operated, and it just depended on where you were. That’s pretty
much what I relate is not real personal experiences, but the way we did things.
RV: Don, is there anything else that you’d like to add to our conversations?
DC: Other than the fact that I think this whole thing is tremendous from the standpoint of it being available for people that really want to know what it was like, I think you guys are doing a great thing.

RV: Thank you.

DC: Probably as soon as I hang up, I’ll think of a dozen things.

RV: Well, in that case, you call me back.

DC: And then I’ve got your email address. That pretty much covers it, I think.

RV: We’ll go ahead and end the interview now with Don Cuneo. Thank you, sir.

DC: Well, thank you.