Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating the oral history interview with Thomas Powers of the US Marine Corps. Today’s date is the second of June 2004 and both Tom and I are here in the Special Collections building in the Formby Room conducting the interview on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Hi, Tom.

Thomas Powers: Hi Laura.

LC: Tom I want to start by asking you some general biographical questions. First of all were you born and when?

TP: I was born in Dayton, Ohio February the 1st, 1945.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your dad? Did, for example, he have service during World War II?

TP: My father was in the Marines during World War II. He did not leave the United States. I asked him what he did in the war one time and he said, “I knocked out one sailor a week in the Special Services. I boxed.”

LC: He was a boxer?

TP He was a boxer, undefeated.

LC: Is that right?

TP: Yeah.

LC: Had he been boxing before he went into the Marines?
TP: I don’t know. I don’t think so. He was a football player at the University of Dayton and then he got transferred to Penn State where he also lettered in football and some kind of military thing during the war. That’s where he met my mother, at Penn State.

LC: So your mom was a student there as well?

TP: My mother is a graduate of Penn State.

LC: Ok so we got a couple of Nittany Lions in the background there.

TP: Well my dad went back and graduated from the University Dayton. So he’s a Flyer.

LC: He’s a Flyer. Tell me a little bit first of all, if you can, about your dad’s background. Was he an Ohioan by birth?

TP: Yes, my father was also born in Dayton. He had two brothers. I think three sisters and there was a brother that died as an infant. Working class family. He was the first from his family to go to college and he only got to go because he had a football scholarship.

LC: What did he study, Tom, when he went to school?

TP: Sociology. He ended up being Chief of the Adult Probation Department in Butler County, Ohio.

LC: Did he stay there for most of his career?

TP: Yes. He started out as a teacher then switched to probation. Then after he retired he went back to teaching again.

LC: At high school level?

TP: His original teaching was high school level where he coached also. When he went back he taught at the juvenile detention center.

LC: Tell me about his coaching. Was it more then one sport?

TP: He coached basketball once and football at Hamilton Catholic High School [Ohio].

LC: Did he like doing that?

TP: I think so. He taught Algebra.

LC: He had a lot of interests.
TP: Yeah. I think he, he started the probation department in Butler County. He was the first probation officer. He was chief when he retired. There is a plaque. He’s deceased. He died in ’86. There is a plaque in the Butler County Courthouse dedicated to him.

LC: Is that right? Because he had innovated the probation program?

TP: Yeah. He spent along time trying to keep people out of prison. (Laughter)

LC: Yeah. What about your mom, she was a college student when he met her?

TP: Yeah, she graduated. She was a kindergarten teacher finally.

LC: What was her name, her maiden name?

TP: Sarah Piollet. Anglicized, now they call it Piollet.

LC: How did she spell that?

TP: P-I-O-L-L-E-T. It’s a French name.

LC: It’s beautiful.

TP: Yeah. She, I think, majored in Spanish in college, but she said she doesn’t remember much of it. She is still alive. She’s 82, or will be 82 in September, October, 27th.

LC: And where she is living?

TP: Lives in Hamilton Ohio in a retirement type environment.

LC: How was it that she came to go to Penn State, do you know? Was she born near there?

TP: She and her three sisters were raised by their mother and father…my grandfather, her father died when she was 15 during the Depression. They lost the family home and the whole works. My grandmother who died in ’92, I guess. She was 94 years old. She was a registered nurse and was the school nurse in this small town in northeast Pennsylvania, Towanda.

LC: Oh yeah.

TP: You know that?

LC: Sure. I’ve been through there.

TP: In Bradford County. My mother was born and raised there. That and Wysox, which is right across the Susquehanna River there. She raised them and three of them went to college. They’re all very bright, all four sisters. My mother has a Master’s degree
too from Miami, Ohio. My father had a Master’s degree from Xavier University. My
brother has one. I’m the only one that doesn’t have a Master’s degree. (Laughter)

LC: Well there’s always time. You can always go back. Education is a life long
thing, right?

TP: Right.

LC: It’s interesting that your mom had both two sisters and herself all going to
college. In that time period it’s unusual.

TP: You know her one sister; my Aunt Joan graduated from Penn State at age 19,
Phi Beta Kappa.

LC: Wow. Sharp.

TP: I can’t remember where Aunt Joyce went. She’s deceased. I think Ryder
College maybe. My Aunt Cynthia married very young. She’s a very well self-educated
woman.

LC: They sound like a bright group of ladies.

TP: Yeah they are. And my grandmother was quite a…she was something.

LC: She must have been, (Laughter), with four girls and…

TP: And of course my grandfather, who died, was a Penn State graduated. I guess
I’m a third generation college graduate on that side. Yeah, in fact there is a student
society at Penn State that was founded by my grandfather.

LC: Do you know which one?

TP: It’s called Parmi Nous

LC: Is it like a Greek or…?

TP: No, it’s an honorary type thing. Like Joe Paterno belongs to it. It’s French. I
think it means, “Among us.” Parmi Nous. He founded that.

LC: It’s sort of a spirit, kind of a spirit organization.

TP: Yeah, I don’t even know. Yeah, it still exists. It’s now co-ed of course. It
wasn’t at first. It was men.

LC: Was he there then in the 20’s?

TP: Much earlier. Because he was 50 when he died in 1938 so…oh I want to say
’02 to ’06 or ’03 to ’07. Somewhere around there, you know.

LC: Any photos of him?
TP: We have a photo of him, but there’s not much. There’s more photos of the girls, the sisters. In fact we’re going to the family reunion at the end of July.

LC: Where is that going to be, up in Pennsylvania?

TP: Yeah, in Towanda. We had it last year; year before down in [Ohio] (cannot distinguish due to tapping on table).

LC: Well it’s a good time to think back over you know these family links and look back over the photos. Tom, tell me about growing up. I imagine that you did grow up in Dayton or near by.

TP: My dad took the job in Hamilton. My first year or two were in Dayton but I remember very little about it except I know where the apartments are. They are still there and there are still people living in them but they are terrible. It’s really bad section of town. He took the job in Hamilton and we lived in part of a house right next to Hamilton Catholic High School where he taught. I remember some of that and I remember that the house really wasn’t set up for two families. So there was no door going upstairs.

LC: How did you get up there then?

TP: Well I mean there was an opening but there wasn’t any lock door. You just went upstairs and had to count on the people downstairs not coming up to see you.

LC: (Laughter) I see.

TP: My mom said she came home one day and one of the priest’s from the high school was standing at the kitchen window looking at the kids out on the playground probably trying to, you know, catch somebody doing something. So people just walked in. (Laughter)

LC: Well is that the high school that you ended up going to?

TP: No. My mother and father decided to send me down Cincinnati to Xavier High School, which was a Jesuit school in Cincinnati.

LC: Why did they make that decision, I mean, can I ask?

TP: It was a real good college prep school. Had a great reputation and some of my mother’s friends sent their children there so I guess.

LC: Now did you have brothers and sisters?

TP: I have one brother, younger, Tim.

LC: How much younger is Tim then you?
TP: 20, he was born in November of ’46. So that’s what 18, 20 months?
LC: Yeah, a year and a half behind you. Did he also go down to Xavier?
TP: He was there for a couple of years and then he transferred back to Hamilton.
LC: Now when you were going to high school down there did you live down there as well or how did that work?
TP: No. Well my senior year there were 22 kids going from Hamilton to Cincinnati. It was about a 20 something mile drive. And we carpooled, the people who rode paid 40 cents a way, I remember that, one way. My junior and senior I drove my mom and dad’s car and they got the money.
LC: So you’re like running a bus service basically.
TP: Yeah, and unbeknownst to the insurance guy probably. My freshman year it was downtown Cincinnati. If I got jugged and missed my ride, jugged is what they called detention in Jesuit school. I would have to ride the Ohio Bus lines to catch the bus and ride to downtown Hamilton and then walk out to the west side, which was a good six or eight miles.
LC: So there’s a disincentive for acting up.
TP: Yeah, didn’t work all the time. Then they moved closer. They built a new school, which still exists today out in Finneytown, which is suburb of Cincinnati, which is closer to Hamilton. Much nicer school and the last three years were there.
LC: Tom, did you play sports in high school at all?
TP: I sat the bench a year in baseball one year. I played a lot of baseball when I was a kid. It was hard to manage to play sports if you were from…had to drive 20 something miles to school.
LC: Yeah because practices would be after school.
TP: Then you lose your ride home and you know…it’s one of those things. I liked baseball but I wasn’t really all that good.
LC: What about football? Did you think of that?
TP: No, I didn’t. My brother played football. He was an honorable mention All State when he was in high school.
LC: Was that right? What positions was he playing?
TP: He played, I guess, what they now call a tight end or something. Players weren’t quite as big when we were playing. My father played two sports in college. My mother and her sisters can barely chew gum and walk. (Laughter)

LC: The coordination’s not coming. The brains are coming from that side but not the coordination.

TP: Yeah, their all smart but that’s…

LC: (Laughter) Well what year did you end up graduating?

TP: High school, ’63.

LC: 1963.

TP: Just had our 40th reunion last year.

LC: Did you go?

TP: Oh yeah.

LC: How as that? Was it a good experience?

TP: Oh yeah. I started going at the 20th one. Before that high school is pretty hard I think. The social business, but I went back to the 20th and found out that everybody had grown up.

LC: So it was a little easier?

TP: Yeah, everybody was glad to see you so I kept going after that.

LC: Do you consider some of those people still your friends?

TP: Some of them, yeah. One fellow…four of us met, actually, before the reunion to have a beer; and two of them I don’t see very often. The other one I see every once in a while but we made a pact that we were going to get together this summer and go to a ball game or something, but one of them I went to grade school with.

LC: Oh really, so that’s along time.

TP: I worked at his father’s root beer stand when I was in high school.

LC: In the fall of 1963 of course the president was assassinated. Do you remember that?

TP: Yes.

LC: What do you remember about it? Where were you?
TP: I went one year of college before Vietnam at University of Dayton where my father went. I was coming out of Mrs. Stockum’s English class, English Composition, when I found out about it. I remember that very well.

LC: What was the feeling? How did you feel? What was the response?

TP: I felt terrible. I thought that’s the kind of thing that happens in Banana Republics. I liked him. My father and mother tended toward Republican, but we liked Kennedy.

LC: Would you say that other young men and women your age at the University, even politics aside, were stunned? Were they in disbelief or were they angry?

TP: I didn’t see a lot of anger. I saw mostly disbelief. That kind of thing didn’t occur to us. I mean when was the last president assassinated before that? Turn of the century roughly. It was how Teddy Roosevelt got to be president wasn’t it?

LC: Yes.

TP: I remember some people visiting the chapel and praying, but it passed.

LC: Did you watch on TV? Did you have access to TV there?

TP: I’m trying to think. This was long before the days of TVs in your room. We had no TV in the room, in the dorm. Seems to me that there was a TV in a rec room or something that maybe we…

LC: Student lounge or something like that?

TP: Yeah.

LC: Tom, you were at the University of Dayton for just a year at that point. What happened such that you didn’t go back?

TP: I really wasn’t ready to go. I didn’t do that well. I was still in good standing, but my parents were not completely happy with my performance. So they said basically, “You can pay for it yourself.” So I started going to school at night down at Xavier and I worked. I worked at the local Pepsi-Cola plant.

LC: What did you do?

TP: I was a truck checker. That meant that I counted the Pepsi products when they came in. They matched them up against what they took out and they better have the money for the difference.

LC: Oh I see, auditing, hmmm. (Laughter)
TP: Eventually I was the cashier. I took the money.
LC: How long did you stay there?
TP: November of 1964 I moved to a life insurance company and became a computer operator.
LC: Really? Tell me about the computers that you would be working with.
TP: The early IBM computers, 1401 and 7070, a lot of those old card interpreters, and card sorters.
LC: How did you get that job?
TP: Answered an add in the paper.
LC: Really, no training required?
TP: Yeah, they would train you. They didn’t pay you much so they better train you. Back in those days that’s a…it’s a good thing because otherwise History majors (Laughter) you know it’s a good place for them.
LC: I absolutely know what you are talking about. Was that something that you thought might be what you would like to do, work with computers?
TP: Yeah and within six months I was programming computers.
LC: In what language would…
TP: Then it was Autocoder, it was called. It was in a similar language for 1401. In fact when that Florida vote thing? I know all about those punch cards. I could’ve told you I know what a “Hanging Chad” is; I know what all that stuff is.
LC: I voted that ballet actually.
TP: Oh yeah. Butler County, Ohio uses it. Those same machines exactly.
LC: I lived in Palm Beach County and voted that ballet. It was a little problematic. So “Hanging Chad” and all that, was that the terminology you would use too? Were those little punch out’s called a “Chad”?
TP: Well they were called “Chads”, yeah there’s a bucket inside the cardpunches that collected them and you had to empty it. A light would come on the outside and say, “It’s time to empty the ‘Chad” and you would take it and pour it in the garbage.
LC: That’s interesting.
TP: The card readers, now I’m sure they use lasers now but back then they were brushes and the card would go between these brushes and where the brushes touched that meant there was a hole there.

LC: The signal.

TP: Yeah and it would go through two positions like that and then compare. I’m sure now they use a light, which makes a lot, but back then it was brushes. I knew all about those. I even offered my opinion by e-mail with some people. During the recount, with the first recount you know I was thinking, “Why is he recounting places where he won?” and then the light bulb went off. I said, “I know what they’re up to!” (Laughter) Yeah, when I pull my cards out when I vote I always look at them to make sure there is nothing hanging there, smack them off and turn them in.

LC: Well out of interest did your county get new machines?

TP: I just voted this spring on those same machines. So I don’t know if they are planning to have new ones by the election or not. It’s a little late you know.

LC: Yeah, this is the next election. It’s imminent. So you thought you might stay with computers? Was it the computer part of it rather then the insurance part of it then that was of interest?

TP: Yeah, the programming is what I liked.

LC: And how long did you stay there?

TP: Until I enlisted. I left there in March of ’66.

LC: Why did you leave?

TP: I was going to get drafted.

LC: So was enlistment a way of…what was you’re thinking?

TP: It was in November. I was in the middle of a semester at night, you know, I was taking nine hours, three courses. I got reclassified to 1-A and I thought, “Gee if I get drafted this semester I’ll lose all this work.” So I went down to the Marine guy and they gave me a 120 day delay. They let me enlist, which got the draft wart off my back and then I had to go in March.

LC: So you finished your term?

TP: I finished the term, got nine more hours.

LC: Do you remember going to the recruiting office?
TP: Yeah first time I went with my dad. He took me down there. I wish I could remember that guy’s name. It was at the post office in Hamilton, upstairs. He was a Gunnery Sergeant and I can’t think of his name.

LC: Was he a good guy?

TP: Yeah, you know. He wanted to make his numbers, wanted to get me in there. He knew that my dad was his ally. He wanted him to…

LC: Now did your dad influence your choice of the Marine Corps because of his own service?

TP: Yeah and plus the 120 day delay.

LC: You couldn’t probably swing that with…

TP: I couldn’t swing that with the Army. They were drafting people why do they need to give people delays for?

LC: Had you actually spoken to anyone in the Army or you were just breathing this, what was in the air you know that…

TP: I knew what was going on. I called the National Guard and that kind of stuff. They got waiting lists a mile long. It’s either: get married or you’re on your way. I know some people that got married but I was too young for that I guess.

LC: Were you anxious about entering the Marine Corps?

TP: Yeah, a little. I was a little worried about that boot camp because I had really been sitting around for a couple of years, desk job.

LC: So the PT (Physical Training) part was a little bit of a worry?

TP: Yeah.

LC: How did you actually do with that, just wondering?

TP: Well they gave you a test when you got there to see if you were good enough to go to boot camp and if you weren’t they put you in this physical conditioning place until you were good enough. I passed, not by a lot but by more then a nose. By the time nine weeks were up I had way more then doubled my score. I did ok. It was very difficult for me and there were guys who were just out of high school there who were three years younger and had been doing something. It was very difficult. It wasn’t until probably six weeks in; I did really well at the rifle range, which gave me a boost in the eyes of the Drill Instructor. The bad thing to do is let them find out your name or do anything to
distinguish yourself either good or bad. I finished first on the test on the written test we
took, so anytime I made a mistake “If you’re so smart how come you can’t march?”

LC: Tom, where was boot camp?
TP: San Diego.
LC: At Pendleton?
TP: No, it’s the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. It’s right next to the
Navy boot camp and right next to the San Diego Airport.
LC: And you were there nine weeks, is that about right?
TP: Yeah, that’s about right.
LC: When did you actually graduate from boot camp, do you remember what
month it was?
TP: March, April, May, must have been June.
LC: Ok. Had any of the DI’s (Drill Instructor) that you came across had
experience in Vietnam do you know?
TP: Yes.
LC: Did they talk about it at all?
TP: Yes.
LC: What did you learn from them about it?
TP: In the drill? That we had to pay attention and do our stuff and there was a
reason for these obstacles and the obstacle course and if you don’t go over that…I can
remember one guy saying, “They got these things, you know you got to do this because
you’re going to run into that type of stuff over in the jungle.” All in all they were pretty
good although I think there’s a streak of nastiness in them sometimes. They can be pretty
inventive when it came to punishment and usually it’s group punishment, the whole
bunch.
LC: Do you remember any incidence that you could tell us about?
TP: I remember at the rifle range. Back then you went for two weeks to rifle
range, and I think now they go longer than that. We weren’t marching right and he just
said, “Stop!” not halt. So we stopped. He said, “Ok, who’s from Oklahoma or Texas?”
He got a couple of guys from Texas and Oklahoma. He said, “All right you guys are
cowboys.” He had the rest of us walk with our heads down and moo while these guys ran
around the platoon like they had ropes, hoping and hollering, like we were cattle, not, couldn’t do any better than that. That wasn’t particularly painful. They did stuff that was really hard sometimes too. I remember when I graduated my hand was infected from doing squat thrust’s on the concrete, you know. I had broken blisters open. I spent the night before; the Drill Instructor was, you know, if guys flunked it’s not good for them.

LC: At all, yeah.

TP: Night before one of the Drill Instructors, this is the night before our final test, had me up with my hand in warm Epson salts. He was taking care of my hand so I could do the pull ups. The rest of it I could tough out, but the pull-ups he was worried about.

LC: He wanted to get you through that.

TP: And I got through fair and square.

LC: From there did you go to advance training?

TP: Yeah we went; well we went to Camp Pendleton to wait for a slot in the infantry training, which every Marine took back then. I’m sure they do it now. So we spent two weeks on mess duty in a Mess Hall, working in a Mess Hall. I was, I remember, I spent those two weeks working in the “Spud Locker” as they call it, the potato peeling apparatus.

LC: So this actually happened. This isn’t just a tale.

TP: No, I actually did this because often you had to wait until a class started, so you had to do something. So the whole bunch of us were in there. I got these big tubs full of potatoes and water and our job was to peel them and put them into these other tubs of water and get the eyes out. Fortunately they had a machine, which was a rotating drum with like sand paper on the inside. Water would come through this thing and you would throw the potatoes in there.

LC: Scrub them.

TP: Let them scrub the skins off and then you shut it off, open the door and out they would plop into your bin. Well when they popped out you had to get the eyes out. Well I soon discovered that if you left them in there a little longer you got smaller potatoes but you didn’t have any eyes. (Laughter) This was wasting government money, hand over fist. Eventually we got caught doing that. They told us to knock that off. We were getting these marble sized potatoes.
LC: Were there any consequences for you experimenting with…
TP No, they just yelled at us. We were out of boot camp at that point. It was some
guy; it wasn’t some Corporal or Sergeant. It wasn’t the big boss. He’s not back there
fooling with the “Spud Locker” guys.
LC: (Laughter) Did you eventually get assigned to an infantry training position?
TP Yes. We had two weeks, it seems to me, of infantry training.
LC: Was that at Pendleton?
TP: Yes. At a place called Santa Margarita, which is one of the camps there. I
think that is where it was. We did our thing there. That’s where I got a visit from a
college friend of my father’s who was a Colonel.
LC: Oh no kidding.
TP: This was really a…in fact he was the Commanding Officer of the 26th Marine
Regiment. They were at Camp Pendleton right then. His name was Padley, I remember
that. John Padley or Jack Padley, my dad called him. I didn’t know this was going to
happen. This staff car pulls up with the Colonel and the Regimental Sergeant Major and
they asked the troop leaders that they wanted to see me. So this was in the morning
before we headed out and they sat down and talked to me and they brought them
doughnuts and coffee, which they gave to me, which was really nice because I hadn’t had
a doughnut in a long time. They talked to me and told me my dad had written him and
said, “Go check and see how my son is doing.” He asked me if I wanted to be in the 26th
Marine Regiment. I said, “I’m going to let fate take its course. If I show up there, fine. If
I don’t, you know.”
LC: Why did you give that answer?
TP: I was afraid to pick. You know if you pick it, it’s sort of your fault if you get
your ass shot. I figured wherever I’m supposed to be I’ll end up there. It was sort of
a…because at that point I had the right MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). My MOS
was 1800 at that point, which was a general track vehicle thing. I could’ve gone to Am
Tracs, which would’ve fit the 26th Marines, or tanks. I ended up then going to Tank
School at Camp Pendleton after Infantry School.
LC: How long did Tank School last?
TP Oh gee.
LC: Any idea?

TP: Several weeks it seemed. It was at a place called Delmar in Camp Pendleton. It was on the beach. We did get a tank stuck out there. They had these big things they call tank retrievers that come yank them out.

LC: If they get in too deep, if the tracks get buried?

TP: Yes. We drove them around and we went into other parts of Camp Pendleton and shot the guns. Had classroom stuff on how it all worked.

LC: During this advanced training were you given to understand that you would be going to Vietnam?

TP: They never said that. The general feeling was, you’re all going eventually. They never said, “You’re going after this class.” You’re all going eventually.

LC: Ok. Was there chatter amongst the guys in your training units about Vietnam and what it must be like or apprehension or not?

TP: I had, I don’t remember much about that. I remember we had more immediate concerns. You know getting out to the beach, passing the tests in the class, or field day in the barracks, you know cleaning the barracks. I remember about that time the, one of the things that stuck in my mind was church on Sunday. They always sang the Sailor’s Hymn at the end. I’ve always liked that hymn. It seemed like the next time I heard it, or one of the next times, I was working down at Cincinnati. This was when the Marines were blown up over in Beirut, Lebanon.

LC: Like about 1982, something like that.

TP: One of the churches down there on their chimes was playing the Sailor’s Hymn that day. It just took me back to then.

LC: I was wondering if you went to church quite regularly during this training.

TP In boot camp we sure did because you could get away from those Drill Sergeants for a while.

LC: Yeah.

TP: I grew up going to church every weekend. I don’t go now. It was really after Vietnam I didn’t go much anymore. I probably only went a couple of times. Over there they had a Chaplain come and do Mass off the back of a jeep. I remember that.
LC: When did you get your posting for your next placement after advance, after Tank School?
TP: At the end of Tank School they gave you orders. My orders were to Camp Lejeune, Second Tank Battalion.
LC: Do you remember going out east for that?
TP: Yeah I went home on the way, then went to Camp Lejeune.
LC: What did your dad think about you showing up as a Marine at this point?
TP: I’m not sure. I think they were proud of me. They probably figured, “Boy, how in the heck did you make it?” I was, you know, boot camp for me was just wrenching I mean you know you talk about a change of life. I was pretty much a do as I please. Boot camp was very, very hard, even harder mentally then physically.
LC: The adjustment to all the discipline and up in your face…
TP: The adjustment to all the discipline and being treated exactly like everybody else. I think I…I don’t know how that sounds but I thought that I was above average.
(Laughter)
LC: That’s fair.
TP: And I was average there.
LC: Right, everyone was average. That’s all there was, was average. What did you find on your arrival at Camp Lejeune? What was the camp like and where were you placed and what did you do?
TP: I don’t remember the exact location. The Second Tank Battalion had a place. When we first got there it was on a weekend I think, but the 1st Sergeant took a look at us and said, “Boy what a bunch of candidates for a hair cut.” I had been home for like…and they had the barbers ready. We went over the barbershop and I can remember it was a barbershop where they would cut your hair the way you wanted, I mean not a boot camp barbershop. I remember the guy saying, “Well how short do you want it?” I said, “See that guy? If he sends me back in here you’re in trouble! You cut it as short as he wants it.” So I got my hair cut and then the next day we got checked in and we were in a barracks where you had bunks and lockers. An old brick building. I think we were up on the second floor. There was a Captain in charge of our…we were in a …not many people know this but at that time all the Armed Forces of the Army had were what they call
medium tanks, was the biggest thing we had, which was an M-60. We had M-48’s for
most of the Second Tank Battalion, but C Company had M10-, want to say 104 but I’m
not positive. It was a heavy tank. It was a 62-ton thing with a 120-millimeter gun,
obsolete you know just like the M-48 was. The Army had M-60’s already; you know the
mechanical computer, ballistic computer for firing solutions and all that. That company
rotated a platoon of tanks down to Guantanamo every three months to guard the heavy
tanks. Anyways I was in those heavy tanks. They had an extra man on the crew, they had
five, had two loaders because you had a two-piece round. You had to put the projectile in
and then put the brass with the powder in it. So you had two loaders, it was a big tank. I
never saw them after that, I think they must of disappeared in the dust bin.

LC: What was the number again do you think?
TP: It might have been M-104 but I’m not positive.
LC: Ok, we can look it up. Did you ever get rotated down to Guantanamo Bay?
TP: I was supposed to go the next month but I got orders to Vietnam instead.
LC: When did those come to you, those orders?
TP: Must have been late November of ’66. Maybe early December.
LC: How long did you have to report? Did you get a break in there?
TP: Well I had a little leave left, which was a little…I had an argument about this
too. I was in for two years so I get 60 days leave, right? They’d only give you leave
you’d accrued so I was going to go off to Vietnam and only get to go home for about 10
days because that’s all I had left accrued at that point. Even though when I came back I
was going to get out and I wouldn’t get it.

LC: You couldn’t spend it. Sort of like “Catch 22” kind of thing.
TP: So I went home before Christmas and left for California before Christmas too,
what they call Staging Battalion.

LC: Where was that? Was that down at Pendleton as well?
TP: Yeah, Camp Pendleton.
LC: How long were you there?
TP: I’m not sure, a couple of week’s maybe. We did a lot of the stuff we did in
infantry training; we did in the Staging Battalion. We fired everything conceivable, stuff
from World War II even, you know Browning Automatic…because I think the South
Vietnamese had them, Browning Automatic Rifles and M-1 Carbines and those silly
grease guns, those 45 caliber sub machine guns, M-3’s I think, M-3A1 or something.

LC: You were going through the whole arsenal.

TP: We fired M-1’s, we even fired. We were carrying M-14’s at that point still.

LC: Later on I’m sure you had the M-16 at some stage.

TP: Summer of ’67, when I was in Vietnam.

LC: Just to step out of the chronological patter for a second Tom, thinking about
the M-14 and the M-16 can you compare the two and which one did you prefer?

TP: I qualified with the M-14’s as an expert. So I was really…

LC: Happy with that one.

TP I was really comfortable with it. When they took them away we were in
Vietnam and we were given M-16’s. We only fired them for familiarization. We didn’t
really have a rifle range or anything like that. They were lighter, you could carry more
ammo but for an artillery guy that wasn’t all that important. We didn’t have any of the
jamming problems because we weren’t out in the mud. I just figured, by that time I was
rolling with the punches. (Laughter) “Take my rifle, all right, give me another one.”

LC: So you didn’t keep back your M-14. You went ahead and changed it in.

TP: Oh they had to take them. They took them, you didn’t get any choice. The
funny part was the staff, the Sergeants, trying to figure out how we were going to do
inspection arms with an M-16. That was amusing. I don’t know what we did to tell you
the truth.

LC: Well Tom you had that few days off before you had to report to Camp
Pendleton again and I think I heard you say that you went home and at this point of
course your parents know that you have orders for Vietnam.

TP: Yeah I called them from Camp Lejeune. That was a hard phone call.

LC: I was going to ask about their reaction.

TP: Well my mother was, both of them were upset but it was like a duty to them.

You had to go, that was it. My mother told me, and my dad never told me this, my dad
went to Mass everyday I was gone in Vietnam.

LC: No kidding.

TP: I didn’t know that.
LC: Did she go as well?
TP: I don’t think so, not every day. I’m sure she didn’t. She had to get up early and go to school. My dad really didn’t have to be at work till 9.
LC: Well I’m sure he was doing it for a purpose other then killing time, he was obviously thinking about you.
TP: Yes.
LC: Because of his own service although he wasn’t posted overseas, had some sense.
TP: When you think about how people worry today. I know we have friends who have a son who’s over in Baghdad who are worried sick. When I think back 15 or 20 people were getting killed everyday. My mother and father had to wonder everyday when they heard that.
LC: And there was no e-mail. There was no video links and all the rest.
TP: Oh yeah. They can talk to him on the phone, you know.
LC: Yes. It’s hard from this time to think back on how difficult communications were at that point and maybe it’s something we can talk about when we talk about being in country. Go ahead Tom, were you thinking of something?
TP: No, go ahead.
LC: Your departure from Pendleton to Vietnam how was that arranged? Did you leave directly from there?
TP I think we left from El Toro. It was a charter, I think Continental Airlines. We went to Hawaii, changed planes and I’m trying to think. Then we flew to Okinawa, I guess.
LC: Would this have been after the first of the year?
LC: Tom, you said it was a charter. Do you remember the mood on that plane?
TP: No, I don’t. I don’t think anybody…I don’t remember anything. I remember my mood leaving Cincinnati when I went to California. I remember getting on that plane. My mother couldn’t go to the airport. She just couldn’t do it. My father and brother went. I was all right till I was on the plane, I started thinking that I may have seen them for the
last time or they may have seen me for the last time is probably a better way to look at it.
That was a sad moment. I was really, really upset about that.

LC: Did you have concerns, Tom, about your brother? He was just 18 months
younger. What was he doing in terms of dealing with it?
TP: He was in college at that point. We could get to him if you want to
afterwards. It’s out of order.

LC: That’s ok. Go ahead and tell me now while we’re thinking about.

TP: He got drafted after I got back. My mother said, “I just can’t do this again.”
She wrote our Congressmen and said, “You got to do something about this. I’ve already
sent one over there. I’m done with this.” I can’t remember who the Congressman was
then. It’s John Boehner’s district now but that was a long time ago, because he’s my age.
It might have been Tom Kindness but I’m not sure. Anyway he wrote back and said,
“Really, there is not anything I can do about this.” My brother ended up handing out
basketballs at Fort Leonard Wood and playing on the fourth Army softball team, fast
pitch softball. Then he was transferred to some really tough duty, he was a lifeguard at
the Dependent Swimming Pool at Sandia Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

LC: Any idea how he managed to get those placements or just fate?

TP: I don’t know. I’ve always suspected that the Congressmen had to say that he
couldn’t do anything but that he called in an IOU someplace. That’s what I suspect.
That’s perfectly ok with me. I can’t imagine having to worry about that again. Yeah, we
flew from Okinawa on a C-130 from Kadena I think is the name of the air base. We
landed at Da Nang and it was night. I remember when they lowered the gizmo at the
back, technical term.

LC: That’s ok.

TP: Seeing the lumination flares and the guy on the ground, the ground crew guy
was saying, “Ok, get your stuff, get out of here fast. Run over here.” I never knew
whether he was just messing with us or whether there was something going on. I don’t
know. They put us in a transiting area and finally said, “You’re going up to the 12th
Marines at Dong Ha.” I said, “12th Marines, what’s that?” We didn’t know for sure. “It’s
artillery.” “All right. Artillery, but we’re tank guys.” There was about seven or eight of
us from Second Tanks. So we went up to Dong Ha and you call from the airport. “Come
and get us.” So they come and get us and we go over to the thing and check in and they
don’t know what the hell we’re doing there because we’re tank crew. I remember sitting
in a tent with a guy from the 12th Marines having a Crown beer. I think it was Crown. It
was Korean. It was Korean beer. I remember reading on the side of the can “Best Beer in
Korea.” I was wondering what exactly does that mean.

LC: What other beers are there in Korea? (Laughter)
TP: Yeah, compared to what? So they said, “Well, we’re going to assign you.”
They didn’t want us. They really didn’t want us and they made calls trying to get us back.
“Ok, we’re going to send you down to the First 8-inch Howitzer Battery back down to Da
Nang,” which we just left. So they sent us back down there, we reported back out there.
You know we said, “Where are the tanks. I guess there are no tanks.” They didn’t have
track vehicles. It was a self-propelled gun, you know 8-inch Howitzer were. They were
on track. You’ve seen an M110. We didn’t have M110’s at that point. They were the
previous generation, M-55 maybe, not sure. I remember they picked me out to go in a fire
direction for a while because I was smart enough to do it, to learn it. So I worked in the
fire direction bunker, you know where they take the calls from the guys asking for fire
admissions.

LC: Now in the FDC (Fire Direction Center), what were actually doing?
TP: This was before computers. So they had these plotting boards, two of them
and they had these basically they would say we’re here-grid squares and all of that. You
would put a pin in it and (makes the sound) and get like a ruler, it’s a big metal thing with
range on it and you would say, “Ok that’s azimuth so and so range.” The guy next to you
is doing the same thing. So you come up with the same numbers. Then they had a slide
rule looking thing that helped them calculate elevation and what charge they were going
to use and how much powder.

LC: So you were on the plotting table?
TP: Plotting table.
LC: And there was someone else who did that right next to you, was doing the
same problem.
TP: Right. Yeah. And over here was a guy in a radio taking the fire mission.

There was usually the watch officer, a Lieutenant. We had to do, every fire admission had
to be cleared through the Air Force and the, this was when we were down in Da Nang, and the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). That takes time. Sometimes that step was skipped. We had a Lieutenant who was from all places, Berkley. (Laughter)

LC: No kidding.

TP: Yeah, he was a great guy. He would just say, “Shoot it. To hell with checking for that.”

LC: Really?

TP: Yes.

LC: What was his name, do you remember?


LC: Ok. He was Lieutenant?

TP: Yes. First Lieutenant and later a Captain I think while I was there.

LC: His background besides or in addition to being from Berkley do you know anything about it?

TP: No, I don’t know anything about him except that he was a graduate of UC Berkley.

LC: Wow.

TP: He was a character. He was a good guy. Sometimes the guys on the other end of the radio were insistent, that they needed it right now. Sometimes they didn’t know where the hell they were too, which you know how big an 8-inch Howitzer round is, it weighs 200 pounds, 204 pounds. We always knew time of flight from the calculations and we would always tell when the radio would splash when it was suppose to hit [say splash on the radio]. Guys would be so far away from where they thought they were. They wouldn’t hear it go off. (Laughter).

LC: You’re kidding. That’s not the help they needed but they couldn’t give you locations accurately.

TP: Right. They didn’t know where they were.

LC: Tom, were you in a situation at some point where you had guys in a firefight calling in?

TP: Yes, that happened. I wasn’t on a radio.
LC: But you were responding in that kind of real time to help with the crisis basically.

TP: The only time I ever really remember being on the radio is when they called in to register places. You know sometimes they would see a likely spot like a cross roads or they would have you shoot out there. You would calculate it and you would write that all down and it’s given a name and you tell them the name so if they ever want to fire in that cross roads they don’t have to go through the grid square and observe with target azimuth and all that stuff. They can just tell you, “Here it is. It’s this. Look this up. This is the guy.”

LC: What kind of names?

TP: I think they gave them numbers. I can’t remember what they…

LC: So you didn’t get to be creative with that?

TP: No.

LC: Oh ok. I just wondered if you got to assign names to it.

TP: No, in fact he just took the next sequential, it might have had a letter in front of it but you just took the next sequential one.

LC: Ok. Now did you stay with the 12th Marines most of the time?

TP: The First 8-inch Howitzer Battery?

LC: Yes.

TP: That’s where I ended up. Yes I stayed there the whole time.

LC: You stayed with that unit but your placement relocated.

TP: We moved in the spring of ’67 we moved up north.

LC: By up north you mean?

TP: To an area, eventually, right outside of Dong Ha and Highway 9. We started out in Dong Ha just till we got everybody there and got our act together.

LC: So you were in that location near the river and along Highway 9 for…

TP: Till I left.

LC: The rest of your tour?

TP: Till January of ’68. Right before the Tet Offensive.

LC: Just to complete this, at that point you moved?
TP: Back in Dong Ha Combat Base. They knew something was up. If we would have been out there by ourselves it would have been bad.

LC: But that was in, would you say the middle of January when you moved?

TP: Early January.

LC: Early January.

TP: Yeah. Dong Ha was the first time I was ever under fire, when we first got up to Dong Ha.

LC: Can you tell me about that incident?

TP: Yes. We were there early before the rest of them. Some of the drivers…there was a rocket attack and it was night. We heard them going over. It’s a skill that doesn’t require previous training, you know what that is. Another guy, a guy named Beaver, Marcus Beaver I think, Beaver, he was a truck driver. We dove under a truck because we hadn’t dug holes or anything. We just got there. About halfway through this attack, which didn’t last too long I asked Beaver, “What’s in the truck?” He says, “Ammo. It’s 8 inch Howitzer ammo.” I said, “Oh great! Well there won’t be anything to bury. We’ll save everybody the expense.”

LC: At what point did you ask him that? Was it after the shelling?

TP: It was going on still. It was towards the end.

LC: Did that coming under fire for the first time you know, I don’t want to say rattle you but make you sit up and pay attention or were you already in that place?

TP: I read something Churchill said about the exhilaration of being shot at and missed. The first time I think that’s true. You get a little bit of the exhilaration. After you start thinking about it, after that, then you don’t want anymore of that.

LC: Yeah that one time is enough. Now setting up the firebase that you were constructing, how long did that take? What was the process?

TP: It seems that there had been somebody there before because it seems to me that there was a lot of things done. The land was graded and it seems to me that there was wire. We added more, they always add more. They never have enough wire. I remember we set up the tents and we dug bunkers. We made bunkers. Mostly of our own design, each section made their own around their tent. You put up sand bags around your tent above the level of where you are sleeping and you make a bunker. We set up a, forget
what we called those. Those things where you go to the bathroom-the woodenhead, the
dfour holer with the diesel fuel gizmo’s underneath. We took turns burning those.

LC: So you got in on all the great duty then.
TP: Oh yeah I got to burn those.

LC: As one of the first guys up there. How long did it take to actually put the base
in what you would call operable condition?
TP: I couldn’t tell you. Not very long because they work you pretty hard. What
else do you got to do?

LC: When you first got up there you had this rocket attack at night. Did you
encounter other fire later on either sporadic or another…

TP: Later? Oh sure. When we were on Highway 9 there was one, well the pattern
of it…it was in the summer of ’67. I don’t think they liked being out in the rain any better
then we did because it seemed to let up during the monsoon. Anyway it’s hard to
remember going back through the years. A handful of times, maybe two handfulls, you
know I don’t know. They would fire five or six rounds, usually at that point was artillery.
I read in the Marine Corps History that it was a 130-millimeter fuel guns from the DMZ,
five or six and it’d stop. I suspect because counter fire would be on them after that.
They’d be exposed. I don’t think they had forward observers very often because they
were pretty inaccurate. One Sunday, and I think it was a Sunday, they did that but they
fired about 50 rounds. They hesitated after every six or so. We just start to relax and then
six more. I actually saw some of those hit. They were close enough and they holed our
tent with shrapnel so they were close enough. There was a new Sergeant in the supplies
section. He had just gotten there, fresh starched utilities. We dove in this; he had come
just when we were building another bunker so he and I ended up in this new bunker by
ourselves. I can remember him over in the corner; you know getting small over in the
corner and telling him, “Oh they stop after five or six.” After about 30 I said, and I’m
saying 30 after 36 years or 35 years. I don’t remember exactly. It’s probably in there
somewhere. I can remember saying, “Geez, when are they going to stop?” I started
getting scared, you know. They finally did stop. One of the guys in our section had been
headed out to, I think this was the same day, this might also not be true, but it did happen.
He headed out to a…it was late in the afternoon, I guess or dusk. He and another guy
headed out to a listening post. They were bitching because, maybe this was another day, but they were bitching because we had gotten some beer and they didn’t get their beer. Our boss who happened to be officer of the day told him, “All right go get one each for you two guys.” So there were two guys going out there. It was still daylight, what the heck? He went back up and got two Balentine Beers. When he got back down in our motor pool one of those artillery rounds hit and blew him into a ditch, into a trench. None of the shrapnel hit him. He got cut a little from hitting the ground basically. I walked down the next day and there was a five ton truck down there on the other side of the blast with holes in the tailgate, like three or four inches across, all flat tires; and he doesn’t get a scratch. He says he did not drop the beer. (Laughter) I still see him. He’s over in Indianapolis. He claims he did not drop the beer.

LC: The concussion though blew him off his feet?
TP: He said it felt like somebody hit him in the chest with a sledge hammer and he said after, a while he said he must of put the beer down because it hurt so bad. He said his chest hurt so bad that he took out his; he had a K-bar knife. He wanted the pain to be somewhere else and he started cutting on his arm. He wasn’t thinking. His brain was completely scrambled. He said, “I started cutting my arm.” He was ok, turned out fine. They sent him over to the main base to get x-rayed or something.

LC: And to chill out. Did he have a chance to have some down time there or did he come right back? Do you know?
TP: He came right back to work.
LC: No kidding.
TP: Yes.
LC: Wow.
TP: I told Richard this story. This guy over in Indianapolis, this same guy was a diver in high school and actually won the Junior Olympics twice. He used to tell us, “You know all those guys that Greg Louganis beat? I beat them too.” He was supposed to go…his dad was a retired Colonel, Marine Corps. His brothers, he had twin brother, and they ended up both being Colonels in the Air Force. He got mad at his dad. He didn’t want to dive anymore. He had a scholarship to go into Indiana or they were talking about it. And he didn’t want to do it anymore. He said he had no social life. He had nothing. It
was dive school, dive school, and that was it. They got into a big fight and he joined the
Marine Corps.

LC: Did he stay in do you know?

TP: No. He served four years. He is a Marion County Indiana Deputy Sheriff. He
was a good guy. Of course his dad was a Colonel, his two brothers are Colonels. He was
a Sergeant.

LC: It would be great if we could interview him too and include him in this
project.

TP: Skyler Atkins is his name. He’s double dipping I think. He retired once from
the Sheriff’s department-his back. He says, “Ironically, You know what I’m doing now?
I’m working in supply.”

LC: It sounds like that’s a good place for him. I mean after all he didn’t drop the
beer. He’s a safe fair of hands. It’s probably a good place for him.

TP: He’s a funny one. He still runs every day, four or five miles, but he smokes
like a chimney. He’s been married a long time. He’s got a couple of sons. Most of our
guys turned out pretty good. We got one that came to the last reunion as a recovering
alcoholic. The other one recovered as a drug addict, recovered.

LC: Have either those guys said anything to you that those problems were related
to Vietnam experience?

TP: They have never said that to me. I don’t know. I know when they came back
they didn’t do well, that’s all. Wonder if that’s the cause or if they had just gotten started
earlier. Who knows?

LC: Tom, let’s take a break for a minute.

LC: Tom, let’s continue. I wanted to ask about your time, particularly at Dong
Hoa. What were your living conditions like? Where did you sleep?

TP: Once we got set up we had GP (General Purpose) medium tents. There were,
I think there were maybe six, eight of us in there with cots, which we figured out how to,
we would get a poncho liner to make them a little softer and we could get blankets and
that’s what we slept on. We would get pallets, wooden pallets from shipping and put a
floor in. Otherwise, the rats drove you crazy because they find you no matter where you
are, the rats.
LC: Did you see rats? Did they get close to you?

TP: Well, we use to trap them sometimes.

LC: How did you do that?

TP: We had these cages that you could bait. This sounds terrible. This goes to show you what amusement among guys over there amounts too. We did this for a little while and then electrocute the rats with radio batteries, sticking wires in and let them bite. That was it, zap; the rats went away.

LC: How long did they last after they had bitten on the wire?

TP: Sometimes they would just be stunned and sometimes not.

LC: Just (makes a sound).

TP: Yeah. We hooked a few up in series I guess. We didn’t do that very long because you had to use radio batteries and they didn’t like that.

LC: They being the…?

TP: Comm guys. We did that for a while, but mostly you would hear them scurrying around underneath those pallets. They didn’t come up usually. We lost interest in the rats after a while.

LC: Were there other animals or insects that impinged on your privacy?

TP: The centipede, those big ugly centipedes they had over there.

LC: Yeah like what three or four inches long?

TP: Yeah like that (shows size by hands), this thick.

LC: Were they biting or stinging, those guys?

TP: I was never bitten or stung by them. They say that they can hurt you, but I don’t know to tell you the truth. I think they had scorpions over there too, if I remember right. We did arrange a match between the centipede and the scorpion I think, in a shoebox.

LC: Who won?

TP: The scorpion.

LC: Yeah I thought maybe. What else did you guys do for amusement when things got boring, when the rats were no longer interesting, and you had conquered the scorpion thing?
TP: I don’t know. We read. I read a lot. One of the guys in the tent use to get recordings from his wife and we would listen to those. She probably doesn’t know that.

LC: Were they general interest recordings, like this is what we are doing today and last week I had over the in-laws, or something more flavorful?

TP: Sometimes they were more private. We were desperate for something to do.

LC: What were you reading? How did you get books?

TP: I don’t know how I got books. People sent them to me, or they got passed around. We also would get packages from home with food. I use to get, my mother use to send me the Chef Boyardee cans of ravioli and spaghetti. I’ve never eaten one since. I use to eat them cold. I can’t eat them now. They are awful. We use to get those things with the summer sausage and the cheese in those boxes and we would share those. Sometimes somebody would send us some alcohol.

LC: And it could get through?

TP: Yeah sometimes. I don’t know how many were intercepted. I sent them some after I got home and sent them back some. We would do that. We would talk, tell stories about home and bitch about the lifers. That’s common. It wasn’t popular in our group, but I know there was some marijuana smoked down the row of tents because I could hear people giggling in there.

LC: Could you smell it too?

TP: Yeah, sometimes.

LC: Was it a problem or was it just a recreational thing that guys were doing?

TP: It was just recreationally. I was always scared to get involved in anything. That was still a felony then. It was also, you know, and I wanted to get out and if you spent time in the brig that was bad time. You had to make that up.

LC: Was that really present in your mind in terms of governing your own behavior?

TP: Yeah. In no way, I don’t want to miss by one day. I want out of this place.

LC: Were you one of the guys that was keeping track of your days?

TP: Oh yeah, they’re marked. Everyday is marked on the pages.
LC: That’s a reference to the diary that you are depositing with us, which will be available in the Vietnam Archive. Were the other guys in the unit, would you say, or in the tent friends? Did you guy’s kind of gel as a group?

TP: Yeah I would say we were friends. There was a couple of guys who were closer than the rest. They were buddies. Some of them were there before I got there and then new guys would come after we had already been there. One of the guys I was friends with, who came later as a psychologist in the Vet Center in Pittsburg. He can’t afford to come out; he’s got two kids in college.

LC: Come out to the reunion that you are attending?

TP: Yes, right.

LC: Did that one-year rotation policy where guys were coming in and leaving at different time’s kind of interrupt the stability?

TP: Our rotation was 13 months. I was actually 13 months shore to shore. So really I was about 12 and 20. They started, while I was there they started cutting it back to 12, gradually, the Marines did. I think eventually they were 12 just like the Army. I never gave much thought to what that did to the whole picture. It was staggered enough so that things went on; life went on.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the managing the environment, if you want. We were talking when we were upstairs about the monsoon season and how difficult that was. So you said that you guys after a while just stopped trying to stay dry.

TP: Right, even inside the tent. The tent leaked.

LC: They all leak. I think that’s a demic.

TP: We would have to move so at least it wouldn’t drip on us while we were sleeping. A lot of boards were laid down outside on the paths that you would like to go.

LC: I’m clear, yes.

TP: We could stay out of the mud to some extent that way. It got muddy and ugly and wet. We just wouldn’t change clothes for days.

LC: Did you get sick Tom? Did guys get sick; I mean respiratory things or problems with your feet or that kind of stuff from being wet?

TP: I don’t ever remember being sick over there. Well yes I do. The first couple of days I was there, the water. You get what they call here the Montezuma’s Revenge
drink. My buddy over in Indianapolis still has a toenail fungus that he picked up over
there. He’s never gotten rid of it.

LC: Is that right?

TP: Yes. Some guys got what they call, if you’re driving, they would get
something called “Jeep Seat.” They’d get a red rear end.

LC: It was called “Jeep Seat?”

TP: Yes. From sitting and sweating. The wet didn’t seem to make people sicker
than normal. They were still giving us those Gamma Globulin shots, we called those the
Halloween shots, Gamma Globulin. They stopped giving us those eventually. They use to
give them to us when they gave us our pay, or whatever pay we got.

LC: So they give you the pay and also give you a shot.

TP: We got paid in the Corpsman’s tent, right. So they got everybody.

LC: They made sure. This was one party that you had to come to right, to get your
pay.

TP: They stopped doing that in ’67. I’m not sure why. Maybe they found out it
was useless. Those were a painful shot though. They gave them by weight I think. If you
were bigger, you got more. They hurt. I don’t remember being…they vaccinated us
against everything, bubonic plague, diphtheria; you know all kinds.

LC: Had that all happened before you went out to Southeast Asia?

TP: Yes, I got those in the states.

LC: Any follow-up shots of those varieties once you were in country, boosters?

TP: The pay thing, they checked your shot card when you went in there.

LC: Oh ok, so if you were due up they would…

TP: Yeah, and you got your Gamma Globulin and you got your other stuff too.

LC: Was it the Medic’s who were doing this?

TP: Yes, the Corpsman.

LC: The Corpsman. (object falls) Was their a doctor that was assigned to the, or

who would visit the FBC at all?

TP: No.

LC: Did you ever see a doctor?

TP: While I was in Vietnam?
LC: Yes.
TP: No.
LC: Never?
TP: No.
LC: What about a dentist?
TP: No.
LC: You know you told me about one incident, it was during the monsoon season where you had to go out and you were suppose to be observing traffic on the river. Can you tell a little bit about that?
TP: That was up in the guard, or what we called the guard tower. Had them all around Dong Ha so you could spot something, you can triangulate and hit it. You had a BC scope, and a radio and a 50-caliber machine gun up there.
LC: And you were by yourself?
TP: Yes, you are by yourself at night. Some guy over at the 12th Marines wanted me to count the boats coming down that river across the road from us at night. It’s pouring down rain and I couldn’t see anything. I’m underneath a poncho trying to just not be driven nuts by this pouring down rain. It’s coming sideways. The roof on this thing doesn’t help; it’s not that big around. It’s coming in spots. There is no way you can escape. It was just a fool’s errand.
LC: It was hopeless.
TP: Yes.
LC: Was there typically a lot of traffic on the river?
TP: I never saw that much. During the day you might see a boat or two. I always supposed that somebody somewhere was checking those out, but I don’t know, maybe they weren’t. It wasn’t that big of a river. There wasn’t much you could take down that river, that little stream.
LC: About how far across was it where you were, any estimate?
TP: I couldn’t tell you, 20 or 30 yards maybe, I don’t know. Well not really but big and it was on the other side of Highway 9 from us.
LC: And you mentioned that there were other bases there. The Army had a base up there.
TP: Yes right next to us was an Army artillery battery and I think it was 105’s and then to the right was I think Mike Battery 12th Marines. I think they were 105’s. We shared the same compound with wires separating us because they came at different times. We were all hooked together there. The road went through; a road went through the whole thing.

LC: Now for somebody who wasn’t clear, how is a Mike Battery different from what you were affiliated with?

TP: Well I think they were 105’s. They’re more of a company, like a company in the infantry, an artillery battery in the Marine Corps is. But the 8-inch Howitzer Batteries were different. They were a little bigger manpower wise. They had a battalion level supply and they were part of Force Troops, like with Force Recon and the Tank Battalions, but we were attached operationally to the 12th Marines. That happened before I got there because the 1st 8-inch Howitzer Battery would have been attached to the 11th Marines and the 3rd to the 12th. We change divisions because something got, ended up in the 3rd Marine Division because something got positionally it was just made more sense. It was one of those things.

LC: Administratively, or in terms of supply did it made any difference?

TP: We went to 12th Marines for our supply. We stocked parts because we were battalion level supply. Anything we didn’t have we went up a notch to the 12th Marines to get.

LC: Now by stocking parts, how broadly should one understand that in other words, did you have them on hand?

TP: Yes, we had some more of the commonly used items for the M110, 8 inch Howitzer’s we would have stocked. To give you an idea about how much I think maybe it was a GP medium tent and a half, maybe of stuff. 12th Marines was only up at Dong Hoa’s so you know we could get stuff. We didn’t have everything we were suppose to have, because I can remember we were going to have an inspection and the Lieutenant in charge of supply had me typing up requisitions because everything you didn’t have you had to have a requisition on file.

LC: To show that you were actively getting it.
TP: I was trying to get this and they haven’t sent it. Every month they did, I think it was every month, they did the logistical summary that we had to type up and send over [to 12th Marines] (tape become inaudible) to what we had and what we didn’t have. I did those sometimes. The Lieutenant would say you know, “Powers do this. This is last months, get the figures, stick them in there.” This buddy of mine from New Jersey use to call those The Logisms. The Log Sum was what it was suppose to be.

LC: (Laughter) You called them Logism! Why was Powers chosen for this vaulted duty?

TP: I think you could trust Powers to do it right.

LC: This is interesting because you’re trained in tank; you actually worked in FDC and artillery. Then you got called on to do supply stuff.

TP: I did the message center too, in-between for a month or two.

LC: How did that work?

TP: Oh God that was awful. We had, you know what a condex box is?

LC: No.

TP: Those big metal shipping containers?

LC: Oh, ok.

TP: They cut a door in one, made a door, and they put the message center inside this thing. So we get these messages and every one of them had to be logged. I had this book and I would be sitting in this thing in the summer in Dong Ha. I got my shirt off. This is no kidding. I’m logging these things in with a pen and my sweat is blurring the ink. It’s hitting the pages.

LC: Actually, I completely believe that. What would the temperature have been in there, 115?

TP: I don’t know. I didn’t have a thermometer. It’s probably good I didn’t know. I would have to log all that stuff in and then eventually I think there was a… I think I got into a row with the 1st Sergeant about something. I was fired and sent over to supply. But that was, god that was hot.

LC: And you did this for about a month?

TP: Yeah, it seems. There was another guy who did it, a guy who was in charge. A guy, a Sergeant named Rizdon, but I just got the work. Man I was glad to get out of
there. I did know when we moved, before everybody else did because I had to get
clearance to do that.

LC: How did the clearance thing work?

TP: Well it turned out to be in tanks you had to have a secret clearance.

LC: Ok.

TP: Except that they hadn’t activated it. What had to happen was the FBI had to
talk to my neighbors.

LC: Back in the states?

TP: Yeah it happened over night practically.

LC: Did anybody ever tell you later on that they had been asked about you’re…

TP: No. The FBI could’ve just said they did as far as I know.

LC: Now by activating the clearance, what was that, just flipping some
administrative switch?

TP: Yeah, it was administrative basically said, “Ok, he’s cleared up, look these
messages.” There were other messages that I couldn’t look at.

LC: Who was handling those?

TP: Probably the officers.

LC: Oh ok. That brings up a question that is sometimes very interesting. What in
your experience was the relationship between officers and enlisted men? Was it would
you say a healthy relationship or was there hostility or did it vary by person?

TP: I’ll say it varied. We had, my boss, Lieutenant Metschan was an excellent
guy. I’ve seen him; he came to one of our reunions with his wife.

LC: How do you spell his last name?

TP: M-E-T-S-C-H-A-N. He’s out in Portland, Oregon. He’s a banker of some
kind. He’d probably be mad if I just said he was a banker. He’s at some highly exalted
international status of some kind.

LC: Well if he would like to he could fill us in on that.

TP: He stayed in the Reserves and retired as a Colonel. His name is strange
enough that he was easy to find when I was organizing reunions. There is another John
Metschan, his son.

LC: You mean using the Internet you could locate him?
TP: Yes, that’s how I organized the first couple reunions. I probably found a 100
guys over four or five years. Since the web site we get more.

LC: Were you working with the memory of their names or did you have a unit
roster or records?

TP: I had these and I had my memory and eventually we did get a couple, we
found out how to write the Marine Corps and get unit rosters from a couple of months. I
got names off of there. There are people we, there are always some people you want to
find that you just can’t find. There was a cook we had, Puerto Rican guy named Roberto
Rosado-Cuascut, I remember his name. I played chess with him sometimes. He was a
great guy. He was from the Bronx, New York. We can’t find him. We don’t know where
he is.

LC: What was he like? You said he was a great guy, nice guy?

TP: Very smart and thoughtful type of person and he cared about the food. He
actually made his own sauce. When we got steaks, sometimes we got steaks, and he made
his own specialty sauce and put on them. He made an effort to make the food taste good,
which was a great thing.

LC: So you had a Mess that was actually on the base, on the firebase?

TP: Yes, in a tent.

LC: How many people is he cooking for?

TP: Couple hundred. Well I don’t know how they handled the outlying guys.
Whether he cooked hot food there and they took it out. There was 220 people in the
battery I think.

LC: That’s a pretty tall order.

TP: There were a couple of guys. It wasn’t just him alone. He wasn’t in charge.

There was actually a Staff Sergeant in charge.

LC: Do you know how to spell his last name?

TP: Yes.

LC: How is that?

TP: R-O-S-A-D-O - C-U-A-S-C-U-T. The Marine Corps had him listed with no
dash in between but I know Cuascut was his mother’s name.

LC: Just can’t locate him. (Phone rings) We’ll take a break for a second.
LC: Tom are there other guys that you remember that you haven’t been able to
contact?

TP: There was a guy in our section named John Mitchell who’s from Wichita. We
actually found him once and he got divorced and moved. There is nobody at that number
or address anymore. He’s lost.

LC: And that name is too common.

TP: Yeah, they’re a kazillion of them. He was a printer I know that. He’s probably
in a printer’s union someplace and he was part Native American. We had several. In fact
the recently retired Chairman of the Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Indian Nation was
in our unit.

LC: What’s his name?


LC: What was his job?

TP: I think he was on the guns and I don’t really remember him specifically
because we were spread out. There was 220. I know he was there and his cousin was
there too. A guy named Cyrus Dick, who was also Yakama. We had a Lakota Sioux
Corpsman whose name was Louie Worldwindsoldier.

LC: Worldwindsoldier?

TP: Yes. That’s a good Lakota name.

LC: Yes it is. What was he like?

TP: I don’t remember him too much. I remember the name you know. You just
don’t run across it, but we found him. The funny thing about Anthony, or Tony or as he
was known then, is my brother and his wife actually went out to that reservation to do
church work on the reservation. I said, “Stop in and see…” He stopped in and saw…

LC: He saw him?

TP: Yes. He said he remembered my name but he couldn’t place my face.

LC: Have you seen him at one of the reunions?

TP: No. I’m kind of hoping he makes it down to this one.

LC: There were other Native Americans that you remember?

TP: Those three are the three that I remember and Mitchell. I can’t remember
anymore.
LC: What about African Americans, were there…

TP: Yeah, we had a great guy in our section named Riggans, Leon Riggans. He was from Pittsburgh. The whole time he was over there with us he was talking about how he was going to buy himself a new Mustang when he got home. He got home and got transferred to Camp Lejeune and was trying home to Pittsburgh on a weekend and fell asleep at the wheel and killed himself.

LC: Oh no.

TP: He would have been something too. He was a good kid. Back then, his dad was a printer at the Pittsburgh Press. Those jobs, this has all changed now, but they were inherited.

LC: Right this was like a guild almost where you passed on the trade.

TP: He would’ve gotten that job if he had wanted it. He was a really smart, bright kid. My friend in Pittsburgh who’s the psychologist was having a meeting with some Vet’s one day and he knew Leon. “One of the guys told me that he was dead”, we didn’t know. He said, “I had to stop the meeting. I just couldn’t take it.” Thirteen months in Vietnam and then run your car off the road. He visited his grave in Pittsburgh. If I ever get up to see him I will too. We had a Sergeant that came, that Sergeant that was in that bunker with me.

LC: In the pressed new utilities, yeah.

TP: He was an African American. His name was Frazier. They eventually started calling him “Smiley,” Smiley Frazier. He was a good guy. I didn’t get to know him real well because I left soon after that.

LC: While you there, did you see any tensions between African Americans and Whites or Hispanic’s and Blacks, any of that?

TP: On an individual basis there was one black guy who was really pretty hateful. I don’t know if he had a bad time or what but he was nasty. You’ve got to remember that this was before Martin Luther King was assassinated, which was in April ’68. My friend in Pittsburgh who’s toured spanned that said that things were different after that. Even with Riggans. He said that there was a little bit of a distance after that. Race relations were not a problem in our unit, 90%. In the Marine Corps, in boot camp I can remember if the Hispanic guys…we’d go into a classroom or in a situation where we are going to sit
down and listen to somebody, our Drill Instructor would look and if there were groups,
he would separate them. He’d say, “We’re all green. I don’t want any of you guys
bunching up like that.” He would move us all around.

LC: We’re all green huh?
TP: Right. (Laughter)
LC: I like that.
TP: I think he’s dead now. I was trying to find him on the Internet. That was the
head Drill Instructor. I think we lost a Drill Instructor in Vietnam although his name was
Johnson.
LC: Do you know when it might have been that he, you’re talking about KIA
(Killed in Action)?
TP: Well I got out of boot camp in ’66. So it would have been 7, 8, or 9, you
know ’67 or 8. His name was R.L. Johnson, a little black man, tough. I think we lost him.
We lost 6 or 7 guys out on my platoon in boot camp. It’s pretty heavy causality rate for
80 guys.
LC: Absolutely. Did you know much of this?
TP: While it was happening?
LC: Yes.
TP: I do one. I saw his name in the \textit{Stars and Stripes}. They had a KIA, Killed in
Action thing. I was the second oldest guy in the platoon at boot camp. This guy was the
oldest guy; he was 24 I think.
LC: What was his name, do you remember?
TP: Wucinski. He was an infantry guy. Was killed, I heard in an ambush. That’s
all I know.
LC: You don’t know where it might have been?
TP: No. He was from Milwaukee, I think. I met his fiancé after boot camp when
we, they came down to see us graduate you know. He married her and then went off and
was killed that following January. So they couldn’t of been married six months.
LC: And not together for most of that.
TP: Right, terrible.
LC: Tom, were there casualties on the firebase while you were there from mortars?

TP: Just, in our unit, most of the casualties were at Cam Lo or Gio Linh, there was a bunch at Gio Linh. One of the KIA’s we had was at Gio Linh, a guy who was on his second extension. In Khe Sanh there was some casualties. Where we were there was only the guy from Indianapolis, the two beers guy while I was there. I was very fortunate not to have to see those things happen. I had met the one guy who was killed. When I first came to the unit in Da Nang he was there in that tent where I was getting ready to go on his first extension leave. You know they gave you 30 days and then you came back and did six more months. And I met him. I think he was killed in July. I think he got back from another extension leave, I can’t remember how exactly it worked out.

LC: But you had met him?

TP: I had met him yeah, and he was killed. He didn’t die right there. It was a couple of days later. I can remember the chaplain came. We had a memorial service on the little hill right in front of the supply tent. There was a row of tents like this and it went down into a flat spot. Right here at this hill, we sat there and had a memorial service. He was 20 I think.

LC: Yeah, all of 20. These are very, very young men. Given that you were a little bit older then some of them, did they take the mickey out of you sometimes? Did they call you an old man or anything like that?

TP: Not too much. I was, in the states, I was very useful because I could buy liquor. (Laughter)

LC: That’s true. You were everybody’s friend.

TP: I was everybody’s friend and I could rent the car.

LC: Right, also true.

TP: So in California when we were out there and got our first leave I remember we rented a wreck from someplace and I had to drive. We went to Disneyland of all places. Then we stayed in the hotel. I went out to this carryout. I remember I had my t-shirt on and my dog tags were hanging down, you know. I walked in and the place was run by this old master chief from the Navy. I asked if he wanted to see I.D. He said, “You
don’t need any.” Gave me the stuff and away we went. It so happens I was legal but he
didn’t care.

LC: What other things did you see that would tell us or tell future listeners
something about the relationship between the Navy and the Marines?
TP: The Navy Corpsmen were, they were well respected. The Marines don’t have
their own medical personnel; we used the Navy. The one Corpsman that comes to our
reunion, Tim McCormick, just razzes all of us two-year guys because he says that he was
in the Marines longer then we were. (Laughter) He was a, he’s a good guy. I actually
didn’t know him over there. He was behind me in a year. I might of told you I met him,
organizing the reunions is when I met him.

LC: Oh is that right?
TP: Yes. He came to the reunion. He was a registered nurse in New Jersey and
later on in California without ever going to nursing school.

LC: How did that work?
TP: He had to sue, to take the boards.

LC: He had to sue on the basis of his having this experience; he had a bunch of
experience?
TP: Yes. He’s had all this experience in Combat Medicine and he wanted to be a
nurse and they said, “Fine, go to nursing school.” He said, “Psha, and teach or what?”

LC: And he compelled them, he compelled the boards?
TP: Took them to court, yes.

LC: And was found favorable to him?
TP: Yeah, favorably he took the boards and passed. He did the same thing; he
worked in emergency rooms. He did the same thing in California when he moved out
there. He doesn’t know where he got it but he picked up Hepatitis C.

LC: That’s a…
TP: So then he started the, he’s in the Union business. He was organizing when I
first met him, interns in California, the doctors. He organizes medical people. Now he’s
doing something, he’s into Union’s still but I don’t know exactly what he is doing.

LC: He’s still out in California?
TP: Yes.
LC: I mean that’s his base.

TP: He’s got a wife and a couple of kids out there.

LC: Tom, you had to move into Dong Ha in January of ’68 and we talked about that being before Tet, but based on what you think was probably some entail about…

TP: Yeah, I would guess. I don’t believe in those big consequences like that.

LC: Was there scuttlebutt at the time as to why you were moving?

TP: No. We moved back in Dong Ha and I think we probably asked the Supply Officer why we were moving and he didn’t tell us or if he knew. I mean because nobody likes to move. Moving, the “M” word.

LC: Yes.

TP: It’s bad; it’s bad in civilian life.

LC: That’s true. I agree with you on that. I’ve done it enough. That move was back down to Da Nang then?

TP: No, back into the Dong Ha Combat Base.

LC: Oh, into the combat base, ok.

TP: Where the 12th Marines were. We actually shared, the supply guys, shared a big metal building. On one end we and on the other end was the 12th Marine supply.

LC: How long did it take to actually accomplish the move? Was it something that was done pronto?

TP: Only a few days.

LC: Is that right?

TP: Yes. A lot of stuff gets thrown away when you move.

LC: Like…?

TP: You collect stuff like maybe a little thing with like a vanity or something that you put your shaving stuff on and throw beer and in the garbage, oversized footlocker, in the garbage.

LC: So did you just leave a pile of garbage?

TP: Set it on fire.

LC: Oh burned it, ok.

TP: Then we went up, we actually lived pretty high in that last three or four weeks. We had the metal roof, CB buildings up off the ground with the stairs going up.
LC: Like real houses almost.
TP: Well…
LC: Well getting close to it, after the tent thing.
TP: The roof didn’t leak.
LC: How many guys in a room there?
TP: I think it was eight there. There’s another funny story in that one too.
LC: Yeah.
TP: The same guy in Indianapolis, he’s sleeping in a sleeping bag you know and you’re suppose to be able to get out of those real easy you know.
LC: Yes.
TP: And this actually happened after I left because it was McPeak, the guy in Pittsburgh who actually did this because Atkins was, they get some incoming and they go to run to their bunker, which is next to their house. He can’t get out of his sleeping bag. You can rip out of them. They make them that way. He was struggling with it. McPeak grabbed his feet and just pulled him down the isle and down the steps. Thump, thump, thump and dragged him into the bunker. That was funny.
LC: Ouch.
TP: Yes.
LC: Now were you still doing fire control type stuff at this point?
TP: No.
LC: When you moved…
TP: No I was away from fire control rather early.
LC: So now you’re…
TP: Most of my tour was supply.
LC: So you’re working as basically, I guess the Navy calls a “pork chop” right?
TP: A clerk.
LC: And you’re doing the supply work?
TP: We’re keeping; you know you get close to the mechanics and the guys that take care of stuff. They come in and they say, “Hey I need this.” We look it up in these manuals and say, “Ok, that’s an SL or a blah blah blah.” They went on punch cards.
Those same punch cards. Actually, when they came back I guess they had those punch
cards with them. We didn’t have punch cards. We would write them up. I was one of the few people who could read a punch card by looking at the holes. That can be useful one time or another when they weren’t interpreted. I’d order stuff, it would come and I’d call out on the field phones out to the guns and say, “You’re mechanics. You’re so and so is here.”

LC: So you would fill out a requisition form?
TP: Right.
LC: Then somebody else somewhere would do data entry and punch it to the cards?
TP: Yeah in Okinawa.
LC: Oh ok that was happening….
TP: Well it could be, I don’t think it was at 12th Marines. It went to 12th Marines and what happened after that I’m not sure, but it ended up in Okinawa. That’s where the big stuff was, unless the 12th Marines had it.
LC: Were there any problems getting hold of specific things that you remember, there with your shortages or just wasn’t in the pipe line?
TP: No, I don’t remember us being short stuff that was really critical. I don’t remember us being short of anything.
LC: At the end of January, you yourself were very short.
TP: Yes, dangle my feet off my dime, right?
LC: Is that what they said?
TP: Yeah. (Laughter)
LC: Ok, but this at the point in which Tet began.
TP: January 31st I think.
LC: Yes. Do you have recollections of that night or the nights there after being particularly eventful?
TP: Not too much. I mean I know, I remember hearing that Highway One was cut going out to Gio Linh, and that they took 8 inch Howitzer ammo out to our guns by helicopter, those big nets. I know the gun guys said that they fired non-stop for all day long, all night long they fired.
LC: I heard they fired so long in some locations that the actual barrels got hot and had to back it down or throw water on it or something.

TP: That’s a… 8 inch Howitzers, one of the gun guys was telling me that the book says that you can put a round out every minute if you do it according to Hoyle, you know if you use the hydraulic lift to pick it up and put it in there and do all the stuff. He said they could get one out every 19 seconds. You’re hand doing whatever they needed to do.

LC: That’s incredible.

TP: That’s putting that 204 pound projecto in there and ramming it and putting powder bags behind it, putting the gizmo or whatever they called that in the breech to ignite the whole thing, slamming it shut, and shooting. That guy who told me that lost a tip of a finger in a breech.

LC: Wow, yeah.

TP: I can tell you exactly how much that’s worth but I forget what he told me.

(Laughter)

LC: Oh ok. You got a dollar figured at some point.

TP: There’s a dollar figure a month that he gets a check.

LC: (Laughter) Well ok, let’s go ahead and take a break for today Tom.

TP: All right.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Tom Powers of the US Marine Corps. Today’s date is the 4th of October 2004. I am in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech and I’m speaking with Tom by telephone. Tom, you’re in Butler County, Ohio, is that right?

Tom Powers: That’s correct.

LC: Well good morning Tom.

TP: Good morning.

LC: It’s a pleasure to continue the interview with you today. I want to just pick up where we left off the last time we spoke, which involved your discussion of I believe January 1968 when you were moving again. This time I think to Dong Ha, is that right?

TP: That’s correct.

LC: Can you tell a little bit about the circumstances of the move?

TP: Well I don’t remember a lot about it. Since the reunion I know, my reunion in June, I know that the place where we were on Highway 9 was called Dong Ha West, which I didn’t know before. It took thirty something years for me to find that out. We packed up and moved over to Dong Ha and at that point nobody, at least nobody was telling us that they were expecting an event.

LC: Nobody was giving that information to you?
TP: No. Looking back on it I expect that we were sort of hanging out there alone almost and the best place for us was inside if there was going to be trouble. So we set up with the 12th Marines in Dong Ha and we lived better there then we had lived so far because we actually got in those, we called them the “tin roof hooches.” They were the things the CB’s (Construction Battalion) built, with the screen sides and the tin roof and stairs going up the front. Eight of us, I think, were in one of those so that was as good as we had lived from a physical standpoint. I had always been in tents or less before. We built a bunker right next to it so we had a place to go in case of incoming artillery or rockets and stuff like that. We had a good sized Mess Hall. It must of fit quite a few people that we went too, another tin roof operation, which I understand after I left that that tin roof made quite a reflection in the sun and one day they used it for a target.

LC: They being who?

TP: The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. It was hit with an artillery round or two. Anyway we shared a big building or supply section with the 12th Marines supply, which was a bigger operation, the 12th Marines. We set up in that building and I say building; it was one of those metal things that they throw up over night I guess. I don’t know what they call them.

LC: Some kind of a prefab structure.

TP: Yes. We stayed in there pretty much until I left. The Tet Offensive I think started at the end of January, didn’t it? January 31st?

LC: I believe that’s right.

TP: Yeah. Right where we were did not notice too much. We knew that the platoons, the gun platoons at our battery, which were stretched out in other places were cut off; Highway 1 was cut. All the 8-inch Howitzer ammo for our unit… Our gun platoons at Gio Linh was going up by helicopter. I know from talking to the guys at the reunion that they fired non-stop virtually. Till the gun tubes were too hot, they had to rest them a little while.

LC: These were your artillery guys?

TP: Yes. We had some at Gio Linh. I don’t know if we were at Khe Sanh yet.

That happened right as I left. We had platoon, we had two guns out there. There were two in a platoon, two 8-inch howitzers. For us right there it didn’t seem like there was any big
attack on the Dong Ha Combat Base, I mean just the occasional rocket or artillery. That
was a pretty big place. There was a small airfield there for C-130’s and cargo planes to
come in. So it was a fairly good-sized place. Early in February of course I finally got my
orders to go home, which was, I don’t have my diary anymore; you have that. (Laughter)

LC: Right.

TP: But it was early February, and I got orders, what they call separation orders,
which meant when I went home I had less then 60 days to do anyway so they were going
to let me out. I remember getting my orders and shaking hands with Jim Eggloff who was
the acting CO (Commanding Officer) then, who was Captain. I saw him again at the
reunion a couple of years ago. He lives in Jersey. Of course then, back then; I didn’t
know his name. His first name was Captain back then. Anyway he said, “Good job and
we’ll see you.” I went up, took a truck, they loaded a bunch of us on a truck and drove us
up to the airfield. This was somewhere around the 7th or 8th or 10th, somewhere in there.
We finally got a flight out on a C-123, which is older than the C-130’s. They are two-
engine propeller driven thing. They had some little jets on the ends of the wings to help
them take off real short from the short fields.

LC: That was an adaptation?

TP: Yes.

LC: For the theater? That wasn’t standard on the 123 was it or do you know?

TP: I’m not sure. Well it wasn’t when it was first built, that’s for sure. We flew
from Dong Ha down to Da Nang. Then we had to go register at the Transient Area they
called it, where they put you up overnight while you waited for your flight. I remember
there was another fellow that was going home with me, Puerto Rican fellow from New
York named Roberto Rosado-Cuascut; I remember his name because he was a cook. He
was a great cook. He use to have his own little recipes he…he really tried to make the
food taste good. He was a smart guy. We actually use to play chess now and then. We
lined up to get a blanket because it was a little chilly, still, relatively speaking, and they
made you sign for these blankets. We’re in this line and they came and got names off this
roster of people who were getting blankets and drafted them for Interior Guard because
the Tet Offensive was going on. So these are guys going home and they issued them
rifles. We’re still in line so we talked it over and decided we didn’t need a blanket and
that we would find some other way.

LC: Can I just ask Tom how did you figure out they were linking the signatures to
the blankets?

TP: Well we saw them come up and get names off of it while we were in line.

LC: Ok, so you skedaddled out of line there?

TP: Yes, we got out of line. We went; we ended up spending the night in the sand
by the runway at Da Nang. That’s about as far inside Da Nang you could get. Of course
there were fighter-bombers taking off all night and every time one of them roared by
you’d sit up. We managed to get some sleep. The next day they put us in a truck and
carted us to the other side, I think, of the airport. We waited there and then a Continental
Airlines DC8 landed and taxied over to where we were and 160 new guys got off with
their, they unloaded their seabags and the 160 guys that were rotating out got on with
their, they put their seabags in the baggage compartment. Of course we razzed the new
guys when they came by.

LC: Now you mentioned that I think the last time that we talked, that you gave a
hard time to the newbie’s. Can you describe and tell us what exactly the exchanges were
or was it all one sided?

TP: They didn’t say anything. We mostly said stuff like, because this was mostly
February, we would wish them a, “Happy Thanksgiving,” which meant you’re going to
be here next Thanksgiving and we’re going to be gone and, “Merry Christmas and you’ll
be sorry,” and stuff like that.

LC: Anything even crueler then that now that you think back?

TP: No, not when I was there, not that I heard. There wasn’t any good advice
either.

LC: That was still pretty hard.

TP: Like, “Keep your head down.” Ok, so we got on the plane and we were
amazed to find out they’re were stewardesses on this plane, which was pretty amazing
and pretty brave of the stewardesses too right in the middle of the Tet Offensive. The
plane, without refueling, taxied out and took off. I’ve heard lots of people say everybody
cheered when the plane took off and that kind of stuff. Nobody did anything on our
plane; it was quiet, dead quiet. I don’t know if that was because we were worried about
getting high enough in the air soon so we could know we were safe or what, but there
was nothing.

LC: How did you actually feel Tom? Can you remember how you felt?
TP: I can remember thinking that I wanted to get higher. I figured that somebody
could be standing around with a, it wouldn’t take much if you hit an engine or something,
a machine gun or some kind of…I didn’t expect to be any surface to air missiles but…

LC: An RPG (Rocket-propelled Grenade) or something.
TP: Yeah, I just thought, “Let’s get some altitude” you know and get away and
get out over the ocean and we did. We flew to Okinawa and I think they had soft drinks
on the plane. It was a DC8; I think I’ve said that though.

LC: Tell me about the stewardesses. You mentioned them and that you thought
they were pretty brave.
TP: Well the whole crew, I think they must’ve paid them extra. I can’t imagine
that they would take those flights. They had gotten a lot of volunteers to come in there
just then. I was told they had some kind of rule where they can only be on the ground.
They had to be on the ground less then a half hour, which meant unload, load back up,
don’t refuel. It was a government contract of some kind. I remember they were young,
back then all the stewardesses were young. Now with the age discrimination and all that
kind of stuff there are all different shapes and sizes and ages of stewardesses these days.

LC: It’s interesting to say that they were young because you were very young too
Tom.
TP: Yes, well they were. I’m looking back, you know.

LC: I know.

TP: They were probably my age. I had just turned 23, February 1st. We went and
landed at Okinawa and I think the air base there where we landed is named Kadena. We
went over to the Marine place by bus. There were two camps over there, Camp Hansen
and there was a Camp Butler. I can’t remember which one I was in. I remember being
surprised to find that there was a local middle aged woman in the barracks when we went
in there. It turned out they told me, “Well, she takes care of any sewing, buttons, rank
insignias, clean. She and some other people cleaned the place. You don’t have to do
anything.” I said, “This sounds great.” And I remember that we went to the NCO (Non-
Commissioned Officer) club and there were cabs on the base, there were little cabs so
you’d pay them a quarter and they would take you anywhere.

LC: Now are these cars?

TP: Yes. With local Okinawa people driving them and they’d take you places.
You want to go to the movie theater; if you had a quarter they would take you. They
would take you down to the NCO club. I remember the first night there we went to the
NCO club. I remember a couple of things about that. I was reasonably sober at the end,
but I remember the menu had numbers and that the waitresses didn’t speak English. They
knew if you ordered a number one or number two or number three. That’s all they knew.
If you didn’t want lettuce on your number one you were just out of luck. They had a band
that imitated American records. They were really good at it. I remember that. I remember
the Zombies; you know those drinks where they mix everything together?

LC: Yes.

TP: Were a quarter. This was a recipe for a real problem.

LC: I’m telling you. Now who did you go with?

TP: I remember, I think Bob the cook and I, and a fellow named Miller, and
several other guys that were on the flight. Some from our unit, some not. I can’t
remember too much about it. I know that Miller went away to go to the restroom late in
the evening and never came back. We saw him the next day when the MP’s (Military
Police) dropped him off. As it turned out he had gotten lost trying to go to the restroom
which you can imagine the condition he must have been in. I guess he couldn’t hold it
any longer and he went in an inappropriate place. I think it had something to do with the
ice cube machine. So he got arrested. So anyway he came back the next day and they
basically let him off with a, “Don’t do that anymore,” knowing that in a couple of days he
was going to be gone. We were there about three days and I remember the next day they
called us all out for formation and they said, “Anybody who wants to give blood, get in
this line. Anybody that wants to go on a working party, get in this line.” Well I didn’t
much want to do either one but I figured well since I had hepatitis when I was kid I
would get in the blood line and then when I get up there I would tell the Corpsman I had
hepatitis, they wouldn’t let me give blood, and I would go back and go to sleep. So that’s
what I did.

LC: Is that how it worked out?

TP: Yeah. (Laughter) I thought it was pretty clever actually. I think we went to
see a movie that night. I remember seeing the Blue Max on Okinawa. That’s where I saw
the Blue Max for the first time with George Peppard and I can’t remember who else. It
was a good movie. Eventually we got new uniforms and we got our rank insignias
squared away. We caught another Continental Airline’s plane in Kadena. This was
another DC8, Stretch DC8 I think they said it was. We flew non-stop from Kadena to El
Toro, California, which was a Marine Corps air station, which was just recently closed I
think. It was right near San Juan Capistrano; you know where the swallows come back
between San Diego and LA I think. We landed there and we got down and they put us in
some barracks, you know the transient thing gave us the stuff to make up our racks with.
They didn’t really bother us too much about you know, still had the jungle boots on, not
polished and stuff like that. They didn’t really get too hard on us about being real squared
away. I remember it was a 12-hour time difference so we were ready to go to bed and it
was noontime. We decided to stay up till that night to try to get the clock back in sync.
We went over to the, for some reason we…well the first thing I did after that was get
some change and I called home. I got my dad. My mom was actually at that time working
on a Master’s degree at Miami, Ohio. She was in class. That must have been that night
because she said it was a night class so it must have been later that evening that I finally
got to the phone because there were lines for the phones, you can imagine.

LC: I can believe it, absolutely.

TP: I talked to my dad and told him I was safe in California and everything was
all right. My mother says to this day that she was coming home from class when that
phone call came and she knew it. She says that she felt a sense of relief on the way home.

LC: Before she had any idea that you had called.

TP: Before she had any idea I had called. I asked her if she wanted to talk to you.
She didn’t say no. Where was I? So then we went to, somehow we ended up at that PX
(Post Exchange) getting our ribbons put on our uniforms. We had gotten a Presidential
Unit citation so we were all lining up to get one of those put on our uniform. Anyway…
LC: Now was that the battalion?

TP: I’m not sure if that was the 12th Marines or if it was the whole 3rd Marine Division. I don’t really know. We got something to eat. We found out the Air Wing chow was actually better. They got all newer stuff. Then the next day they put us on working parties. No, the next day we took a physical, complete physical. Apparently they don’t let you out unless you’re healthy. They make sure you’re ok and then they can release you. Takes a week or so or five days or something for those results to come back so you got these five days for them to do whatever they want with you. So we ended up working parties with this other fellow and I over in an Air Wing classroom building where we were supposed to put together desks. We discovered in this building there were simulators, you know C-130, F-4, all that. We spent all day looking inside these, sitting in the seats; I don’t know how we got away with that. It was a lot of fun. I think we put together two desks. (Laughter). No one cared. Then the next day, or maybe they did because the next day we ended up washing windows at a Mess Hall. Those are the only two I remember. At night we tried to go into town, whatever was around there, I can’t remember much about it. I think about five days later they gave us the results of our physicals and said, “Come and get your orders tomorrow and you’re done.” So next morning we go down there for our orders and there was a women Lieutenant, I use to remember her name because she signed my papers to get out of the Marine Corps. I can’t think of her name. But anyway we found out from her that the fellow who was supposed to take the pictures for your ID, it’s a pink ID that they give you for Inactive Reserve or whatever it, wasn’t there. He wasn’t going to be there until this afternoon she said. “So you can either wait around for the guy with the picture, to take the pictures or you can leave and just take your ID without a picture.” They didn’t care. Well I don’t think anybody waited for the picture.

LC: I was going to say, yeah.

TP: So we got our pink ID and shook hands with the Lieutenant, headed out. At that time I headed north to visit a girlfriend of mine in San Francisco or around there and spent a week or so up there, can’t remember how long. Then I flew home. I never saw that girl again either, but that’s one of those things.
LC: Tom, can you describe, I know that seeing someone familiar who was a friend would have been a great incentive for you to get moving on out of the base but I wonder what your mood was in general. Were you, do you remember euphoric or kind of….

TP: Relaxed. Relaxed and felt like I had done a hard job and I was finished. There is sort of a, when you complete a task you know that kind of feeling too you know when something is over with and you’ve successfully completed it and you’ve got all your fingers and toes.

LC: Do you have any specific recollection of how it felt to be back in the states and once you walked out through the gates the idea of basically being off the chain in a way and able to do…

TP: Well I don’t remember feeling anything but that relief. I hadn’t had a lot of interaction with civilians at that point, you know. We had gotten off the base a couple of times to night clubs, or what passed for one. I hadn’t had a lot of, you know; mostly it was just the guys in the Marine Corps I was with. I do remember, it’s funny that you should mention that. I remember the first real interaction I had with a person other then a military person was when I landed at the Oakland Airport and I was waiting for this girlfriend of mine to pick me up. You know one of the baggage guys or the guys that get the cabs at the airport. He was standing there. I starting talking to him, turned out he was from Dayton, Ohio, which was where I was born. I talked to him for a while and he told me that California was God’s country. (Laughter) He was glad he left Ohio. I remember that guy. That was really the first and…other than that you still have to tip the people that carry your baggage. I realized that after I got home. I let them carry my baggage. I wasn’t going to carry it anymore. I just felt relaxed, unburdened. I was really glad that my parents were unburdened, and my brother. Nobody had to worry about me anymore.

LC: When you arrived back in Ohio can you tell me a little bit about how it was to see your folks again?

TP: Yes. My dad’s family is from Dayton so I flew into the Dayton airport in civvies, I didn’t wear my uniform. I had a sport coat on as a matter of fact, that I had purchased out in California. My dad and my family and my dad’s two sisters and one of
them had a son and a husband; they were there, my dad’s brother and a couple of his kids and wife.

LC: They all came out to the airport?
TP: Yeah they all came out to welcome me home. My brother brought the new car that I had told him to order when I left, because I knew I had a job to go back to.

LC: What kind of car was it?
TP: It was a ’68 Firebird 400.

LC: Sweet.

TP: Yes. Maroon with black interior.

LC: Nice, you don’t still have it do you?
TP: No, I wish I did.

LC: Yeah I was going to say, that would work.
TP: Before I went in I had a ’65 GTO. I wish I still had that. But anyway…

LC: So they brought the car out to you.

TP: Yes and I drove the car home. I guess we went home. We didn’t stop in Dayton. We went home. I went up into my room at my parent’s house and I think I picked up my guitar, which was, I had bought a new guitar and the thing kept not showing up and not showing up, because everybody was buying a guitar in the 60’s I guess. Like a day before I left for Vietnam, my guitar showed up; my new guitar. So it had been sitting there brand new until I got home. So I opened that up and played a little bit on that. I probably slept a while and ate some food. It was funny, my mom and my aunt use to send me cans of Chef Boyardee meatballs, spaghetti, and ravioli and all of that to supplement the diet, vitamin pills and all kinds of stuff. We use to eat those cold, which is kind of odd. We didn’t have anything handy to heat them up; we would just eat them.

LC: Right, just pop the lid and eat them.

TP: Yeah. I haven’t had a can of Chef Boyardee since. It’s just, it doesn’t appeal to me. Anyway I think she had some for me when I got home and I said, “I think I’ll pass on that.” She figured I liked it. Well I did under the circumstances but now I had better opportunities.
LC: Absolutely. Did you talk to your dad and say, “Dad I need a steak” or something like that.

TP: Yeah I craved lemonade again like I did on R&R. It must have something to do with Vitamin C as near as I could figure. After a couple of nights I went out to one of the local hang outs to see I could run into anybody and a couple of days later I went to my old place of work to tell them, “Hey I’m back and you got to take me back.”

LC: Now was that the insurance company, am I right?

TP Yes. I set up to go to work as soon as possible. I don’t think that was a good idea. I should’ve taken more time off.

LC: About how long until you did start back?

TP: Not more than two weeks, maybe ten days.

LC: And you say that looking back that probably wasn’t a good idea. Can you just explain why?

TP: Well I couldn’t sit still for one thing. I kept moving around. I was nervous, I don’t know if it’s nerves or whatever it was. I was sitting behind a desk just wasn’t doing it right then. I just had to move. I had to get up and move around. I was still not sleeping real well. My mother said you could walk past my room and I would wake up. I think I should’ve relaxed more, taken a little time to unwind because I think you don’t realize you’re tense the whole time you’re in Vietnam. You don’t sleep as well as you do in the states for sure and you’re on edge. Not on edge so that you’re nervous or shaky but it’s that you’re alert—is a better word for it. It takes a while to get rid of that constant alertness kind of thing. You know what I mean?

LC: Absolutely. So you’re first couple, maybe three or four, maybe even longer weeks at work were not so productive.

TP: Well I would say not. I got back in the swing of things pretty good but I couldn’t work non-stop. I would have to get up and move around, take a break, you know.

LC: Were you realizing at the time, as it was going by that you weren’t kind of all right. I mean you should’ve taken more time or was it only later on?

TP: It was only later that I realized that.

LC: How did people treat you Tom?
TP: Pretty good overall I think. People I worked with, you got to remember southern Ohio is not a real radical area.

LC: No, that’s right. Putting it mildly, yeah.

TP: The people I worked with were fine. There weren’t a lot of questions.

LC: There were not, oh.

TP: Some people I worked with were glad to see me home and I met some new people. The only time I really, and I tried to just forget about it, but it did come back because one of the guys was in a Reserve Medical Unit in the suburb of Cincinnati and they got called up after I came home. So he was asking me a few questions after that. So he went for a year and came back.

LC: Was he more or less seeking your advice?

TP: Yeah he was just asking me what to expect and all of that. I tried to tell him that really depends where you’re going and where you end up and what you’ll be doing. I fell in with a couple of guys. There was another fellow who had gone about the same time I did and came back from the Army. There was another fellow who had gotten out of the Navy recently and then another guy. We sort of hung out together. We were the young programmers there and we had every day at lunch we would play Hearts and that’s what we did and kept a cumulative score and we played to 1000. So went day to day and when somebody would get ahead the other people would gang up on him. It was one of those things. We did that for a couple of years, or a year in a half until we started leaving to go onto different jobs. I got into the swing of things after a while. I really didn’t expect anybody to buy me beers or pat me on the back really. I never felt like that at all.

LC: Let me ask you a couple of timeline questions. You’re back at home in the spring of ’68 and it was at that time that Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. Do you remember that?

TP: Yes, I remember that and Bobby Kennedy too.

LC: What do you remember first of all about King? Do you remember hearing about it or what?

TP: Yes I remember seeing it or hearing about it on TV and thinking it was too bad you know. I know guys who said things changed in our battery after I left, you know after the Martin Luther King assassination.
LC: You mean relations between African Americans?
TP: Yeah, relations between. We had a couple of black guys with us in our tent or
in our hooch at Dong Hoa that...there was never any problems in our battery along those
lines that I saw. Some guys said that things did become a little more distant after that, but
I wasn’t there then so I don’t know. I remember that and I remember thinking, “Geez that
was really awful.”

LC: Did you have a good sense of who Dr. King was at that time? I mean had you
been paying attention before you went over?
TP: Yeah, somewhat. I was not a really politically active or anything like that but
I knew who he was and I knew that the non-violent business was a good thing. I didn’t
see any reason why some people should have to ride in the back of the bus you know, I
never got that, you know. Of course you didn’t see much of that in Ohio.

LC: That’s right; although there is still frictions in the cities, no question.
TP: There wasn’t a rule that you couldn’t go in the same restroom or you couldn’t
ride in the same area of the bus. It wasn’t any of that.

LC: What about when Robert Kennedy was killed; any impressions or
remembrance around that?
TP: Oh I remember it and I remember thinking what was going on? I didn’t
understand why. I wasn’t a particular fan of his, but I didn’t understand somebody’s
motivation. It’s not like he was dangerous or radical, I didn’t think. I found out later
when he was a young lawyer he was on McCarthy’s staff, Senator McCarthy and the
Army/McCarthy hearings-that guy.

LC: That’s right, Joe McCarthy. Yes, he was a council to the committee.
TP: I remember that. But anyway I didn’t dislike him and I really felt bad because
two brothers in the same family. That’s basically what I was thinking at that time and all
those kids.

LC: Were you paying attention much to the rest of that election year as it went
on?
TP: Some. I remember Johnson saying he wasn’t going to run. I paid some
attention to it. Not as much as I do these days. I’m a little more; I was young. I remember
Humphrey and Nixon.
LC: Were you attracted by either of their programs for the Vietnam conflict?

TP: I did want to see it end. I thought Nixon seemed to have the idea to get it over with. Neither one of those guys were really likable I thought. (Laughter) You know how some guys are likable? Those guys are not likable.

LC: I think that’s probably fair. Let me ask a couple of other questions about this period of adjusting. Did you actually change jobs? Did you get out of the insurance company?

TP: Yes I changed in ’69, in April. In fact the day I was supposed to start was the day the country took a day off for Eisenhower’s funeral. So I started the next day.

LC: Where did you start?

TP: This was at Champion International, what was then called, oh geez ’69, Champion Paper, I think. Then it became US Plywood Champion Paper and then Champion International, then it’s no longer existence. It was bought by another paper company and they even moved the whole business out of Hamilton, Ohio, which was where it was, closed the paper mills.

LC: Do you know which company purchased them?

TP: I think it might have been International Paper, somebody in Memphis.

LC: What were you doing? What was your position?

TP: I started out doing application programming and then I became what they call a system’s programmer, which is some other guy, he took care of the computer software-the operating software and fixing problems and making sure new equipment worked.

LC: What kind of software system was it, do you remember?

TP: Yeah, they were IBM 370 hardware and the software was something called OSMVT. It was right before the virtual operating systems came out. Then I did that and performance monitoring on those machines, stuff like that. Organized the disks so that to cut the movement of the head, you know you organize the data since those mechanical operations are moving ahead back and forth are slow, you want to minimize that kind of stuff, back then that’s what we did.

LC: Did you have any problems adjusting to the changes of the technology? This is a very interesting time period in software development and hardware development too.
It wasn’t unified like now. I mean there were different systems, competing systems all over the place.

TP: I didn’t have too much trouble though. It’s more trouble now than it was then.
LC: No, you’re kidding.
TP: No then I was a lot younger and I could soak it right up. No I didn’t have much trouble. I started to go to school too by the way then, at night.
LC: Where did you go?
TP: Xavier University.
LC: In Cincinnati?
TP: Yes. Then I kept going there until I finished with my Bachelor of Arts in ’73.
LC: Was it in some kind of computer area?
TP: No.
LC: What was it in?
LC: That was very brave and sort of nonlinear.
TP: You would be surprised. I know lots of guys that have degrees in non-computer stuff.
LC: Yeah non-application.
TP: Some crazy stuff like Art History or stuff. That’s what they have. We use to say, that’s what they have data processing for- is for places where History majors can work.
LC: I’ll remember that.
TP: Yeah. (Laughter) Well if you get a PhD. you can probably find a job.
LC: Well, well we can discuss that later. The status that you had as a Vietnam Veteran, did it make any difference to you over this time period, the 70’s, early 70’s?
TP: No. I can only remember one small incident at Champion where a young girl who was a little radical hassled me about it but that was minor and we became friends. I didn’t hold it against her.
LC: Just out of interest what was the tenor of the exchange and how did it come about, do you remember?

TP: I don’t know. You know they tell you not to talk politics at work now. That’s probably a good plan. I don’t remember exactly how it came out, but it was something like basically accusing me of murdering civilian children and stuff like that.

LC: Do you remember Tom that whole Vietnam Veterans Against the War movement in the early 70’s?

TP: Just a little. I remember Jane Fonda and John Kerry. That’s what I remember.

LC: Do you actually remember them independently of everything that is going on?

TP: Yes.

LC: What do you recall?

TP: I just remembered I thought they went over the line. It’s one thing to disagree but like Jane Fonda sitting on an anti aircraft gun was a little over the top I thought. Then I thought as I look back on it Kerry was looking for a political career I think. I thought he was a little over the line. It doesn’t mean that none of that stuff ever happened. Everybody knows that when everybody has a gun bad stuff happens sometimes but to say that it is policy and everybody does it, you know, that’s just not right.

LC: Did it make you feel any differently about your service when you saw these kinds of protest? Either better that you had done what you had done and done so honorably or like it was being cheapened or anything like that?

TP: I was glad that I was not in a position to where I had to see some of that. I always wondered what would I have done if I would’ve seen somebody doing that. Would I have stopped them? Would I have turned them in? I never was put in that position. I had no worries about me ever doing it but there are other problems too, what if you see somebody? I use to think about that sometimes. I always felt that our guys had done the right thing and had done what they were supposed to do and had, and I can remember going out at Da Nang and I might of told you this. We went out on these Med Caps (Medical Civilian Action Program) they called them. We’re in one of these little trucks, a driver, me riding shotgun, the radio guy and the Corpsman would go out to these
local villages and the Corpsman would fix lance boils and fix hangnails, minor stuff for all the villagers. That was my interaction with civilians for the most part.

LC: How many times did you go Tom?

TP: Maybe two or three. They alternated. They didn’t send the same guy every time.

LC: Did that strike you as a useful thing that American personnel were doing?

TP: Yeah, I thought it was nice. The local people that I met there didn’t seem to have a big ax to grind with us. In fact they were getting a lot of business. They were sitting up laundries and barbershops and stuff like that. If you stay in one place long enough, the Vietnamese people are really, really hardworking. They see an opportunity, they move. That’s one thing that I always admired about them. They are really hardworking, not afraid to work at all.

LC: Can you tell me any of the Med Caps that you went on? About how far from base area would you go, any idea?

TP: Just a few miles, nothing more then that, local villages. I’m sure they picked them fairly carefully. I don’t think they would send us anywhere where it was really dangerous with four guys you know.

LC: And you were providing security it sounds like.

TP: Yeah I was like what they call riding shotgun. The other guys had weapons too but I was just that extra guy just in case.

LC: Did anything untoward ever happen on those missions?

TP: No, no, no. They were without incident.

LC: And you thought it was a good thing essentially?

TP: Yes.

LC: That makes me sort of think about the broader question. If you could place it both when you first came back and then later on, you know like now essentially. How did you assess the US involvement in Southeast Asia generally? Did you think it was a noble attempt or was it a kind of a policy that backfired or something in-between?

TP: That’s funny that you should use the word noble because a friend of mine, who was over there at the same time in the Navy, he was down at China Beach. He said all it has left is its nobility. He said that there wasn’t any oil, no gold, he said it was an
attempt to help somebody in the beginning and it wasn’t very well executed and that’s
basically the way I feel about it. The treaty, I guess we had a treaty there didn’t we,
SEATO Treaty, Southeast Asian (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). That’s the way I
felt about it. We weren’t trying to steal anything. What other reason was there? I always
thought that the idea was noble and the execution was flawed. Maybe the execution
wasn’t possible. It’s not like Korea; it’s a peninsula. You have water around to protect
you from infiltration because you had Laos and Cambodia and all those places up next to
it. It may have been possible.

LC: You know of course that revisionists thinking back on the conflict have said,
“Well the United States should’ve done similar to what’s been done in Kuwait, now more
recently in Iraq. Attack the capital city of the enemy, cut off the head of the
administration and hope that and encourage the rest of the apparatus of the enemy to sort
of fall apart.” Any thoughts on that?

TP: Well I always thought when I was there that it was really silly that they could
come down and invade the south but we could not invade on the ground up north. We
could bomb them I guess. I think it all had to do with the Chinese. I think they were
afraid of the Chinese.

LC: They meaning the US administration?

TP: Yes. I think they didn’t want, it was close enough to Korea but they
remembered that the Chinese surprised everybody by coming across the border into
North Korea and I think they were afraid of that. I think we were basically playing
defense. What we could’ve done, I don’t know. I don’t know if that would’ve worked or
not. It’s hard to imagine that it could’ve been worse. You know there were 58,000 people
killed over there. What if you would’ve gone for the capital early, maybe it would’ve
come to a head. You just don’t know, but 58,000 is a lot of dead kids.

LC: Yes. As you know that’s just the American’s.

TP: Oh yeah, right.

LC: Did you come across any of our allies while you were over there Tom? I
don’t think we talked about that before.

TP: Yeah I saw some South Koreans, I met some Aussie’s.

LC: What did you think of those guys, either group?
TP: Well the South Koreans I just, you know would pass them by, never really talked to any of them, but they had a great reputation as hard fighters. I have no idea if that was deserved or not. I had no experience with them. The Aussie’s had those funny hats that we all liked. There were a few of them up at Dong Ha. I think they were attached to 12th Marines but I’m not positive. I never really talked to them either.

LC: When you saw them you recognized them as being Australian?

TP: Yeah they had those hats that folded up on the top.

LC: Right, the bush hats, but you never really sort of had any interactions with them either?

TP: No, no I didn’t.

LC: Did you form any kind of impression of our South Vietnamese allies and not speaking here of the civilians but of the ARVN, the military structure?

TP: They seemed a little loose, the ones I ran into.

LC: How was that?

TP: Well for instance when we were on the convoy going up north from Da Nang to Dong Ha I remember we were stopped some place. A stopped convoy is always a target so one of those South Vietnamese guys decided to shoot a chicken while we were all stopped there and had just everybody diving all over the place for holes. That didn’t make much sense to shoot a chicken while everybody is all tense, you know. I remember one of our officers screaming at him. I don’t know if he understood a word he said but they were just kind of hanging around, not really…and I would see them riding motor bikes wondering what the hell they were doing. How come they are not out in the field someplace? I have heard stories of good units and it had a lot to do with the leadership, which I guess is true anytime. If the leader of a unit was good then the unit was good or had a chance to be good anyway. I never got the impression they were much interested as long as somebody else was going to do it for them, just a personal opinion.

LC: Sure. Did that seep into your thinking at all or did you just kind of keep on with what you were doing?

TP: I just kind of kept on. I was just putting one foot in front of the other for 13 months. Just trying to get through it and come home. I didn’t do a lot of critical thinking.

LC: Well you may have spared yourself a lot of anxiety as a result.
TP: Yeah I tuned out quite a bit I think. Maybe that made me look for less stress.
I’m not sure.

LC: Tom, let me ask you a little bit about again the issue of being a Vietnam Veteran. Here I wonder if you have any view on whether the United States government over the years has put its best foot forward in terms of supporting Veterans. Would you say that more resources ought to be devoted to Veteran’s Affairs, I’m thinking of healthcare and other opportunities for personal support or financial support, or do you think there’s a pretty good program in place, or is it somewhere in between?

TP: Well I really loved that GI Bill. I worked full time and went to school and took GI Bill money and was able to put my wife through school at the same time. I have always had jobs with benefits so I haven’t had a chance to use the medical facilities so I don’t know much about them. The Agent Orange thing I was just told recently, I’ve got Type 2 Diabetes and have been watching my carbohydrates and now I’m testing my blood to avoid taking medicine. I’ve lost 20 pounds. They told me that’s presumptive Agent Orange cause.

LC: Absolutely.

TP: So I gotta get a letter from my doctor to go turn that in and see what happens.

LC: So that will be a new experience then interfacing with the VA (Department of Veteran’s Affairs).

TP: Yeah that will be a new experience.

LC: Do you remember Tom being exposed to Agent Orange at all?

TP: To tell you the truth I had never head the word Agent Orange till many years later. I remember being sprayed by C-130’s when we at Da Nang. I thought that it was probably insecticide for the mosquitos, but now I wonder because there wasn’t a lot growing around there. It was all sand and there wasn’t much green where we were. I don’t know if they were spraying something to keep it down or if that was insecticide. I know on the map the places where we were show up on Agent Orange’s map as having been sprayed. I just don’t know.

LC: Can you describe, you said you remember being sprayed. Do you know where you were or what you were doing? Can you call that back?
TP: It was in our place in Da Nang before we went up north. I just remember
being outside and seeing a C-130 come over with spray bars underneath it just like a crop
duster only not quite as, didn’t see quite as much stuff. I guess it was more visible. I
could smell it. That’s why I thought it smelled like insecticide. I just don’t know.

LC: Do you remember the smell? Like Malathion that kind of?

TP: Maybe or DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane).

LC: Do you remember it hitting you?

TP: No, I don’t remember feeling it.

LC: Some guys have talked about that. They’re walking along and they see the
plane coming over and they feel that hit them.

TP: No, I never felt any.

LC: Ok, but you smelled something though.

TP: Yes.

LC: Do you have many friends right now who are Vietnam era Veterans?

TP: A few, yeah.

LC: Do you guys talk about, you know, the lasting effects or interfacing with the
VA or having to, you know the diabetes issue?

TP: Not too much. We meet once a year, usually right around Veterans Day for
lunch.

LC: Now these are local guys, not the reunion.

TP: Yeah, just local guys. Guys I see sometimes. We sort of celebrate Veterans
Day and every once in a while we’ll talk about it.

LC: How did that get started, that lunch?

TP: One of my friends did it, started it. Then we started calling other people and
asking them to come over. We had five or six the last time I think from different branches
of the service.

LC: The thing you talk about is not necessarily your experiences over there?

TP: Not too much. Sometimes we’ll tell funny stories about it, like the time in
Dong Hoa when I ordered some Dixie cups. Did I tell you that?

LC: I don’t think so.
TP: For some reason the staff or the officers wanted some Dixie cups and I was working in supplies and said, “Well, order us up some.” So I looked up the stuff and to make a long story short we filled out this requisition and it would say like two cases or whatever the unit of issue for that particular item. So anyway I got the unit of issue wrong and I thought it was each so I ordered a thousand Dixie cups, I thought. Well what I got was a thousand cases of Dixie cups. They came on a five-ton truck.

LC: I was going to say did they actually deliver that?

TP: Yeah, they unloaded a, I know those guys in Okinawa knew that wasn’t right and they unloaded it with a forklift off this big pallet, but we used them for trading material.

LC: I bet.

TP: It turned out all right. Another fellow, a friend of mine ordered chain and got the size wrong and got a chain that had to be unloaded with a forklift. It was big enough you could’ve tied up the Queen Mary with it. They ordered chains by the thickness of the link, not the length of the link. So when you order like three inch links it’s three inch thick steel. That was another one.

LC: Tom, let me ask whether you’ve given any thought to the work that you’ve done around organizing the reunions that you’ve gone too. Did you help organize them?

TP: Yeah the first, I organized the first two or three.

LC: Now, what’s the unit that has the reunion that you helped organize?

TP: The 1st 8-inch Howitzer Battery, which is what I was in.

LC: How many guys do you have on the contact list?

TP: A hundred and something, 120 maybe.

LC: I know you just went to the reunion this summer, out here. Was it in Las Vegas I think?

TP: Right.

LC: I know you drove all the way and all the way back, which is quite a haul.

How many guys attended?

TP: We had maybe 20. We were with another infantry unit this time at the reunion. I’m not sure how many they had; they had another 30 or 40 maybe. So we were all together so we got a good price.
LC: Was that infantry unit part of the 12th Marines as well?

TP: No, 12th Marines is an artillery regiment.

LC: Oh ok, I’m sorry.

TP: You know 10th, 11th, 12th Artillery; 1 through 9 Infantry.

LC: Which infantry unit?

TP: I think it was 3rd Battalion 1st Marines, or 1st Battalion 3rd Marines, I can’t remember.

LC: That’s ok, but you kind of clubbed up with them in order to get a better rate?

TP: Better deal, right.

LC: Were there any experiences that took place for you during the reunion that you can you know share with us here or in the impression of how the guys are doing?

TP: I think our guys are doing ok. The infantry guys I remember at the reunion they read a list of their Killed in Action. They must’ve gone on for five minutes. We just had a couple. I remember thinking, “Wow! Glad I wasn’t running around with those guys.” Our guys are doing ok. You know some of them had some trouble afterwards with drugs or alcohol. One of them that did is now a counselor, drug and alcohol counselor, and he’s doing ok.

Another one that did, wasn’t at this reunion, but he works out in a forest up in Oregon for the government. He got the vote for being in the best shape. They weren’t allowed to use power tools because it was government, because of pollution. So that had to use hand tools to do all their trimming and everything to keep their paths open and cut down trees and stuff like that. This guy was in great shape.

LC: That’s hard work.

TP: Yes. The ones that come to the reunion are doing ok. I suspect the ones that aren’t doing ok aren’t coming. That’s my personal opinion. They can’t afford it.

LC: Or it’s too hard or whatever. Tom, have you been to Washington to the Wall or to a traveling exhibit?

TP: Yes, I’ve been to the Wall. I went with my wife and kids many years ago. My kids were little.

LC: What was that like for you?
TP: I remember being impressed that it was, it was a very impressive site. I didn’t understand at that point what all the hoopla was about. It seemed fine to me. I did look for some people I knew and took some pictures. It was a little emotional but it would have been different had I been there with guys that I served with. I was there with my family.

LC: Have you thought about or do you have any interest in returning to Vietnam at any point?

TP: No.

LC: Why is that?

TP: Didn’t leave anything there. (Laughter) There is nothing I have to go back and get. No, I don’t want to go back there. I know guys that have gone. One of the guys at our reunion has been back twice. I just can’t do it. I just don’t want to.

LC: Did you ask him why he was going back? Was it clear why he?

TP: No, he just wanted to see all the places he had been and see what happened to them I guess.

LC: And there is nothing like that that’s pulling at you?

TP: No, not at this point.

LC: Tom, is there anything that I perhaps haven’t asked you about but that you would like to include in the interview?

TP: No, can’t think of anything. Probably will after we hang up.

LC: That’s ok. We’ll give you an opportunity to add to the interview at some stage if you like, but for now let’s take a break and I want to thank you very much for participating Tom. It’s an important thing that you’ve done and I really appreciate it.

LC: Go ahead Tom, let’s go ahead and add this.

TP: There is one thing that I wanted to mention that I, I didn’t find this out until a few years ago, after my father was dead. My father died in 1986. My mother said, told me just kind of off the cuff one day, “You know you’re father went to Mass every morning you were gone.” And I said, “And nobody told me?” You know that’s kind of significant and I never found out about it. I didn’t know it. He was a once a week guy before that. When I went he went every day to church.

LC: The entire year you were gone?
TP: Yes, the entire year I was gone.
LC: Let me just ask, your brother Tim, he was drafted right and he was in the Army?
TP: Right after I came home, as a matter of fact.
LC: Was he actually in Vietnam then?
TP: No, he ended up being, a culmination of his career was being the lifeguard at the Dependent swimming pool at Sandia Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
LC: That’s sweet.
TP: Yeah, and before that he played softball on the fourth Army softball team, handed out basketballs at Fort Leonard Wood. (Laughter) It was a good deal.
LC: That’s incredible because he would have been drafted what in ’69.
TP: Yeah ’68 or ’69.
LC: You never had a chance to talk to your dad about his conversation with God.
TP: Yes.
LC: Did your mom tell you anything else about that?
TP: No, she didn’t. It made me a little sad because it meant that he was really worried. I knew they were worried, but he was really worried.
LC: Well he had served in the Marine Corps himself.
TP: Yes, but he never saw combat though.
LC: Where was he?
TP: He was like my brother, he was lucky. He was in the Marines during World War II and I asked him what he did one day and he said once a week I knocked out a sailor. He was the boxer. He boxed and worked in Barstow, California at that Supply Depot but he was in Special Services, he boxed.
LC: As he remembered it then, he won every round. Was that what he was telling you?
TP: Oh he won every fight he said.
LC: Well thanks for including that.
TP: Ok.