Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am beginning an oral history interview with Michelle Steiner of the US Army. Today’s date is the 9th of March 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech and Michelle is speaking to me by phone. Good afternoon, Michelle.

Michelle Steiner: Good afternoon.

LC: I wonder if you could give me just a little bit of background information, biographical data. For example, where were you born and when?

MS: I was born December 1st, 1942 in the Bronx, New York.

LC: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family.

MS: Okay. I’d say we were what is now termed lower middle class. My dad before World War II and after he got out of World War II was a truck driver and then a dispatcher in the garment industry in New York City and then became a slipcover cutter. We lived in the Bronx in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. I’d say eighty-five to ninety percent of the population was Jewish. There was an orthodox synagogue right across the street from our apartment house. Most of the people in the neighborhood though were reformed even though the only synagogue serving us was orthodox. I have one younger sister, three years younger. My parents—my mother was born in November 1917, my dad in February 1918.

LC: Were they both born in this country?

MS: Both born in this country. All four of my grandparents are immigrants.

LC: Where from, Michelle?
MS: My maternal grandparents were from Hungary—no, excuse me. My paternal grandparents were from Hungary and Austria, my grandmother from Hungary and my grandfather from Austria. No, reverse that. My grandmother from Austria and my grandfather from Hungary. My maternal grandparents were from Poland and Russia but I don’t know which was from which.

LC: Do you know what lines of work either of your grandparents were in?

MS: My paternal grandfather owned some restaurants, some Hungarian restaurants in New York City but was wiped out during the Depression and he became a waiter and worked as a waiter in a Hungarian restaurant. More than one but only one at a time until the late 1950s before he retired. My paternal grandmother was a housewife all her life as far as I know and I don’t know what my maternal grandfather did. He died before I was born.

LC: Do you know what the circumstances were that led them to come to the United States on either side?

MS: On my mother’s side it was part of the great Eastern European Jewish immigration of the early 1900s and my grandfather on my father’s side, I think it was primarily to avoid being drafted by the Kaiser. My grandmother, I don’t know. They met and married in the United States although my grandmother once mentioned to me that they had known each other in the old country but they did not—they had least met each other there but they did not immigrate together. They just re-met here.

LC: That’s a great story. What about your own childhood? Where did you go to school?

MS: I went to school in the public school system in New York City. I went to PS 104 in the Bronx and then Macombs Junior High School and then DeWitt Clinton High School.

LC: When did you graduate from high school?

SM: I graduated high school in 1960. Most people my age that are born about the same time of the same year graduated in ’61 but New York City had some very loose age requirements and I was able to start school a year earlier than most of my contemporaries who did not live in New York.

LC: Were you a good student?
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: Were you a good student?
MS: Was I what?
LC: A good student.
MS: Uh, no. (Laughs)
LC: (Laughs) Okay.
MS: I got As in the subjects I liked and Cs or worse in the subjects I didn’t like or didn’t care about. I was what is now considered hyperactive and dyslexic, although those terms hadn’t been invented yet and the conditions had not been diagnosed at this time. But I did graduate in the upper half of my class but not the upper quarter.
LC: What subjects did capture your attention and did you perform well in?
MS: Back in those days they were the math and the hard sciences, math and physics primarily.
LC: Did you have good teachers or was it just an instinctual interest on your part?
MS: Both.
LC: Really? Do you remember any teachers particularly?
MS: Yes, I remember in the fifth grade there was a Mrs. Hoffman who—I had the nickname of the Dreamer or the Clouder because I was always up in the clouds, so to speak. She had a policy. Every year her class would have a class newspaper that would come out every two, three, or four months and she got me to write an article or column, *The Adventures of Michelle the Clouder*. Basically it was to let my imagination go wild and using the term the Clouder as a starting point I guess you could call the stories almost science fictional. I remember her. She’s about the only elementary school teacher I remember. In junior high school there was an art teacher named Mr. Ganz. I was lousy at art. You know color within the lines? Forget it. I mean at an earlier age. By then I could but I was a lousy art student and really the only reason I remember him is because he had been my mother’s and my uncle’s art teacher when they were in high school to give you an idea of how long he had been teaching.
LC: Absolutely.
MS: And he actually remembered my mother and her younger brother because they were very good at art.
LC: (Laughs) Was there disappointment there, do you think, or was he encouraging?

MS: I think it was disappointment on his part, definitely, once he found that out. When I mentioned to my mother my teacher’s name she said, “Is he redheaded?” I said, “No, he’s bald.” She said, “That’s no way to tell,” and she described him at a younger age and adjusting for the age and lack of hair it sounded like the same person. So I asked him, “Do you remember Dottie and Jackie Buckhalter when you were teaching at Morris High School?” and he said, “Yes.” I said, “Well, she’s my mother and he’s my uncle.” So it didn’t really affect anything in the class but it caused me to remember him.

LC: Yeah, it gives a sense of the stability of the area though, too.

MS: I remember the names of some other teachers but no… LC: Nothing particularly attached to them?

MS: Mrs. Labeski was my homeroom teacher in eighth grade. Mrs. Stark was my homeroom teacher in the seventh grade. Her son went to the same school even though he wasn’t in the district but that way she could drive him to and from school, I guess. She was a heavyset woman and she always signed everything B.Z. Stark; and someone in the class asked her what her name was and she said the B was Bertha and of course someone said, “Big Bertha,” and she said, “Well, I’ve never been a Slim Jim.” I had a Mr. White who was a math teacher and taught algebra and he recognized that I was doing well and encouraged me. (Coughs) In high school there was a Miss Macurio who was actually a substitute teacher but on a full-time contract. I had her for math in the ninth grade and she encouraged me also. She became the faculty advisor for the math club, which I was a member of. I found out at one of my high school reunions from another teacher who had been there at the time and who has since retired, I asked him about her and where she went and he said, “Oh, she got out of teaching math and started working with the deaf.” But he had lost contact with her over a decade earlier. His name was Mr. Irving Packer. Miss Macurio’s first name was Anna. And then there was Doc Hlavaty, H-l-a-v-a-t-y, who was the head of our math department. He had previously been a math teacher, maybe the head of the math department and Bronx High School of Science and lost his job and became virtually un-hirable because of Joe McCarthy.

LC: Do you know what exactly the issue was?
MS: He came from Czechoslovakia and had relatives there but by the late fifties, because it was about ’55 or ’56, I guess that’s the mid fifties; I think it was ’56 he was again hirable and became the head of our math department and he stayed there until he retired. His first name was Julius, Julius Hlavaty.

LC: Was he Jewish by any chance?

MS: Julius, as in orange julius. There was a principal who was Walter Degnan, D-e-g-n-a-n, who was principal of that high school from some time in the 1940s until the late sixties or early seventies. I think he became principal in ’48 and he was very well respected and admired by everyone in the school and it was Doc Jersey, as in Jersey cow. He must have had polio or something when he was a kid because he walked with two crutches or arm brace crutches. He was the type of person that even the worst disciplinary kids in the school looked up to, respected, admired and would do anything he said. There wasn’t a student or faculty member in this school who didn’t like him.

LC: Really? Was he charismatic in some way?

MS: I don’t know. I never really had much contact with him. I don’t think I ever spoke to him face to face. I dealt somewhat with his wife who also worked in the school. She was an administrator and I was on an office squad in the assistant principal’s office and she was the secretary or something. I forget exactly. Her first name was Jesse, J-e-s-s-e but I never really did anything with Doc. I don’t even know what he taught or what position he had.

LC: But he was sort of a fixture there.

MS: Yeah, he was a definite fixture.

LC: Now, Michelle, you said you were in an office squad. What does that mean?

MS: Basically a group of students who helped out during their free periods in the office.

LC: Was it a position of some responsibility like, I don’t know, hall monitors used to be and that kind of thing?

MS: Well, sort of but we did mostly the clerical work, filing for them and running the mimeograph machines and stuff like that.

LC: Was that fun for you?

MS: Yeah, actually.
LC: Okay. How did you come by that job, that work?
MS: (Laughs) This is embarrassing.
LC: Oh wow. (Laughs)
MS: I had cut school for about a month and when the truant officer finally came to the house and he happened to live in our apartment building so my folks knew him, of course the next day my father dragged me into the school and one of the people we had to speak to was Mr. Ingaro who was the assistant principal and basically he said, “Okay, you’re going to be on my office squad so I can keep an eye on you and I’ll know any days you cut school because you won’t be here.” Anyway, that was in my sophomore year and I stayed on his squad until I graduated.
LC: But it turned out to be punishment or monitoring anyway that was fun.
MS: It started out as monitoring but I became one of the most favored or senior members of the squad. Trusted, favored, whatever word you want to use.
LC: It sounds cool.
MS: It was.
LC: You were also, you mentioned, in the math club. Were there other kinds of extracurricular things that you did?
MS: Nope.
LC: That was it?
MS: That was it.
LC: Okay. So no sports or any of that?
MS: Oh no.
LC: Okay. Were you, as you entered say your senior year in high school were you thinking that you would be going to college or were you thinking that you wanted to get out and work?
MS: Oh, I was—it was known from the time I was in the third grade that I was going to college.
LC: (Laughs) Okay. I suspected that might be true.
MS: (Laughs) There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that I was going to be going to college.
LC: Where was it thought that you might go to school and go to college?
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: Where might you have gone?
MS: What colleges?
LC: Yeah.
MS: Well, we didn’t even think about that until I got into my junior year and senior year.
LC: Did you think about leaving New York City?
MS: Yes. One of the schools I planned to apply to was Brandeis although I never did apply there. But in my yearbook it says that I was going to Brandeis. The schools I actually did apply to was City College of New York and New York University but we moved out of New York City in my senior year and I on paper at least moved in with my grandmother so I could finish my senior year at the same high school. But I wound up going to New York University.
LC: Where did your parents move to?
MS: We moved to New Rochelle, which is a suburb of New York City.
LC: Right. Did they get their own house out there?
MS: No, we just moved from one apartment house to another.
LC: Okay. What was the motivation behind moving out of the city?
MS: Basically influence from my mother’s sister and her husband. My dad worked for my uncle Jerry and Jerry and Sheila lived in New Rochelle and the Bronx was just starting to cave in even though the decay really didn’t hit for over a decade later. In retrospect I could see that it had been starting. So my family decided to move, get a bigger place, lower rent, live within just about walking distance of my mother and her sister. My dad was a salesperson so he wasn’t by that time, so he wasn’t in an office by himself or he didn’t have to go anywhere. But even when he was a slipcover cutter it was just go into the shop, pick up the stuff for the day and then be on the road in the city all day. And as a salesperson he was even further flung. Most of his clients were in New Jersey.
LC: Yeah, people more mobile then and out of the city.
MS: And out of the city. Whether we lived in the Bronx or New Rochelle didn’t matter that much. And also my mother—I forget if she got this job before or after we
moved to New Rochelle, but the company she worked for when she started working was in the Bronx and she left the company. I forget when she went back but it had moved its headquarters to New Rochelle. As I said, I don’t know whether it was before or after we moved that she started working in the New Rochelle office.

LC: Did you in fact yourself move out to New Rochelle and just continue to kind of make it back it high school?

MS: Right. The whole family moved to New Rochelle and I basically commuted. Either Dad or Uncle Jerry drove me into the Bronx or most of the time I just took the bus. Maybe one or two nights a week I’d stay at my grandmother's house, especially if I got to playing with friends after school.

LC: Time kind of got away.

MS: It was a little bit too late to travel.

LC: Sure. As you moved toward graduation in that spring of 1960 and you were planning to go to college, did you think about getting a summer job?

MS: Actually, I did.

LC: Okay. What did you do?

MS: I worked as a shipping clerk in a factory or warehouse that was a five-minute walk from my house at the same company that my mother and father worked for.

LC: Great. That was pretty convenient then. And were you saving a little bit of that money to be going to NYU?

MS: At a buck and a quarter an hour it’s hard to save anything up. That was minimum wage. I wound up spending most of it over the summer.

LC: Okay. So I take it you entered NYU then in the fall of 1960.

MS: That’s right.

LC: And how did that term go? How did that first term go?

MS: I got As in the subjects I liked and Cs or worse in the subjects I didn’t like.

LC: (Laughs) So you’re very consistent on that point then.

MS: (Laughs) Yeah. I got to the point—I had the misfortune of learning how to play contract bridge while I was there.

LC: Oh boy.
MS: I probably spent more time in the student union playing bridge than I did in
the classroom.
LC: Were you good or getting better?
MS: Better than average. Actually at the time in college I probably wasn’t all that
good because I was learning but I eventually became quite good. Not expert but quite
good.
LC: But pretty good?
MS: Yeah.
LC: Well you could teach me a few things then. I like the game but I don’t think
I’m quite so good.
MS: Well except for playing online, which I started to do about a month ago, I
stopped playing in about ’78 and I picked it up again in ’84 again for a few months and
then hadn’t played since.
LC: Was that something you were—you could find games during the course of
your military career? Could you find people to play with?
MS: Yes. Usually I wound up going to local American Contract Bridge League
tournaments and getting pick-up partners and then meeting people there who had the
same bidding philosophies as me and we became regular or semi-regular partners.
LC: That’s interesting. So that was like a whole sort of side element.
MS: Yeah. And one of my best friends who I met early in my Army career who I
am still very close friends with, we met at the bridge table and during my Army career
when I had been in for maybe about ten years, he and I wound up living about a block
from each other.
LC: Really?
MS: Yeah, he was out of the Army by then and working for the Red Cross and I
was in the Army and stationed in the D.C. area. Basically when he found out I was
coming to D.C. he searched around and found this apartment for us that was in the same
apartment complex as his.
LC: That’s nice. That’s great to have friends who you can sort of see at different
points in your life and have them still be good for you and good friends. Michelle, were
you thinking at all about entering military service while you were at NYU?
MS: Yes, actually. I joined ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps). There was basically physical education or ROTC and then when I got my grades at the end of that semester I realized, “I’m not going to be able to make it through college.” Well, now the term is dropout and in those days the term hadn’t existed yet but I was withdrew from school and I enlisted in the Army.

LC: Was that kind of traumatic for you?
MS: A bit. It was more traumatic for my parents, I think. Until they got a copy of my grades in the mail they didn’t realize I was doing so poorly.

LC: And were they supportive though of your new plan to go into the military?
MS: Outwardly, yes. They were quite; I can’t say they were unsupportive once they realized it was a done deal.

LC: They kind of got behind it.
MS: Yeah, they got behind it. They tried to talk me out of it but they realized, my dad went and spoke to the recruiter and found out I’d already signed the papers.

(Laughs) I was old enough that I didn’t need parental permission.

LC: Right. And was this in the spring then of 1961?
MS: About January or February. I entered on the ninth of March.

LC: So you were nineteen years old at that point.
MS: Eighteen.

LC: Eighteen. Oh, okay, you had just turned eighteen.
MS: I had just turned eighteen about three months earlier.
LC: Yeah, so you were on your own basically. Do you remember going and speaking to the recruiter yourself?
MS: Yes I do.

LC: Can you describe that interaction?
MC: Okay. Can you cut the tape for a moment?
LC: Sure.
MS: Are we back on?
LC: Yes, we are.
MS: Okay. I should clarify one thing.
LC: Okay.
MS: I’ve had a sex change operation and when I’m talking about when I was in
college and entering the military it was decades before that operation so in those days I
was ostensibly a male.

LC: Okay, sure.

MS: Posing as one and acting as one so in those days a female had to be twenty-
one to enlist without parental permission but a guy could enlist at eighteen without
parental permission.

LC: And that’s where you were then. You were eighteen.

MS: That’s what I was then.

LC: A young man and so you were decided on your own what to do.

MS: Right.

LC: Okay.

MS: So I went into the recruiter. There was a recruiting station at the intersection
of the Grand Concourse and Fordham Road in the Bronx. There was an overpass on
Fordham Road over the Grand Concourse and right in the middle of the overpass on the
north side was the Army and Air Force recruiters. On the south side were Marine and
Navy and Navy Coast Guard recruiters. So I decided Army because I’d been taking
Army ROTC so I figured the ROTC would give me a little leg up. It turned out it really
didn’t. So I went in and spoke to the recruiter, Master Sergeant Green, I’m surprised I
remember his name, and told him I wanted to go into electronics. So he talked me into
go ing into the Army Air Defense Program with the Nike Missiles and I could get
electronics training.

LC: Did he tell you much about that weapons system? Obviously not in detail but
did he kind of describe to you its purpose and that it was brand new and all that?

MS: Yeah. The Nike Ajax system had been around for quite a number of years.
The Nike Hercules system had been around just for a year or two and was replacing the
Ajax. Of course there was—basically, he had a quota for that. That’s what he was
pushing because there were a lot of other electronics I could have gotten into like radio,
radar, cryptography, etc, etc, etc. But anyway, so I went through the whole bit, went
down to 39 White Hull Street, which had been New York City’s recruiting main station
since time memorial, and took all the tests and everything and then went to the Air
Defense Command’s representative there to discuss initial assignments and he told me
that unfortunately my eyesight was too bad to get into that. And he referred me to the
Army Security Agency representative who had me and said based on my test scores I’d
be very suited for that. I went there and he had me fill out all sorts of security paperwork
and everything else. About a week or two later I got a call from Sergeant Green back at
the recruiting station telling me that the Army Security Agency had rejected me on
security clearance reasons because my grandfather was born in Hungary, which is a
Communist country and my other grandparents were born in Russia and Poland which
where Communist countries and he had another alternative for me which was Nike
Missile Electronics Repair, which I found out earlier that what he had first told me about
would have just gotten me into the Air Defense Command, most likely as a crewman and
not having anything to do with electronics. Like most sales people he lied to me. But he
got me into this Air Defense Electronics maintenance program school, which was like a
six month course or so that actually did teach electronics. The first eight weeks were
nothing but basic electrical and electronic training very similar to what I had already
learned in high school physics and on my own. And I got into that field that way and that
course was at Ft. Bliss, Texas, in El Paso and that’s where I met this best friend of mine I
mentioned who I lived near in Virginia in the D.C. area.

LC: Okay. Let me just ask you a couple of questions there. Were you upset or in
any way disappointed about that security clearance rejection? Did that make any sense to
you?

MS: It didn’t make any sense to me because as far as I knew I didn’t have any
family living in those countries but this was 1961 in the middle of the Cold War and
people were still somewhat paranoid even though McCarthyism was pretty much dead
there were things still lingering on.

LC: Did the electronics maintenance program—did you get descriptive material
about that from Sergeant Green?

MS: I don’t recall.

LC: Okay. But you knew in any event that you were on your way to basic
training and then to an advanced course that would likely be at Ft. Bliss?

MS: Right.
LC: Okay. Tell me about basic training. First of all, where did you do that and when did you go in?

MS: I went in on the ninth of March of ’61, Ft. Dix, New Jersey, spent a week at the reception center taking more tests, getting shots, getting fitted for uniforms, getting issued the uniforms and all that stuff and wound up taking basic training at Ft. Dix also.

LC: How did you fare during the basic training program?

MS: I managed to survive.

LC: Okay. Was the experience the sort of stereotypical one where you have drill instructors in your face and no privacy and dawn till dusk?

MS: Yeah, pretty much except that was the days that they called them drill instructors.

LC: Okay, what did they call them back then?

MS: I think they were called cadre. We called them, Sergeant.

LC: Yeah, and Sir.

MS: And Sir, yes.

LC: Did you do weapons training during basic?

MS: Yes, everybody did.

LC: Okay, can you tell me what weapons you qualified on?

MS: The M-1 rifle. That was it.

LC: Had you been doing any shooting before in your experience?

MS: When I was in the scouts when I was about thirteen or so I shot a .22 rifle and my dad had bought me a BB gun at some point when I was maybe ten or so.

LC: How did you do with the M-1? Was it easy for you to pick it up?

MS: I didn’t fire expert. I think I fired sharpshooter, which is the middle grouping. The basic qualification was marksman then sharpshooter and then expert. I almost fired expert.

LC: And what about the physical training? Were you in pretty good shape?

MS: No. (Laughs)

LC: No? Was that tougher?

MS: I still to this day don’t know how I managed to pass the physical PT (Physical Training) test but I did pass it.
LC: (Laughs) Okay. So you left Ft. Dix then during the late spring. Would that be correct?

MS: Let’s see. I went in on March ninth so I finished in early May.

LC: And did you go directly then down to Ft. Bliss?

MS: I had about a week or two leave that I took at home.

LC: How did that go? Do you remember that at all?

MS: Basically it’s just I went home and spent time at home just like I had never been gone.

LC: Oh really?

MS: Let’s see. One incident—my folks came to our graduation parade at basic training and drove me home. When we got out of the elevator in the apartment house my dad insisted on taking my duffle bag from me. So when we got out of the elevator he started dragging the duffle bag on the floor. I said, “Dad, please don’t drag it. That thing has to last me at least three years.” I forget his exact words but he indicated great approval because I was actually thinking about the future. And he lifted it up and carried it. (Laughs)

LC: (laughs) Jolly good. I was going to ask. He sounds like an okay dad.

MS: Oh, Dad was wonderful. I mean he was not perfect. I don’t think any dad was, but he was…I have no complaints about him.

LC: Well, that’s more than very many people can say, as I know you know. Tell me about arriving down at Ft. Bliss. Do you remember that trip?

MS: I remember some things about it. I decided for some reason to go a day or two early. So I’m sitting in the lounge room at Kennedy, well, in those days Idlewild Airport waiting for them to call the plane to arrive and board and an Army Captain walks in and I pop up to attention, all the books on my lap falling off saluting and he says, “You don’t have to do that here, son.” (Laughs)

LC: Really? (Laughs) That’s cool.

MS: When we arrive and we’re waiting at the luggage area I said, “I’m actually not supposed to report in until tomorrow or the day after. I forget which. What would happen if I reported in early?” And he said, “Well, if you were in my company I’d have my 1st Sergeant put you on some sort of detail until your reporting date so I suggest you
find a hotel or something and enjoy El Paso for a day.” So I did. And then I reported
into Ft. Bliss and found the right building to go to and went through all the in processing
at the holding company for new students and then we got transferred to our student
company and assigned barracks, billets, and beds there and stuff. That’s about all I
remember.

LC: Now how long did the advanced training last?
MS: As I said, I think it was about six months. I forget.
LC: Okay. So perhaps all the way through the end of the year almost.
MS: Actually, yes, almost just about through the end of the year.
LC: And can you describe just a basic outline of your daily activities there? How
much were you in a classroom and how much were you elsewhere?
MS: Basically what we had was we got up in the morning, did all our morning
stuff, got into formation, marched to the classroom. I’m not even sure. No, I don’t even
think we marched to the classroom. We walked there on our own. We went into class,
broke for lunch, came back to the mess hall, went back to the classroom. Classes were
from like 8 am to 3:30 pm with an hour for lunch if I recall correctly. It’s been over forty
years. Our evenings were free.
LC: Were you able to go off base then?
MS: After the first month I think it was. The very new people were restricted to
base for two weeks or four weeks. I forget how long.
LC: And then later on you had a little bit more freedom.
MS: Right.
LC: Okay. Can you tell me what the curriculum was just in general terms if you
remember?
MS: Well, the first eight weeks as I said was basic electronics where we learned
what a resistor was, capacitor, coil, we built an AM radio out of stock parts, learned how
to wire things, just to learn the principles of electronics. After that we went to our missile
courses where they started us with the theory of how the missile works and how the
electronics work on the missile, how things go, the post-codes that are sent from the—
how the acquisition radars find the target and how you have another radar tracking the
target, another radar tracking the missile and sending commands to the missile to guide it
through the target and we got a tour of the radar area but we weren’t working on the
radars, just on the missiles.

LC: Michelle, were you working…?

MS: And everything about how the missile—how the electronics and the
mechanics of the missile worked and on all the ground handling equipment that goes with
the missiles; the electronics that operate the launcher, the elevators on the launcher and
those sites where they were on elevators; the emergency firing centers at the missile area
in case the firing center at the radar area, which is the main firing center, goes out and
basically that was it day to day. We also learned the mechanics and the hydraulics even
though there was a separate MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) for people who did
that stuff. We had to know how it worked because technically we had supervisory
capabilities over them depending on rank and stuff but they would never have a
supervisory capability over us because we had “superior knowledge.” More
encompassing knowledge, actually.

LC: Yeah, broader, with the whole missile end of the system.

MS: Right. And basically that was it. In those days the Army worked on a five-
and-a-half-day week so every Saturday we were in classes of a different kind where they
had what they called character guidance and other administrative type classes that we
needed to take. It was also Saturday mornings when we had, not every Saturday
morning, when we had our inspections. It was pretty relaxed. It was more of a campus
atmosphere than the typical AIT (Advanced Individual Training) atmosphere.

LC: Yeah, it sounds very much that way, especially since you were there for quite
a long time.

MS: Yeah, but it was considered an Army school rather than a training center.

That’s how they made the distinction between how the students are treated.

LC: And this was the US Army Air Defense School, correct?

MS: This is the US Army Air Defense School, right.

LC: And were you learning both the Ajax and Hercules system?

MS: We learned primarily the Hercules system. They gave some lip service, less
than ten percent of the course time was on the Ajax because I think the only Ajax’s that
were deployed at the time were with Reserve and National Guard units.
LC: And I’d like to ask you a little bit more about the Hercules system kind of as prep later as we go on.

MS: Okay.

LC: After this period of training at the Air Defense School concluded in early January of 1962 you had an assignment, a posting.

MS: Right.

LC: Can you just tell us what that was and where it was?

MS: I was assigned as an instructor at the same school.

LC: Okay. Now how did that come about?

MS: Well, our entire class was assigned to the school at the time. Every person in my class was reassigned as a permanent part either at the school.

LC: How many people were in your class?

MS: I don’t recall. I’d say less than two-dozen.

LC: Really? Okay.

MS: It was a small class.

LC: Sure.

MS: Apparently they just didn’t have any place to send us at the time and so we were assigned and I asked to be an instructor rather than to be one of the maintenance people in the class and they allowed me to be, in this school I mean.

LC: Right, so you found yourself kind of on the other side of the desk as it were.

MS: Right.

LC: Talk to me about your experience as a teacher. How did that go?

MS: Well one of the first things that they did was send me to the instructor-training course.

LC: Okay. Was that also within Ft. Bliss?

MS: Yeah, that was within the same school, yeah. And basically it was two weeks on how to be an instructor. Very similar to public speaking classes in college except it’s focused on teaching rather than just giving a speech and teaching the Army by the Army way.

LC: For those that don’t get that reference, could you say a little bit more about teaching the Army way?
MS: Well, basically you have a program and a lesson plan and they taught us how
to write lesson plans. Basically what you do is you get up, you introduce yourself, you
tell them what the subject is, you tell them why they need to know this subject, then you
tell them what you’re going to teach them, then you teach them, then you review what
you taught them, and then you have a question and answer session. You ask them for any
questions they may have to cover things and then you ask them questions to be
back…actually, I think first you ask them questions to get feedback to see if they actually
knew what you were doing. Not what you were doing but what you were teaching. And
during the presentations you’d ask questions also, either leading questions to lead into a
subject or check questions to see if they actually got it.

LC: If they’re getting it, yeah.

MS: And then you finish up by recapping what you told them and giving them
motivation again why they need to remember it.

LC: And this is all very content-driven, is that right?

MS: Oh definitely, yes. It was not education, it was training.

LC: Right. Do you remember your first day in front of a class?

MS: No. (Laughs)

LC: Okay. (Laughs)

MS: No, they all blur together.

LC: Oh okay. Well, I just wondered if you could rate yourself as an instructor.

How did you do, do you think?

MS: Well, the reviews I got from when my presentations were rated were all very
high and the feedbacks from students at the end of their classes were high so I’d say I did
very well.

LC: Okay. And did you feel good about it?

MS: Oh yes, I enjoyed it.

LC: Great. After teaching for a little bit into the middle of 1962 did you then
move on back to New Jersey? Is that right?

MS: You mean New York? You mean home?

LC: No, I meant to Ft. Belvior.

MS: I’m missing something here.
LC: Okay. I was wondering what you…let me just ask you, your next assignment after that instructorship at Ft. Bliss.

MS: Okay, oh okay. I was in Hawaii.

LC: Oh, okay, Hawaii. What happened there?

MS: Okay. The Army had gotten ready to deploy the Nike missile in Hawaii. Traditionally the Hawaii National Guard always handled the Air Defense of the islands. The Nike missile had nuclear warheads. Not ever missile but a number of the missiles in each missile battery had nuclear warheads. The federal government was very reluctant to give control of nuclear warheads to state governors so basically what they did was put a regular Army component at each missile site. We stayed in the guard shack of the missile site in what they called the exclusion area, the area where the missiles and the warheads were stored and ready to fire and we had a safe in that guard shack with the arm plugs for the warheads. Without these arm plugs plugged into the missile the warhead can never detonate. And this was to keep federal control. They decided they would have the maintenance people like us doing this which was really a military police job because whenever the warhead was open, there was an open access to the warhead, one of us regular Army types had to be there even if there was no arm plug there because that was so the regular Army could have control and make sure that the state people did not commit sabotage.

LC: And were you actually briefed that that was the situation and that was the purpose of you being there?

MS: Right. And they said, “We don’t necessarily, it’s not that we don’t trust the governor of Hawaii but we have to set a precedent for all states because you wouldn’t want George Wallace to have access to nuclear warheads, would you?”

LC: Was that actually said to you in a briefing?

MS: Unofficially.

LC: Wow.

MS: Not during the official briefing but yes, the name George Wallace was definitely mentioned. I’m going to shut the door on the TV room. My partner is watching TV and it’s getting a bit noisy.

LC: That’s okay. Good, thank you.
MS: I don’t know if you were hearing it.

LC: I was actually hearing it a little bit but that’s fine and thank you for doing that.

MS: Yeah.

LC: Michelle, how long were you in Hawaii and where did you actually live?

MS: Let’s see. I was in Hawaii…let’s see. I got there in the spring of ’62 and I was there I think fourteen months. I had my tour cut short because I got into another school. But where was I living? Part of the time at Scofield, well, let’s see. When we first got there it was the Scofield Barracks in transient quarters and my first assignment was at the Nike Missile Base at Bellows Air Force Base so they actually quartered us at Ft. Shafter and attached us there. We were not assigned any units at Ft. Chafter. We were actually assigned to the G3 of US Army Hawaii, which was at Scofield. Ft. Shafter at the time was US Army Pacific Headquarters and we were assigned to the Headquarters Attachment or attached to the Headquarters Attachment for rations and quarters.

LC: Where were the Nike sites?

MS: Well, the one I was at that time was at the Bellows Air Force Base, which was on Waimanalo or near the town of Waimanalo. It was low-altitude in sighting. It was just off the beach. Eventually Nikes were completely taken out of the system but about two years ago I was visiting my daughter in Hawaii and my partner and I went to Bellows Air Force Base and I went up to the gate where the Nike site had been. The gate was locked, the chain and lock were rusted and the road that actually led into the area was just about completely overgrown with foliage.

LC: Is that right?

MS: It looked like the last person out locked the gate, which was like ten or twenty years ago.

LC: And they just walked away.

MS: And they walked away and no one’s been inside since. But I couldn’t tell because anyplace I could see where that fence was around that area, all I could see were trees and bushes so I don’t know what’s inside there.

LC: How many of the actually missile emplacements with elevators and erectors were around Ft. Bellows? Was it a composite of say, three such sites or five?
MS: Bellows had just one site, one missile battery.

LC: Okay, one battery.

MS: Each missile site in the islands had one battery.

LC: And can you say how many missiles were stored for each of the batteries?

MS: I don’t recall.

LC: Not necessarily warheads; but you don’t really know?

MS: I don’t remember.

LC: Okay.

MS: I think there were three sections of four missiles each but I really don’t know.

LC: Okay. Was it strange to you to be on that same turf again and to see it? In your mind’s eye it must have looked so different.

MS: Yeah.

LC: Yeah, it’s kind of a strange thing.

MS: It was a bit strange. My son-in-law is in the Army and he’s stationed in Hawaii so in May two years ago my partner and I went there. She and my daughter had never met. I hadn’t seen my older grandson in three our four years. We went there for his third birthday or was it his fourth birthday? Fourth birthday. And I hadn’t seen him in like two years.

LC: Oh boy.

MS: And my younger grandson was about six months old and I had never seen him.

LC: So there was a lot going on in that trip.

MS: Yeah (laughs). So we wanted to take a vacation. We had never really had a vacation together of any sort except for a weekend trip to Vegas once but not just a nice vacation. So we spent like a week and a half in Hawaii.

LC: It sounds beautiful. It sounds great, especially with those little kids.

MS: Yeah.

LC: Where did you go? You said that you received notice that you were eligible to enter another school.
MS: Okay, well, it wasn’t that. I applied to another school. That was the Army’s West Point Preparatory school, which was at Ft. Belvoir in those days.

LC: How did you come to identify that as somewhere that you wanted to go?

MS: The officer in charge I was working for was a West Point graduate.

LC: Do you remember his name?

MS: Veal, like in the meat. And I found out much later one when I happened to bump into someone who I had known way back when then that he eventually got out of the Army after finishing his initial commitment and went to dental school. (Laughs)

LC: Really? (Laughs)

MS: Yeah.

LC: But was he talking up the academy a little bit to you, and the preparatory school?

MS: He wasn’t talking it up to me but he was the first West Pointer I had ever met so a lot of us were asking him questions about it.

LC: It was intriguing.

MS: Yeah, so I started looking into West Point and found out about the preparatory school.

LC: Now did you actually leave the islands to go to Ft. Belvoir?

MS: Yes, when I was accepted to the prep school I left Hawaii and got transferred to the prep school.

LC: Okay, so that would be in the middle of 1963?

MS: Right. Class started in August so I went home and took some leave with my folks and they drove me down to Ft. Belvoir, which is south of D.C. It’s still—now it’s considered the D.C. metropolitan area because the metropolitan area has expanded so much.

LC: Right. What was the academy like? Can you describe your experience there?

MS: Okay, let’s see. We’d have four classes each morning, two math classes and two English classes, and then in the afternoons we’d have physical training. Wednesday afternoons we’d have the Army mandatory classes like character guidance and other administrative stuff. And we had study hall in the evenings.
LC: How did you do as a new academician?
MS: I was always in the top academic class. They broke the student body by academic classes. They started us out based on aptitude test scores and then after each block of instruction, which lasted for six weeks, they regrouped us based on our grades. I was always in that top class, usually near the top of the class. Only once was I ever the top person in the class, though.
LC: Well you probably had some pretty heavy competition.
MS: Oh definitely.
LC: Yeah. What was the criteria to get in? Do you have any idea?
MS: The criteria to get into the class was we basically took aptitude tests. I think I had to appear before a board and I had to pass the medical test. They have since added physical conditioning tests, which they didn’t have when I went in. If they had it when I went in I would not have gotten in.
LC: That wasn’t going to be your strong point.
MS: That was my weakest point in the school.
LC: Describe the instructors. Were they all military personnel?
MS: The academic instructors were all civilians. They were hired for their academic abilities.
LC: Were there any persons there who were teaching who impressed you?
MS: I can remember faces but I can’t remember any names.
LC: Sure, sure. That happens.
MS: How long was the curriculum designed over? Was it over a one-year period or six months?
MS: It was over primarily a year period. You started in August and you graduated I think the following July. I was through from it in January, though.
LC: Now why did you leave?
MS: Because I could tell that because of my physical conditioning problems that I would never have been accepted into West Point anyway.
LC: Okay.
MS: And my leadership skills weren’t all that great and it was very strong competition with leadership skills. So I figured I could stay on, loaf through the
academics and still get all the top grades and put up with all the BS with the disciplinary
and the physical stuff or I could get out of the school.

LC: And in getting out, what was available to you? What were your options?
MS: Basically my options were to give my preferences for station and what post I
would like to be assigned to and what installations.

LC: And what installations did you put down?
MS: One of them was Ft. Bliss. I forget what other installations I put down. I
got to Ft. Bliss.

LC: And did you return then to be an instructor?
MS: Not initially.

LC: Okay, what was the initial set-up?
MS: The initial set-up was a Nike missile mobile tactical unit that only mission
was to get ready to be deployed somewhere sometime.

LC: Okay, so you had to be on readiness?
MS: Well, basically we were not on a readiness status per se. We just went in and
we mostly killed time and did make-work stuff.

LC: Okay. How many people were attached? This was a battalion?
MS: Yeah, there was just one battalion with three batteries, I guess.

LC: What was the personnel compliment, do you know?
MS: Whatever was standard for a battery at the time. I don’t know if we were up
to full strength or not

LC: Were you pleased to be back at Ft. Bliss?
MS: I was pleased to be back at Ft. Bliss but I hated that unit.

LC: Why? What was going on?
MS: Because like most military units that don’t have a mission, all the military
BS becomes the primary thing.

LC: Okay, so it was more about the shine on your boots, metaphorically anyway?
MS: Yeah, the shine on your boots, the PT was a big thing; you into the work area
and you sit around and have coffee and donuts, play pinochle. Every so often you’ll go
out and do your preventative maintenance on the vehicles and on the missile equipments
and stuff. I don’t even think we had any missiles but we had all the equipment that goes
with them.

LC: Sure. And the supposed mission again was that you were supposed to be
ready to move?

MS: Yeah, but we were the type of thing where if we had to go somewhere we’d
be given at least a month’s notice.

LC: Would it be fair to say, Michelle, that you were bored?

MS: It would be fair to say that, yes.

LC: Yeah. And were you looking around for some other way to continue to serve
but somewhere else?

MS: Yeah.

LC: Then how did you transition to becoming an instructor again?

MS: Basically I re-enlisted.

LC: Oh, okay, so your commitment?

MS: I re-enlisted to become assigned to the school, the Air Defense School.

LC: And was that in 1964?

MS: Either late ’63 or early—it was probably late ’63.

LC: Okay.

MS: I don’t think I was at that assignment more than three to six months.

LC: Just as an aside, at that time of course the President was shot.

MS: The President was shot while I was still at the Air Defense School, I mean at
the West Point Prep school.

LC: Can you just step aside from your own career path here for a moment and tell
me if you recall anything about that moment, where you were and what you were doing?

MS: Oh yes I can. That and the first man on the moon I don’t think I will ever
forget. We were in one of these Wednesday afternoon classes and the 1st Sergeant—we
just finished a break between classes and the 1st Sergeant got up and said, “Now, listen up
everyone. This is hot.” And then the Captain from the back of the class said, “Excuse
me, 1st Sergeant, this is hotter. We just heard on the radio a report that President
Kennedy has been shot. We don’t know if these reports are true, we don’t know what the
President’s condition is. We will keep you informed.” The 1st Sergeant finished his class
and we had a short break. The Chaplain came up for the character guidance and before he could talk the Captain came back in and said, “We have heard it is confirmed. President Kennedy is dead. We will give you more information as we find out.” The Chaplain led us in a prayer and did his class. The Colonel came in and said, “We are waiting on word from headquarters as to what should be done. In the meantime we will continue our business as usual. We are now scheduled to have physical training so go back to your barracks, change into your physical training gear and fall out as usually at the assigned time.” We did that. Of course you can imagine all the discussion. When we were in the barracks I said, “I can’t believe it.” I meant it as a figure of speech. Someone took that literally and said, “You better believe it, Steiner, blah, blah, blah.”

LC: Really?

MS: Yeah. “Don’t delude yourself. This is reality.” I used it as a figure of speech, as in, “This is incredible.”

LC: Yeah, of course.

MS: Yeah, and he took me literally.

LC: Did you personally feel a tug at that time?

MS: Well you heard how I choked up. (Laughs)

LC: Yes, and I don’t want to press you on it.

MS: That’s okay. Yes, I did feel a tug.

LC: Yes, I wondered if he meant something to you outside of just being the constitutionally elected head of government.

MS: He must have been. My family…I was raised in a Democrat family. Kennedy was a very charismatic person. Even though he barely won the election he was a person that everybody that I grew up with voted for. His election was November ’60 while I was at the first semester of college, still living in a heavily Democratic part of the country. And as I said, a very charismatic person who brought loyalties and it affected people very deeply.

LC: Yes. I think even those of us who don’t actually remember him can get some feel for that through films and from listening to him. But first person account is really important. Let’s go back to Ft. Bliss and to your re-instatement, I guess, if that’s fair to
say, as an instructor. How did you do the second time around? Was it still a good thing for you to be doing, Michelle?

MS: Yes, it was. I enjoyed it.

LC: Did you have contributions to make to the curriculum? Was the curriculum set?

MS: The curriculum was set. It had been set for decades. Well, maybe not decades.

LC: It felt like it.

MS: The curriculum for the military instruction methodology had been set for decades. The curriculum for the missile had been set for years.

LC: And there was no movement on that?

MS: There was no need to move.

LC: It was good?

MS: Yeah, it was good. The missiles had not changed. In other words, any change in the electronics or stuff on the missiles, the curriculum would change for that but at a higher level than where I was. Basically we were told what to teach.

LC: You were delivering it, not packaging it as it were.

MS: Right. We were the messengers.

LC: Okay. I wonder if you could talk for just a minute or two about the Hercules system. You’ve mentioned that there was a potential for the missiles to be armed with nuclear warheads and that that was true when you were in Hawaii. Can you also talk a little bit about the...At least my understanding is that the fuel system was different between the Hercules and the Ajax system. Is that true?

MS: Yes.

LC: Can you say anything about that?

MS: The Ajax had a liquid fuel system and the Hercules had a solid fuel system.

LC: Was the solid fuel preferable?

MS: Yes, it was much more stable. It was safer, it was easier to transport. Now they both used solid fuel boosters. As a matter of face the Hercules booster was four Ajax boosters clustered together.

LC: Oh really?
MS: Yes. But the fuel on the missile itself; on the Ajax you had two tanks, one for the fuel and one for the oxidizer and the two were hypergolic. If they came into contact they ignited so you had to be very careful in using the equipment for one or the other. It went as far as when you put the hose to fill or drain it into the spout you actually had to screw it in to make it solid and make sure it didn’t fall out and the oxidizers had reverse threads, counterclockwise instead of clockwise.

LC: Okay. And what was the significance of that?

MS: So that you could not connect a fuel line to an oxidizer line or vice versa.

LC: So it was a built-in preventative to the horrendous result.

MS: And if I remember correctly, and I can’t say this for sure, they were also color-coded. They had different colors.

LC: Now can you talk a little bit about the Nike Hercules mission? What was this weapon designed to do?

MS: Its primary mission was to shoot down bombers.

LC: And so it was placed in what kinds of locations?

MS: Coastal areas, also around major cities within the country because some bombers would fly too high to get over the coast or they’d fly over Canada and then come in across the Canadian border. So basically they were centered around major cities and especially around the coast.

LC: Now as someone who was trained in an electronics background were you also observing the role of electronic computers with regards to the targeting of the missiles?

MS: No, that was at the other end. That was at the radar end.

LC: Okay and that was a separate location?

MS: That was a separate location. Those people received longer training than we did because they had to maintain both the radars and the computers. The interesting thing is that the Nike used analog computers rather than digital computers.

LC: Really?

MS: Uh-huh. Analog computers were cheaper to make in those days. Basically a digital computer in those days was a UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer) or something like that.
LC: Right, one of the big ones.
MS: The IBM 360 that could fit into a big trailer hadn’t even been invented yet.
LC: Right, which, for us even now is…
MS: Ancient history.
LC: Yeah, it’s a dinosaur and a time warp. But I think it will be a matter of interest in the future, the initial introduction.
MS: Well, all I knew about these computers was that they were analog computers. They did mention that to us.
LC: How long did you stay this time at Ft. Bliss as an instructor?
MS: Let’s see. I left there sometime in ’64. About the summer of ’64, I think. Maybe the spring.
LC: Under what circumstances did you leave, Michelle?
MS: I applied to go into Army counterintelligence and was accepted so I went to the Army Intelligence School, which in those days was at Ft. Holabird, Maryland.
LC: Just outside and actually now part of Baltimore.
MS: It was still part of Baltimore then.
LC: Okay, it’s a few miles south of downtown, I guess. Michelle, this is maybe the second time that you had applied for another school. Were you unhappy, would you say, with the Air Defense School?
MS: I can’t say I was unhappy. I was not ecstatic but basically what happened at one of these Saturday morning classes, an Army intelligence special agent made a pitch for people to apply for the school and told us all the good things that would happen if we were in Army intelligence and it appealed to me.
LC: So you sort of put your hand in the air and took some of the entrance test?
MS: Well, not literally put my hand in the air. I just had to go and fill out paperwork.
LC: Sure, figuratively. And do you know whether an additional security clearance was run on you at this time?
MS: Oh definitely.
LC: And evidently it turned out differently than the first one did.
MS: Well the first time back in ’61 I didn’t think they actually ran a clearance and I think what happened, and this is just a gut feeling, is that Sergeant Green lied to me and basically told ASA (Army Security Agency) one thing that I didn’t want to go and told me that I was turned down so I could get me into Army Air Defense somehow to meet his quota. This is just a gut feeling. I have no idea if that’s what happened.

LC: But certainly things did turn out differently for you in 1964 when you applied for the Army Intelligence School. Were you happy to find out that you had been accepted?

MS: Oh yes.

LC: Did you have any kind of break between your leaving Ft. Bliss and your reporting to Ft. Holabird?

MS: Yes, I went home on leave again.

LC: And was everything okay at home? Were your parents okay and everything?

MS: Yeah, everything was fine.

LC: And were they, would you say, proud of you?

MS: They were proud of me overall but nothing…my getting into intelligence was just another step in my Army stuff.

LC: Okay, so it kind of all seemed the same to them.

MS: Yeah.

LC: But they were supportive would you still say?

MS: Oh yes, definitely.

LC: Tell me about Ft. Holabird. Do you remember arriving there?

MS: No. (Laughs)

LC: Once you were on the ground there what was an average day like?

MS: An average day basically was eight hours of class interrupted by an hour of lunch.

LC: So you’re doing all kinds of classroom work. Can you talk about the curriculum?

MS: Let’s see. I can’t say in what orders we learned these but we learned how to touch type, we learned Army security regulations, we learned how to conduct interviews, we learned how to write reports of our interviews, we learned how to conduct security
surveys and inspections to make sure that security procedures were being followed and
that classified documents and equipment were maintained properly. We learned the
principles behind adjudicating security clearances. We learned how to do surveillances,
both vehicular and pedestrian. We did those in downtown Baltimore and the vehicular,
we expanded that area. We learned a little bit about counterespionage techniques, we
learned how to interrogate as opposed to interview, a lot of report writing as I said.
Everything we did we had to write a report on and once we got out of school that was
true, too. Anything we did we had to write a report on. That was basically it.

LC: And the coursework lasted over an entire year?

MS: No, the coursework lasted for about six months, I would say. Yeah, six
months.

LC: Now, how did you do as a student?

MS: I graduated number one in my class.

LC: (Laughs) Did you really?

MS: Yes.

LC: When did you graduate?

MS: Excuse me?

LC: When did you graduate?

MS: In the fall of, I guess in the late summer of ’65.

LC: Can you explain coming out number one in the class? Were you driven, were
you motivated? Was this material that appealed to you?

MS: I wasn’t driven or motivated. I wasn’t driven. I was motivated. Everybody
in the class was motivated. As a matter of fact I didn’t know I was number one graduate
until we hit our graduation ceremony.

LC: What happened at the ceremony?

MS: Well, basically they said, “Okay, Steiner, you’re number one. You’re the
number one graduate. You sit here.” We had figured out among ourselves from
remembering what all the grades were that somebody else was number one and I was
number two.

LC: So it was a bit of a surprise then.

MS: Yeah, it was a surprise to me and everyone else in the class.
LC: Did you make friends with some of the other guys in the class?
MS: Not really. Mostly acquaintances.
LC: What were some of their background? Were they from all around the US Army?
MS: Yes.
LC: Were there any people there who were not US Army people?
MS: In my class, no. In some of the other classes they had Navy and Air Force people.
LC: Okay. Can you tell me anything about your instructors?
MS: Well, we had one guy who was African American, really short and thin. He was a Lieutenant Colonel and extremely animated and extremely left wing, as much as you can be within the Army. (Laughs) He would say, “You don’t remember the march on Washington?” (Laughs)
LC: (Laughs) He sounds cool. He sounds like an interesting man.
MS: Yeah, he was. I don’t remember his name. And we had a few people who, in retrospect I could say were very conservative. They were the people who taught us about Communism in our political theory classes.
LC: What did you learn about Communism?
MS: The standard propaganda from the US government. (Laughs) I guess I can’t remember any details.
LC: Sure, okay.
MS: Oh, there is one thing I do need to bring up about this class. We were in a very small class, only thirteen or fourteen students. One woman, genetic, other than me, I mean, and the rest guys. There was one class when we were talking about the requirements for security clearance and the question came up, “Can homosexuals have security clearances?” And the instructor pretty much left it open for open debate within the class.
LC: Really?
MS: Yeah. But bring up things like, “But what if this person…?” You know the terms closet and out didn’t exist in those days so I’m going to paraphrase. “What if this person is out and not in the closet? He doesn’t care who knows he’s homosexual. He
can’t be blackmailed because everybody knows and if someone threatens to blackmail him by telling someone he says, ‘Go ahead. I don’t care?’” So he was putting in these leading questions. Out of the thirteen of us, twelve of us were saying, “Sure, why not? If he can’t be blackmailed and he has nothing to hide and he can’t be sexually entrapped, why not?” One person, who did come from the south, was saying, “He’s homosexual. He shouldn’t have a security clearance.”

LC: Period.

MS: “Why?” “Because he’s homosexual.” “But why shouldn’t he have a security clearance because he’s homosexual?” “Because he’s homosexual.”

LC: It just kept going around?

MS: Yeah, that was it. “He’s homosexual. He can’t have a security clearance.” That was it to him. All the others of us, there was no problem. As long as the person was out and not subject to blackmail or entrapment we saw no problem with it.

LC: That’s interesting.

MS: By the way, one of the requirements in this class, to get into this class, was you had to be over twenty-one years old. Another requirement was you had to have an Army GT (General Technical) score of 115 or higher, which meant, if you equate GT scores with IQ, which means you had to be in the top third percentile. Sixty-seventh percentile or higher. And by means of comparison, to get into Officer Candidate School you could get in with a GT score of 110. So they were more restrictive as far as “IQ” than to get into Officer Candidate School. So after we went on with this open debate in the class, in forty year retrospect I’d say for fifteen to thirty minutes out of a fifty minute class, the instructor said, “The official US Army and US government policy is that homosexuals cannot have security clearances and this is the policy regardless of what any of us thinks of it.” And then we moved on to another subject.

LC: Did you think that was because there was a sense that homosexuals were psychologically, I don’t know, had psychological difficulties that they couldn’t overcome?

MS: Well this was before the APA (American Psychological Association) removed homosexuality from the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders).
LC: Right, so it was in the DSM or whatever the equipment was as psychological disturbance.

MS: It wasn’t until Bill Clinton that this policy was rescinded.

LC: Yeah. You remember this conversation, the open conversation because of the way it ended, particularly?

MS: Among other things, and the fact that this guy had no logic behind his thought and that it was a twelve to one opinion.

LC: But nevertheless the rule was the rule.

MS: And the rule was the rule.

LC: Are there any other incidents from your time at the school that you recall that you can talk about?

MS: That was basically it. There was one rumor going around the school that has been in every Army school I’ve ever been to or heard about that some sergeant male and some private female had been caught at some unspecified date having intercourse in a dumpster.

LC: In a dumpster?

MS: In a dumpster. (laughs) I mean I have heard that at every Army installation I have ever been at where there was a school and even at some installations where there wasn’t a school. (laughs) I’ve heard of some other people who said that they’ve heard it where they were, in places that I hadn’t been.

LC: (laughs) Well it’s a fairly unsavory image so perhaps…

MS: But it was always that the senior person was male and the junior person was female.

LC: Of course. That fits.

MS: And in some cases somebody would point out to a WAC (Women’s Army Corps) and say, “That’s the WAC.” And I’d say, “How do you know?” “So-and-so told me.” “How does he know?” “I don’t know.” (laughs)

LC: “Well, she’s the only WAC around here.” Actually, that points up a question that could possibly be of interest. The genetic woman who was in your class, she was a WAC I take it.

MS: Right.
LC: Do you remember her or anything about her or where she was from?
MS: I don’t remember where she was from. She had had some Army time already because I believe she was an E4. We had some people fresh out of basic in our class. The highest ranking person in our class was an E7.

LC: What was your rank at this time?
MS: I was an E5. I was a Spec 5. She was tall, about 5’7” or 5’8” maybe, thin, and mannish looking.

LC: Was she smart?
MS: Yeah. We were all smart.

LC: What was the dynamic with her and the other guys?
MS: A lot of guys were trying to hit on her.

LC: No kidding.
MS: Including me. (Laughs)

LC: Really?
MS: Yeah. (Laughs) She and I dated once or twice.

LC: Do you think she handled the class okay as the only genetic woman there?
MS: Yeah, she did. She made friends with WACs who were in some of the other classes. And of course they had their own WAC barracks so she…

LC: She separated off from you guys.
MS: Yeah.

LC: Who were the other WACs on the forge at that time? Were there other schools held at Holabird at that time?
MS: No, the only thing at Holabird was the intelligence school.

LC: But they had a barrack, the WACs did?
MS: Yeah. We had one WAC instructor who was a Captain and she had a child if I remember correctly. I think I remember her mentioning she had a child. I don’t recall whether she had a husband at the time. I don’t know if she was married, divorced, or widowed but based on Army policy at the time, I know she didn’t have the child out of wedlock.

LC: Sure, because Army policy at that time around unwed mothers was what?
MS: The interesting thing was that she had a child period. In those days if a 
woman had a child she was out of the Army. So they made an exception in her case for 
some reason.

LC: Interesting. And she was an instructor?
MS: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember what content she was teaching?
MS: No, I don’t.

LC: After your graduation…well, actually, before your graduation, I’m sorry, 
Michelle, at what point did you learn what your posting would be?
MS: I hadn’t yet. I’ll tell you why in a moment but there are a few other incidents 
that I want to bring up.

LC: Okay, please do.

MS: While I was at the school I bumped into a Captain who had been a tactical 
officer when I was at the West Point prep school. He was going through the officer basic 
course, transferring from the infantry to military intelligence. Sometimes it’s a small 
world.

LC: Yes. Was that someone you had been more or less friendly with at the prep 
school?
MS: No, the TAC (Tactical) officers and the students, cadet candidates never had 
yany sort of social relationship whatsoever. But he did remember me.

LC: That’s interesting.

MS: He was hard to forget. He was like 6’4” or 6’5”, flaming red hair and a big 
strawberry birthmark on his cheek.

LC: Really? Where was he from? Do you remember?
MS: No, he was Irish. His name was Donahue and that’s all I remember about 
him at the time.

LC: Does he recur for you later in your career?
MS: Well, I saw him…later in my career I was reading an issue of Time Magazine 
and they had an article on Vietnam and one of the things was on military advisors and he 
was the advisor that they picked and there was a photograph of him there. That’s the 
only other time in my military career that he appeared in any way whatsoever.
LC: So you saw him in *Time Magazine*?
MS: Yeah.
LC: Was there another incident or two that you recall also from that time period?
MS: Yeah, there were two other things. We had a Captain on the base who worked at the Army Advocate General Office on the post whose name was James Bond.
LC: No, no. Seriously?
MS: Seriously. (Laughs) Later he got into trouble for anti-war activity or sentiments. And then one other thing, there was a Captain there named William Marvel, or Bill Marvel. Actually he was a Lieutenant and he got promoted to Captain so the day he got promoted the civilian women in his office brought him a uniform to wear.
LC: Right. What else could they do, really?
MS: They brought him a Captain Marvel comic book outfit that they had sewn together themselves. (Laughs)
LC: (Laughs) They just couldn’t wait.
MS: They just couldn’t wait.
LC: That’s funny.
MS: And he wore that. And according to a newspaper article in the *Army Times* he wore that uniform all day.
LC: Well at least he was a good sport about it. That’s important.
MS: (Laughs) Also, his commander was a good sport about it.
LC: Yes, I suppose so.
MS: Actually, I think his commander was in on the gag.
LC: Well it’s kind of irresistible, really. That’s good. You found out that you were going to get your first assignment after graduating. When did you actually learn what your posting would be?
MS: Well, actually, before I got assigned to the school I found out that immediately after graduation I’d be going to another course at the same school. That was called Defense Against Methods of Entry.
LC: And this was a special sub-course?
MS: Right, it was a specialty course.
LC: Okay. And its name again was…?
MS: Defense Against Methods of Entry.
LC: Okay, what did that actually mean?
MS: Basically it taught us how to defend against surreptitious entry, against lock picking and stuff like that. In order to teach us how to defend against lock picking they had to teach us how to pick locks and that was most of the course. But it was also how to pick locks, how to manipulate combination locks, etc, etc. It was an eight-week course. There were eight of us in the class. I graduated fourth.

LC: I was going to ask was this easy or difficult for you?
MS: I found it somewhat difficult. I do not have the best manual dexterity but I still managed to come out fourth.

LC: Yeah, well that’s not too bad.
MS: Partially because of the written tests.

LC: Okay. And was it training that turned out to be in any way useful?
MS: My first assignment wound up being in the tech shop of a military intelligence unit.

LC: Really? The tech shop?
MS: Yeah, that’s where the people who do anti-bugging and defense against entry and forensic photography all were assigned to; the technical aspects of the field.

LC: Right. And this was in Germany, is that right?
MS: This was in Germany.

LC: Okay. When did you go over to Germany?
MS: I went over there in September of ’65.

LC: Were you pleased with getting this overseas assignment?
MS: I would have rather have stayed in the States.

LC: Why do you say that?
MS: Oh, because I was familiar with the States. I could easily travel to visit family and stuff.

LC: When you received your posting did you know how long it would last?
MS: It was nominally a three-year tour.

LC: Okay, three years.
MS: That’s what all tours in Germany were at the time.
LC: Okay, I wondered if that was true. So it was a standard three-year tour.
MS: Right.
LC: You mentioned that your assignment was to the tech shop. Who did you report to?
MS: Let’s see. Actually, my first assignment was not to the tech shop. My first assignment was in the training office.
LC: How did that go?
MS: It was an administrative job. Paper pushing, making assignments to other members of the unit for our weekly training program—who would teach what. It was one of these offices that had to be manned that nobody wanted to be in.
LC: Did they just plug you in there because you were new?
MS: They plugged me in there because I was new and because I didn’t know how to drive.
LC: Okay, you didn’t know how to drive.
MS: Right. That was one of the few jobs in the unit where you did not have to drive as part of the job.
LC: Was it known that you didn’t know how to drive?
MS: Yeah, when my sponsor wrote to me from Germany back to Ft. Holabird he wrote something about privately owned vehicles and stuff and I foolishly mentioned, “I don’t have a car. I don’t know how to drive.”
LC: So they did know that. Did you repair that deficit?
MS: Eventually.
LC: Okay. Did you do it in Germany?
MS: Yes.
LC: How long were you in the training office?
MS: About four or five months, I think.
LC: Okay. And you moved from there to the tech shop?
MS: No, what happened was our unit got tasked to provide someone to be transferred up to the 7th Army G2 office and since I was new, didn’t have a driver’s license, etc, etc, they sent me up to be interviewed and I was accepted and so I was transferred to 7th Army G2.
LC: Which was located where?
MS: Also in the strip yard area. That’s why our unit was tasked because we were in the area. We didn’t have to do any transportation to move people. It was just, “Hey, we’ll drive you over there and park you and put your stuff in the back of this little truck and here you are.”
LC: What was your job, liaison with the 7th Army G2?
MS: No, I was actually assigned to the 7th Army G2.
LC: Oh, okay. Was this a temporary duty assignment?
MS: No, it was permanent.
LC: And how long did you stay in that office?
MS: I stayed in that office six to ten months.
LC: Okay. What was your work like there? What did you do?
MS: Basically we were responsible for the policies for physical security of classified areas and installations, for keeping records of the tracking of the SMLM vehicles. Soviet Military Liaison Mission.
LC: Thank you. (Laughs)
MS: (laughs) S-M-L-M. This was before Germany was reunited of course and basically the Soviet Union had a military liaison mission in each of the US, French, and German sectors of West Germany and each of us had a military liaison mission in East Germany. And basically members of SMLM and us in the other areas I would assume, but basically sized, even though they were ostensibly military liaisons. And every SMLM vehicle had to have a distinctive license plate with the flag of its nation. And basically any time a soldier in Germany saw one of these vehicles he had to report the license number, the description of the vehicle, what road it was at, where on that road, and which direction it was heading or as much of that information as he could remember.
LC: And you were in an office that was receiving these reports?
MS: Right. We were receiving them, keeping track of them and then forwarding the reports to US Army Europe Headquarters.
LC: Was it your sense, if you can say that all of the Soviet Military liaison vehicles were appropriately marked with the correct license tag?
MS: As far as I know, because if they weren’t, if they were caught in a vehicle not
appropriately marked that was grounds to kick them out of the country.
LC: Yes, it would have been a serious incident, no questions about it. What other
kinds of things did the office keep track of? Individuals?
MS: We reviewed reports of the security inspections and the investigations of, not
investigations, inspections and surveys of military installations. We followed up to make
sure that the units corrected any deficiencies that were noted in these reports and
provided some recall for US Army Europe.
LC: Were you also seeing reports from other sectors and other parts of the
Western-held sectors?
MS: No.
LC: You were just producing reports and sending them out?
MS: Right.
LC: Okay. Was your rank, had your rank changed at this point or were you still
an E5?
MS: While I was working at the training section I got promoted to Staff Sergeant.
LC: Okay. Did you enjoy that G2 office work?
MS: Not really. I would have rather been out doing background investigations or
working in something that was more closely aligned with my training.
LC: And did you have an opportunity to undertake that kind of work while you
were in Germany?
MS: Yes, I managed to get back into my parent unit.
LC: Which was…?
MS: My original unit, the 6th Military Intelligence Company.
LC: Okay and you went there from the G2 office?
MS: Right.
LC: And what was your assignment at that point?
MS: I forget in which order this happened but part of the time is when I worked in
the tech shop and part of the time was when I was going background investigation.
LC: And you’ve already described some of what you did in the technical and forensic work. Tell me about background investigations. What kind of path did you actually undertake?

MS: Okay, basically what happened is when someone was being considered for security clearance and was stationed in our area of responsibility or had previously been stationed in our area of responsibility we would check military police records, we would check local police records although we had a special liaison section for that so I didn’t get to do that. If they were still in the area we would check medical records, we would check personnel records if they were in the area, we would check records at the local credit union and we would go out and interview co-workers, former co-workers, commanders, character references, both those that they listed and those we developed on our own. And we were told in the case of listed character references we were given the name. In the case of developed character references that were developed elsewhere we were given the names. Otherwise we had to determine the developed references and the commanders, co-workers, etc, and we were told how many of each kind to interview.

LC: Were the protocols for those interviews fairly strict or was it up to you to determine how an interview would unfold?

MS: Yeah, it was a strict protocol that we learned at the intelligence school at Ft. Holabird but based on the information derived we’d have to use our own intelligence and common sense as to what follow-up questions to ask.

LC: Now you implied that you did these kinds of investigations and interviews both for people who were currently military people assigned in your area of responsibility but also people who had been assigned there before. Would it be the case that you had to go through older records sometimes to look back any number of years for information about someone who had been there earlier?

MS: Well normally it would be the people who had formerly been there normally it would be just records.

LC: Not interviews?

MS: Not interviews unless the person listed someone who was in the area as a reference, in which case the subject of the investigation may never have been in that area. It’s just that the person he listed as a reference was there. And if it’s somebody who left
Germany who like three months earlier and needs a clearance at his new location we’d go back, if we were instructed to or given a lead sheet to, to go back to his old unit and see if there’s anybody there who remembers him.

LC: What about things like medical records? Were those all proprietary military medical records?

MS: Yes.

LC: Okay, so nothing outside?

MS: Nothing outside the military, and again, only if the person was in the area and that was where his current records are.

LC: Right, the records follow the person through their assignment. Did you have any language difficulties in conducting interviews and how was that handled?

MS: I interviewed mostly military personnel and civilians working for the Army. We had people there who were fluent in German so they interviewed people whose interviews had to be done in German.

LC: Was this work more appealing to you than some of the paper pushing that you described earlier?

MS: Oh definitely.

LC: Can you say why?

MS: Because I was interacting with people directly.

LC: It was more people oriented?

MS: Right.

LC: Okay. Did you feel that that’s where your strengths were as well as your interest?

MS: I think so.

LC: Okay. How long did you stay in Germany, in fact?

MS: I stayed in Germany a little bit over two years.

LC: And not the normal or standard three years.

MS: Right.

LC: Under what circumstances did you actually leave?

MS: I was sent to Vietnam.

LC: Did you want to go to Vietnam?
MS: I volunteered to go. I can’t say I wanted to go but I felt it was my duty to go.

LC: Can you say a little bit about that, Michelle? You volunteered because you felt it was your duty. Can you talk about that sense of duty and why it compelled you to volunteer for Vietnam, maybe in light of what was happening over there?

MS: Basically this was sometime in 1967. Things were getting heavy there and we were losing so much in Germany as far as gasoline allocation and personnel and everything because the emphasis was on Vietnam. In those days, even though I was twenty-five or so, I was still somewhat naïve about certain political realities (laughs) and I was still, “We’ve got to fight the Commi hoards and I can do that in Vietnam. I can’t do that in Germany.”

LC: The work you were doing wasn’t really targeted at containing Communism in Germany?

MS: No, it was basically just basic security stuff.

LC: Sure. Did you have a sense of some urgency that the real conflict was in Vietnam? Did it go something like that?

MS: To a degree, yes.

LC: How did you actually volunteer to go to Vietnam? Did you put paperwork in? Did you talk to your superiors?

MS: I put in paperwork. Part of the reason was that we had a change of command in our unit and the new commander was not liked or respected by many of us.

LC: So morale was not so great.

MS: Morale was not so great. A lot of other people were doing it and that’s what gave me the idea.

LC: Really?

MS: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember some of those other servicemen who put in to go to Vietnam?

MS: Not really.

LC: Okay, but you knew it was happening?

MS: I knew it was happening. People were saying, “I just put in for Vietnam.” It was also considered a ticket to be punched for your career progression.
LC: Were you thinking along those lines as well?
MS: It was not a major or primary reason or consideration but it was a consideration.
LC: Did you consult with anyone? Did you talk to say a trusted friend or a superior officer about the wisdom of putting in for Vietnam?
MS: No.
LC: No? You just did it on your own?
MS: On my own.
LC: When did your orders come through?
MS: My orders came through in July, I think.
LC: And what did they say?
MS: They said I’m being assigned to the 149th MI (Military Intelligence) Group and APO (Asia/Pacific Office) so-and-so in San Francisco, for service in the Republic of Vietnam.
LC: Okay. Were you pleased?
MS: Yeah, because I asked for it.
LC: (Laughs) But sometimes, as you know, between asking and getting maybe there’s a little doubt. But you were fine with it?
MS: I was fine with it.
LC: Okay. Did you have an opportunity to go on leave before reporting?
MS: Right, I went on leave back to New York, visited my folks, and then my mother mentioned that my buddy who was the one who I met at the bridge table in 1961 and who I lived near later on a few years later, had visited her. He and I had lost contact about two or three years earlier. He had gotten out of the Army and managed to figure out which Steiner family in New Rochelle, New York was mine and paid my folks a visit. And my mother made an interesting comment. She said, “You know, back when you and he were friends and hanging out together I was thinking that the two of you might be homosexual but after meeting him I know that’s not the case.”
LC: After meeting him she knows that’s not the case?
MS: Yeah. She said, “If you were a homosexual you wouldn’t pick someone like him.”
LC: (Laughs) Okay. Did she ever say anything else about that?
MS: No, just the fact that when he and I were buddies we were very, very close friends.
LC: Sure. And your mom kind of picked up on…?
MS: And any place we went off duty, almost all the time we were together.
LC: Yeah, and she picked it up a little bit, yeah. Was she concerned about your posting to South Vietnam?
MS: Of course.
LC: What about your dad?
MS: He was concerned, too.
LC: Sure. Did they ask you, did it come out that you had volunteered?
MS: No. However, my uncle… I was spending an evening with my uncle and aunt. My uncle came out and said, “Why did you volunteer for Vietnam?” I said, “Huh?” I forget exactly what my reaction was but it indicated that, “Yes, I did.” I don’t know how he figured it out about the idea but the question came out of the blue and completely surprised me.
LC: That’s interesting.
MS: So I basically told him but as far as I know they never told my folks.
LC: I wonder how he figured it out.
MS: I don’t know.
LC: Maybe he knew you a little bit.
MS: (Laughs) Maybe he knew me better than my folks did.
LC: Or he was just watching different things, maybe. Michelle, let’s take a break for a minute.
MS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins. I am continuing my oral history interview with Michelle Steiner. Today is the 15th of March 2004 and I again am in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and Michelle is speaking to me by phone from Arizona. Hi Michelle.

Michelle Steiner: Hi.

LC: Hey, we were speaking last time about the conclusion of your time in Germany with the 66th MI Group and we were just about to begin talking about your service in Vietnam and that I believe begins in September of 1967.

MS: Right.

LC: Okay. Do you remember flying over to Vietnam?

MS: Uh-huh.

LC: Can you tell me about that flight?

MS: It was quite uneventful, actually. I reported to the replacement station at Oakland and they got us organized in groups and appointed me as the NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) of the group. I was the senior; I don’t know if I was the senior E6 in the group but maybe they just picked an E6 at random from the group. There were others in the group but they never put senior NCOs on detail. Making you in charge of the group was considered a detail. Basically they got us upgraded on our shots and made sure all our paperwork was ready and had us pack up all the uniform items that we would not take to Vietnam with us, like our greens and stuff and I don’t know what they did with them because when we got back we were issued all new stuff. And then eventually we got on our flight and we flew over to Vietnam. It was a long flight. I’m trying to remember if we refueled in Alaska or not. No, basically, I don’t remember any of the details. I just remember flying.

LC: But you said it was fairly uneventful. Do you remember how you were feeling, you yourself? Were you calm, were you expectant, anxious?

MS: I assume I was calm because there was nothing to evoke any memories.

LC: Where did you fly into?
MS: We flew into Tan Son Nhut. I think everyone flew in there.

LC: By ’67, yeah, pretty much. Were you awake when you arrived there? Was it the daytime or nighttime?

MS: It was daytime because I remember taxiing up to the terminal. Everybody was looking out. I had a window seat so I was looking out at the jungles and everything below us as we were coming in. Having never been to the country before we were looking in wonderment and wondering what was going to happen.

LC: Sure. What happened when you got off the plane?

MS: They shepherded us into a building and we started getting all sorts of briefings. We got issued, I forget the sequence but they were telling us various security things, personal and personnel security, they were briefing us on customs. The one thing that remains in my mind is they said, “One thing you will see here are men walking in the street holding hands. They are not homosexual. This is just the custom of Vietnam and it’s perfectly acceptable for heterosexual men to walk holding hands together if they’re friends.”

LC: What did you make of that?

MS: I just filed it away for reference and I could understand why they brought that up, considering our culture.

LC: What was the kind of tenor, the implied meaning behind, “Don’t think this is anything weird or unusual?”

MS: It was presented very matter of factly, actually. It was just part of an overall briefing and it was presented just as an item of data just the same as everything else in the briefing.

LC: Okay, but no special attention to it.

MS: No special attention was made of it and probably most straight people probably would not remember it at this late date.

LC: That’s right. After the briefing, were you clear where you were going to actually be going?

MS: Yes, I had that on my orders before I left and it was one of these things where if everyone was saying, “Once you get to Vietnam they can change your orders because all your orders area really good for are getting you to Vietnam,” but we all knew
that was not true for MI because MI assignments were controlled from DA (Department of the Army) and no one has the authority to change them.

LC: That’s right. And what exactly did your orders say?

MS: The 149th MI Group.

LC: And that was in…?

MS: That was in the Saigon area, in Saigon, actually.

LC: In Saigon itself?

MS: Yeah.

LC: Okay. Where did you actually go from Tan Son Nhut? Did you go to downtown Saigon?

MS: Yes. I forget how long we stayed at the replacement depot but I eventually wound up at the 149th MI group headquarters.

LC: Michelle, tell me a little bit about the headquarters. Where were they? What else was around there?

MS: Okay, well the MI Group headquarters itself was on a Vietnamese military compound with Vietnamese MI. We were co-located with them. Our quarters were in a group of rented villas. I couldn’t find them to save my life right now if I were back in Saigon.

LC: Were they on the base or just nearby?

MS: No, they were civilian quarters. There were about four or five houses that we had rented from the Vietnamese and they were not quite mansions. We called them villas, multi-bedroom, two-story homes.

LC: And how many guys were in there?

MS: I don’t know. There were four in my room.

LC: Okay, sure. And were your bunkmates or hooch mates or whatever you guys called each other, were they new in country as well as you were or had they been there for a while?

MS: Some of them had been there for a while. As a matter of fact, I was the newest one there. When I came in I was the only one on our plane who went there.

LC: Oh really? Okay. Were there other MI people, though, coming in at the same time?
MS: That I don’t know. The two people who were in the room with me, I mean sitting next to me on the plane were not.

LC: What were they? Do you remember at all?

MS: No.

LC: Okay. When you got into Saigon, what kind of first impression did you have of the city?

MS: It was dirty. This was the first time I had been outside of North America other than my tour in Hawaii. It was cramped. It looked like country villages because that’s what we were driving through between Tan Son Nhut and getting into Saigon. I remember passing a Buddhist temple with an iron gate that had a swastika built into the wrought iron and I had learned previously somewhere that that had been an ancient Buddhist symbol so I didn’t freak out at seeing. Being of the Jewish heritage, that symbol has other meaning for me, and very negative meaning, but I was able to put it in context and you could tell the difference between it and the Nazi swastika in that one is clockwise and the other is counterclockwise. One stands on point and one stands on the flat but it was enough for me to actually notice it and remember it, obviously.

LC: I think…yes, absolutely. It stuck with you. It had some kind of impressive quality.

MS: And that’s about the only thing I remember from the bus ride from the airport into Saigon itself.

LC: Now were you placed off the bus at the headquarters? Is that kind of how it went?

MS: I really don’t remember.

LC: Okay. What was the job that you were to do there?

MS: I wound up working at the group headquarters. My assignment was to the group so they could have sent me anywhere within the group they wanted and the group had field offices throughout the country or throughout South Vietnam. And I wound up at group headquarters being an administrative clerk, even though I was an E6, for the classified confidential funds.

LC: And in general terms, what were those funds being used in support of?
MS: They were being used for confidential purposes and I really can’t go into that.

LC: Okay, sure. The money that you were administering, were those U.S. funds or were they also South Vietnamese government funds?

MS: I didn’t handle the money itself. I just basically reviewed the paperwork submitted by people out in the field and our liaison officers and stuff and did a lot of typing of vouchers and stuff to prepare for the officer for signature and did some bookkeeping work also. And yes, they were most in piasters, some in US funds, but we always had an account for, even the stuff in piasters we had to account for it in US equivalents.

LC: Okay. I see. What was the headquarters structure? For someone who didn’t have any familiarity with it could you walk me through the headquarters group structure?

MS: Are you talking about the physical plant or the organization?

LC: The organization.

MS: Oh, there was a group commander, a deputy commander, a Sergeant Major, and there was a headquarters company with a 1st Sergeant and company commander and basically the standard S-1, S-2, S-3, S-4.

LC: Overall, what was the mission of the group headquarters?

MS: It was intelligence collection, human intelligence.

LC: And was this within ICEX (Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation)?

MS: Excuse me?

LC: Was the group headquarters within ICEX?

MS: No, it was not. It was strictly US standard collection mission.

LC: Okay, so separate from Robert Comer’s group that was operating essentially from the embassy and MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam)?

MS: Right.

LC: Who was the group commander at the time that you were there?

MS: I don’t remember any names.

LC: Really? What was life like for you on a daily basis? Did you walk back and forth from where you lived to the office?

MS: No, we had to take a jeep. It was too far to walk.
LC: Were there particular security protocols that you had to observe going back and forth or was it a secure area in general?

MS: We were driving through Saigon. Basic security procedures were when you picked up the jeep inspect it for any booby traps. Even though it was parked in a secure area anytime we took a vehicle we examined it for booby traps. Basically someone picked it up at the motor pool or facility, walked over to that and drove back to the barracks, we climbed into it and we had four people per jeep so we picked up as many jeeps as we needed to get everybody over. We worked twelve-hour days. We did not work cut shifts. It was one twelve-hour shift for everybody from I think seven AM to seven PM or maybe eight to eight. I forget. Normally for lunch, for breakfast and dinner we did have a mess hall. For lunch I don’t remember what we did. I think we mostly picked up boxed lunches at the mess hall in the morning or we drove over to the Cholon Navy Exchange and ate at the snack bar there or something. It varied. Monday through Friday was twelve-hour shifts. Every other weekend we worked an eight-hour shift so basically we’d work twelve hours for five days, eight hours for two days, twelve hours for five days, then we were off for two days and then repeat it. And of course on the weekends we always had a weekend man so it was half the office work one weekend and the other half work the following weekend.

LC: I see. Did things pile up over the weekend when you only half the personnel?

MS: Not really.

LC: Not really? And with that schedule fairly rigorous was that hard on you guys or did you just take it in stride?

MS: We took it in stride but it wasn’t exactly easy.

LC: Yeah, it would kind of wear on you.

MS: Essentially we could have gotten all our work done in a five-day eight-hour work week but because we were in a war zone and there were a lot of people who were working much longer hours in much more hazardous conditions it was decided that we could not have it easy and be REMFs. Familiar with REMF (Rear Echelon Mother Figure (polite form))?  

LC: Yeah. (Laughs) Did you think that you were? Did you have the feeling that you were kind of getting by as an REMF or not?
MS: Yeah, we knew we had it a lot easier than the troops in the field.

LC: Okay. And that was an awareness that you had at the time?

MS: Yeah, because it was a war zone and we knew what the people out there were actually undergoing and going through even though we weren’t experiencing it.

LC: Were you aware of it in terms of seeing things in the sky at night or hearing things? Were you aware in the background of conflict going on?

MS: Not really. I don’t recall for the most part hearing any gunfire at all. But even in the Saigon Cholon area there was things going on. There was this one Vietnamese woman who had the nickname, The Dragon Lady, which I am sure she wasn’t the only person who had that nickname. But basically she rode on the back seat of a motorcycle with a guy driving it and would shoot at US personnel either in uniform or out. It didn’t happen all that often, maybe two or three times a month, if that often even, but we knew she was there or they were there.

LC: Yeah, it may have been more than one.

MS: There may have been more than one woman also.

LC: But that was the kind of thing that was sort of in the background for you in terms of security?

MS: Yeah. Oh, and that’s an interesting thing that I just recalled. You quite often saw men, women in tandem on a motorcycle with the guy driving and the woman sitting in the back and invariably the woman would be riding sidesaddle.

LC: Is that right?

MS: Yeah. Of course with that ao dai outfit it’s very hard to straddle a motorcycle seat.

LC: Yeah, that would be true. Just think of the mechanics of that. Did you have, on your days off, which were few as I understand, and the evenings that you had off, did you have particular things that you liked to do?

MS: Nothing in particular, really.

LC: Did you go around town or did you stay pretty close to the headquarters?

MS: I spent quite a bit of time downtown. There was a USO (United Service Organizations) there; there were a lot of shops. I’d go to the Cholon Exchange. We had movies at our villa every night, sixteen-millimeter copies of major motion pictures. Not
the most current ones necessarily. We’d also go on the airbase and occasionally go to the
exchange there or to the real movie theater there. Sometimes we...we stuck around the
barracks a lot playing pinnacle or poker. I remember my second or third—no, when I
was still fairly new there I got into a poker game and that first poker game I got into I
won a heck of a lot of money. Money was cheap there. You had nothing to spend it on
so when you’re playing cards with scared money you don’t win so much but when you
have the money then it really doesn’t mean all that much to you.

LC: The bets are plumper.
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: The bets are a little bit plumper sometimes.
MS: I couldn’t make out that word.
LC: The bets are a little bit heavier.

MS: Oh, heavier, yeah. Heavier and more free sometimes. I remember one hand
where we were playing seven-card stud high-low. High hand and low hand split the pot.
It got down to three of us and one other guy and I were obviously going for high. The
other guy was obviously going for low so he would raise every bet of course because he
knew he was guaranteed half the pot. This other guy and I were betting. I had three of a
kind showing. He had two pair showing. My three of a kind beat either of his pair and
we were both betting like we had full houses. I didn’t have a full house but I bluffed him
out and he had a full house but he knew that if I had a full house or four of a kind—he
knew I couldn’t have four of a kind because the fourth card from that triple three was
showing somewhere but he knew that if I had a full house it would beat his and I was
betting like I did have a full house.

LC: So he folded up?
MS: He folded. (Laughs) I think I won two hundred bucks on that hand after we
split the pot.

LC: Not bad. Good job. (Laughs) That was a small victory. But as you say
there wasn’t a lot for you to spend your money on. Was there anything, did you eat at the
noodle stands and that kind of stuff?
MS: Yes I did occasionally.
LC: Did you pick up any Vietnamese language?
MS: Very, very little. Just some of the common GI slang was about it.

LC: Would it have been of any use to you?

MS: It would have because I did on occasion have to speak with Vietnamese counterparts but not that often.

LC: Okay. I wanted to ask you about that arrangement on the compound where the Vietnamese MI were located with you. Can you tell me something about that structure? This was within the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?

MS: Right.

LC: Okay. Tell me what you know about their MI structure and anything, if you recall, about their personnel or the organization that was on the same compound.

MS: Well they and we were in separate buildings. We had one building in the entire complex because it was their complex and I really, except for one or two occasions, just did not have anything to do directly with them. We were basically there because we had to be somewhere and we had some liaison functions but we were not a liaison organization. So there were one or two times I had to speak with one of their people. I don’t even remember any of the details of that. I just did not have any contact with them in general so I really don’t know.

LC: Did you form any kind of a general impression about their efficiency, productivity, dedication to the fight, anything like that?

MS: Not really. As I said, no contact with them. I had the overall impression that it was more than just a job for them and they really believed in what they were doing.

LC: Now you stayed at this posting with the 149th for a few months. What happened to you next?

MS: Okay, they disbanded the 149th. The 149th was an unusual situation in that the 149th was an MI group and they were subordinate to another MI group. There were actually three MI groups in country: the 149th, which was a collection group, I think the 163rd but I’m not sure of the number was a counterintelligence group and then there was I think the 504th, the 5-something, that was supervisory to the 149th and the 163rd. And after about three months they disbanded both the 149th and the 163rd and just had the 504th, if that’s what its number was, to run everything without subordinate groups under it. Everybody who stayed with it just stayed with the 504th. But there were a number of
us who, when they reorganized, suddenly became superfluous to the organization so we
were reassigned to the ICEX program. We actually stayed under the assignment of the
504th but we were put; we were attached to the ICEX program to MACV. And that lasted
about two or three months at most I think and then we were actually reassigned to them
but with no change in duties.

LC: Okay. So this was kind of happening, those administrative changes were sort
of happening over your head.

MS: Right.

LC: And the impact it had on you was…?

MS: That our records went somewhere else.

LC: And were you moved from Saigon?

MS: Yes. I was actually supposed to go, oh, let’s see. I was going up to I Corps
to a village in Quang Ngai province, just north of Quang Ngai and I can’t remember its
name. It began with m-i or m-e or m-y but we all went up to the Corps ICEX
headquarters in DaNang initially for in-processing. While I was there and while we were
there, there were about four or five of us, they decided they needed to keep one of us at
the headquarters to work in the headquarters and I don’t know why they picked me but
they did.

LC: People keep picking you for things like that.

MS: It may have been that I was an E6 at the time and it may have been that I
wasn’t the lowest rank. There were some lower rank and there were some higher rank
than I was. It may have been that the village sub-sector that I was to go to they decided
didn’t need the body there as much as the other ones did. But anyway I wound up in the
headquarters there in DaNang and that was, actually we were co-located with CORDS,
C-O-R-D-S, and I can’t remember what that stood for but that was the overall project run
technically by the embassy and consulates but de facto by the agency. We were under
their control and working there and in this facility that we had, we had their operations
people, their admin people, our branch for ICEX and lots of others.

LC: Okay. Could you draw a distinction between the mission of ICEX and what
CORDS (Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support) was doing? Can you
talk about the differences or what you mission was, if you can?
MS: Well, the ICEX/Phoenix was to identify, capture, and interrogate members of the Viet Cong infrastructure. I know ICEX/Phoenix had a reputation that was heavily promoted by the US press of being an assassination group, which we were not. We did wind up, as an organization, killing a lot of Viet Cong infrastructure because they didn’t want to be captured and interrogated so they fought back and so they wound up, in a lot of cases, getting killed because they wouldn’t surrender. Our mission was not to kill them because killing them just gets one person out of the way and he’s going to get replaced. If you capture him and interrogate him you actually get information that can be used to press the war effort.

LC: And that was essentially the mission behind the organization. That was what was driving them, was the Viet Cong and obtaining information that might be useful in developing both strategic and tactical plans. Is that fair?

MS: That is correct.

LC: Where were the offices in DaNang?

MS: (Laughs) I don’t know.

LC: Okay. Right, with regards to somewhere else, pardon me.

MS: It was in DaNang. It was walking distance from the main hotel where I Corps headquarters...I Corps headquarters was on a military compound but there was a hotel that they were using in DaNang for barracks and mess facilities. There was an enlisted/NCO club there and we were within walking distance although we had a jeep assigned to us. And then there was another villa again elsewhere where those of us and the enlisted people were quartered, and some of the civilians separate because we were not quartered in hotel with the military.

LC: What was your impression of DaNang? It was smaller than Saigon, much smaller. It was a more relaxed atmosphere some ways but unlike DaNang, all Vietnamese civilian commercial establishments, especially the restaurants and clubs were off limits unless you were there on a liaison mission with one of your Vietnamese counterparts.

LC: So to go there you had to go with more or less trusted Vietnamese?

MS: Right. We were not; I didn’t not have any Vietnamese counterparts. There was one evening where a bunch of us were in a restaurant eating. There was me and the
one or two others from my office and a bunch of us from the local counterintelligence
office. It turned out the NCO/IC of that counterintelligence field office had been my
class leader when I went through the counterintelligence school at Ft. Holabird.

LC: No kidding.

MS: And there were one or two people in that office who had been with me in the
66th MI in Germany so I had some friends there so they were going out and they invited
me to join them. Then two MPs (Military Police) walked in and I remember one of them
was a really big, shockingly tall, heavy guy, muscular, and the comment was that the
shotgun he had on his shoulder looked like a toothpick, he was so big. Anyway, they
came up and asked to see our ids and everything and Sergeant Choy, who was the
NCOIC there who was ethnic Chinese, went over to them, showed him his MI credentials
and said, “We’re on an official mission.” And they go, “What?” We weren’t on any sort
of official mission.

LC: But it worked that time. (Laughs)

MS: It worked. (Laughs) He had his credentials and said, “I’m
counterintelligence and a special agent,” and his credentials backed that up and said we
were there on official business.

LC: The MPs were like, “Okay, over to you then.” Did the MPs in the area
generally know that you guys were there and know that there was MI people there and
also CORDS and all that?

MS: Well the CORDS and us they didn’t pay any attention to. Of course they
knew MI was there. DaNang was one of the few cities in the country that had a Rabbi
and a Jewish Chaplain. Of course Saigon had one, too, and I would spend Friday nights
when I was in both places at Jewish services. I’m trying to think what else.

LC: Who were you working for? What kind of work were you doing while you
were up there?

MS: I was processing reports from the field. We had an office that consisted
basically of two desk offices for the agency and me and a Lieutenant working for them
and a bunch of Vietnamese civilian hirees who were translators. And basically they
would be taking in reports from the Vietnamese side of the ICEX/Phoenix program and
translating them to English. The Lieutenant and I would take those translations and
rewrite them into proper English because I’m sure you’ve seen very poor translations if
nothing more than some instruction manuals for products coming from the Far East.

LC: That’s right. Very choppy.

MS: Very choppy. They were not, admittedly their English was a lot better than
my Vietnamese, which was nothing, and even if I had studied Vietnamese at VLI, their
English was probably better than my Vietnamese would have been. But we took their
reports, translated them to English. I mean, they translated to English and we polished it
up to make it readable for higher headquarters and basically that was my job. I also
wound up interviewing job applicants for translators, which was interesting.

LC: Now that would be Vietnamese people?

MS: Vietnamese people, yes.

LC: How did they come to know that there was a possibility of getting a job?

MS: I don’t know. There was some agency that would send them to us. I don’t
even remember if it was a Vietnamese agency or a US agency.

LC: What kinds of things would you do in those interviews?

MS: I’d speak to them. They’d either come with the forms filled out, the
application form, or they would fill it out on the spot. I don’t remember. I’d read the
form, ask them questions about their backgrounds, their work history, trying to get an
idea of their language capability from speaking to them because the interviews were done
in English, of course. I gave them something in Vietnamese that I already had a
translation of and compared their translation with what I received. In all cases it was a
matter of either, “We’ll get back to you.” It was always a matter of, “We’ll get back to
you.” There was no hiring decision on that first interview. Some of them—then I’d have
one of my translators a bit later call them and either have them come back in for a second
interview or tell them sorry. We never let anyone hang. We always gave them one of
those two answers. There was one person in particular I recall that my notes had very
positive comments about and when this person came back it was like it was a different
person completely. I found it hard to believe it was the same person and actually I’m not
even sure that it was the same person but I had very positive response on my notes for
this person and when he came back for the second interview it was almost like he could
barely speak English at all.

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LC: Did that raise suspicion for you?
MS: It did. But I passed them on to my supervisor and basically had the boss or
the secretary tell him no. On the second interview I had the decision of hiring or not. I
did not have to pass it up to my boss to make a decision to the point that I even got into
salary negotiations with them.
LC: Really? Can you talk a little bit about that? What was the going rate?
MS: I don’t know but I had a chart indicating different translator levels based on,
it was almost like a civil service chart. And so I basically I didn’t show them the
chart, although in one case I accidentally did. It was just a matter of negotiation.
LC: And did most of the people who were offered the position come around to
taking the offer?
MS: Yes, they did.
LC: Were you able to form an impression about why these individuals were
volunteering to work with the Americans?
MS: They needed the money in most cases. Part of my interview was also
ideology and they all had the right answers.
LC: Sure. Had they been cleared at some previous point in the process?
MS: Yes, as best as you can run clearances in Vietnam.
LC: But somewhere along the line an effort had been made?
MS: Yes, whatever could be done was done and that was done before they came
to us.
LC: Right. Was there any tension or was there a good working relationship
between the military people such as yourself and the people from the agency?
MS: Yeah, no problem.
LC: Really?
MS: Yeah.
LC: Okay, because I’m sure you’re aware the picture seems to be a little more
cluttered at this remove in time.
MS: Well, in our office at our level there was no problems. I can’t say anything
about anywhere else. Not that I can’t. I’m saying I can’t, not based on not being allowed
to but being based on no knowledge of it.
LC: Yeah, no information. But where you were it was pretty good?
MS: Yeah.
LC: Can you describe at all the people that you were working with who were from the agency? Were there any women working there?
MS: No.
LC: Were there any…?
MS: Actually there was one woman there from the agency. She was there on temporary duty apparently. She had her own translators with her and if I remember correctly her mission was trying to track down where POWs (Prisoner of War) were.
LC: Okay, that’s interesting.
MS: I asked her about problems, her being—I didn’t get to speak to her all that often but there was one night where we happened to be sitting in the club together and we were the only people who, she was the only one I knew in the club and I was the only one she knew. It was one of the Army or military-run clubs. So we sat and talked and I asked her if she was having any problems with her being a woman and dealing with the Vietnamese and she said there were some but it wasn’t such that she couldn’t function.
LC: That’s interesting.
MS: Basically it was if a pilot was downed somewhere she would find people who saw what happened and interview them. As I said, she had her own two translators with her and I believe both were Vietnamese and I think both of them were women also.
LC: Did she travel outside of the office much?
MS: Yes, yes. She was very rarely in the office.
LC: You know it makes me think that I should also ask you, Michelle, as a Jew, did you take any heat or did you experience any kind of stuff on the edge of a remark or any kind of what we know generally call discrimination or prejudice? Did you encounter that?
MS: Not in Vietnam. Not when I was in MI. I ran into some of it when I was in the Air Defense many years earlier but that was on a very individual basis. There were just some people who, I don’t know, this might be stereotypical but it happened to be true. They were from the Deep South.
LC: Well, that’s just a fact. But yeah, I just wondered if you can come across any of that and if it impacted you at all.

MS: No. But while we’re on that subject, just a little anecdote, while I was in DaNang, Hanukah was coming up and my mother mailed me a menorah. She and my dad had been in Vegas and at one of the gift shops she found a menorah and mailed it to me like a month maybe before Hanukah. It arrived in the mailroom and I picked it up at the mailroom about two or three hours before sunset for the first night of Hanukah. It arrived just in time.

LC: Oh, that’s amazing.

MS: Yeah. I still have it. I’m looking at it right now.

LC: Really? Do you? That’s wonderful. That’s great that you still have it.

Gosh.

MS: Yeah, along with two or three other menorahs there. I’m not Jewish anymore but I still value that heritage.

LC: Absolutely. That’s very cool. That’s a good story. I want to ask you about the Tet Offensive.

MS: Okay.

LC: Now I’m thinking that you’re still in DaNang at that time. Is that right?

MS: That is correct.

LC: Can you tell me whatever you recall about that time period and what happened in the city perhaps?

MS: We all knew it was coming. Those of us in intelligence knew it was coming. No one would believe us so it was discounted. We all knew it was coming. We even knew what date it was coming.

LC: And you knew this from what kinds of information?

MS: Intelligence reports.

LC: Can you talk at all about what sorts of sources?

MS: No, I can’t, partially because I don’t know. I saw some of the reports but the report information is completely divorced from source information for protection of sources and everything. But all of us in the intelligence community knew something was coming and it was tied with Tet. Okay? I believe the Tet Offensive was either the 21st or
22\textsuperscript{nd} of January and we all knew what date it was going to be and what was going to happen so we were all on high alert. It was going to be the day after Tet itself so I was sharing a room with another enlisted person in our villa and we were sleeping at night and we woke up hearing these sounds. And he wanted to get up and get into a defensive position with his rifle and I said to him, “No, it’s happening tomorrow night. That’s just fireworks because tonight is Tet. Let’s go back to sleep.” So we did. The next morning we found out that we were really hearing gunshots and he was really upset at me. What had happened is the Tet Offensive was originally scheduled to be that night. A word went out through the Viet Cong channels that it was postponed another night. However, the Viet Cong infantry forces who were supposed to attack DaNang didn’t get the word of the delay. They’re supporting artillery did. So they attacked DaNang a day early without artillery support and never got into the city. All the firefights were out on the edge of the city. They did manage to overrun the I Corps complex. It was actually a Vietnamese complex that I Corps co-located with them. They did manage to overrun it and then were repelled out of it. There were stories about people gathered at the edge of rice paddies that morning watching the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and US forces just mopping them up in the middle of the rice fields; chasing them down with bunches of Vietnamese civilians standing at the edge of the rice field watching this happen outside the city. They never got inside the city. Of course my roommate and friend was very upset with me because if they had gotten in and gotten near us, which might have been one of their targets because of who we were, they would have caught us asleep.

LC: How did you live that down or did you just let time go by?
MS: Just over time it went away.
LC: Okay. Did he remain your friend?
MS: Yeah. Well, we weren’t close friends. We worked together. He was a clerk and it was one of these things, he worked for the military chief of our office, I worked in the office next door for the civilians but I still came under the command of Major Thompson and we were roommates. And when you become roommates you usually become friends to some degree but it was not a close friendship.

LC: What was his name, do you remember?
MS: No. I remember the name of the Major and the Lieutenants that I worked
with before.

LC: Go ahead and tell it.

MS: The Major was Owen L.L. Thompson and he either went by the nickname of
Double L or Tommy and the Lieutenant was Mike Brumley, B-r-u-m-l-e-y, I think.

LC: Now, what did Lieutenant Brumley do?

MS: He and I basically did the same thing. I didn’t work for him. I worked with
him. We both worked for the same civilians and those civilians’ names, even if I could
remember them, wouldn’t matter because they were not their real names. Of course he
was a Lieutenant and I was a Staff Sergeant so yes, he did have authority over me to a
degree but not an official landline type thing. It was not a chain of command thing.

LC: Right. And how was he to work with?

MS: We worked well together. Actually we did the same kind of job but
separately from each other. We had to coordinate a few times on some things like who
would get which documents to work on if one of us was overloaded. When one of us
went on R&R (Rest and Relaxation) the other one would have to take over his workload
to a degree, the stuff that just could not be allowed to back up.

LC: Sure, things that can’t go left.

MS: Yeah.

LC: Michelle, did you actually get an R&R?

MS: Actually I got two of them.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me about those? When did they fall, if you remember?

MS: The first one was just after I got to DaNang. I had put in for it when I was in
Saigon and it came through when I got to DaNang. I asked Major Thompson, “Can I
take this?” and he said, “Sure. You haven’t gotten so heavy into a job that we can’t
afford to lose you for a week.” I forget which R&R was which, but as I said, I took two
of them. One was to Japan and one was to Australia.

LC: And when did the second one come in your tour? Were you still in DaNang
or was it after?

MS: No, it was actually after I had left DaNang.
LC: Okay, after you had moved on. Well, let’s talk about the R&Rs for a second. Tell me about going to Japan. What happened?

MS: I got down to Tan Son Nhut. Because of where I was working I was able to arrange for an Air America flight or actually they arranged it for me and basically I was the only passenger on the plane. I sat in the co-pilot’s seat and the only seats on the plane were pilot and co-pilot. And basically they just flew me down into DaNang and I took, they flew into Tan Son Nhut and I went over to the R&R center that was to process us out and hung around a day or two while they arranged transportation and flew over to Japan. Interestingly, we had to change our Military Payment Certificate, the MPC, to US dollars and then when we got to Japan we had to change our dollars to MPC but they used different series of MPC in each country so we couldn’t just take our Vietnamese MPC and spend them in Japan. And they told us it would be very easy to change MPC back to dollars if we wanted because all we had to do was convert the MPC to yen at the military finance institution and then go to a Japanese bank and change the yen back to dollars. But they said, “Number one, if you do you’re in violation of regulations and number two, if you do, what are you gonna use the dollars for anyway?” So basically I just went there, enjoyed myself, went on a lot of tours, took photographs, wandered around the Gensa, bought some camera equipment and then came back.

LC: Did you hang out with anybody or did you just kind of make your own way?

MS: I made my own way. I went there alone. No one from my office went with me and I didn’t meet anybody who I really hit it off with.

LC: Okay. Was it interesting for you to be in Japan? It’s a totally different culture. Did you pick up an interest in Japan or was it just kind of a place that you visited?

MS: I’ve always had a mild interest in the country. I shouldn’t say always. I don’t know, maybe I picked up the interest while I was there. Pardon me.

LC: That’s okay.

MS: Anyway, I enjoyed it. I had a lot of fun although a lot of people wouldn’t think what I did was fun.

LC: But it was fun for you?

MS: It was fun for me.
LC: There you go. (Laughs)

MS: I went on these tours that were mostly sponsored but the USO. I should say I bought them through the USO. They weren’t necessarily sponsored by the USO because there were a lot of tourists on them also.

LCP: Okay, I see.

MS: They were quite interesting and that’s how I spent most of my evenings. Daytimes were spent visiting stores and stuff. I always loved to just do a lot of window shopping and stuff and wandering through places.

LC: And just sort of observing and having a look.

MS: I sampled Japanese food, which I found was more my taste than Vietnamese food. To this day, except for pho and noodles I never really got into Vietnamese food.

LC: Well, either earlier or later, it’s not really material, you also went to Australia.

MS: Right.

LC: Okay. Where did you go in Australia?

MS: Sydney.

LC: Okay. And how long were you there?

MS: R&Rs were nominally five days but in actuality I think we spent six or seven days each. Technically they were five days.

LC: And what did you make of Sydney?

MS: I loved the city.

LC: Yeah, it’s great.

MS: It’s a great city. You’ve been there?

LC: Yes, I have a couple of times.

MS: The time I was there, though, there was a petrol strike. All the truck drivers that delivered gasoline or petrol to the service stations were on strike.

LC: Oh boy. So did that close things down pretty much?

MS: Well, let’s put it this way. It made travel around the city a lot easier. There was no traffic. The subways and busses were a little more congested than they probably would have been otherwise.

LC: Yeah. What did you while you were in Sydney?
MS: Oh, let’s see. I managed to get to a duplicate bridge tournament, I went to synagogue, had a few dates, one with a woman I met at the bridge tournament, one was arranged for me by some people who I met at the synagogue. I had dinner with that couple one night, also. I wandered around the city like I did in Tokyo. I didn’t do any guided tours, though. That’s about all I can remember. I didn’t by the stereotype stuff but I did buy some boomerangs and stuffed koala bears.

LC: Sure, sure. Absolutely. (Laughs)

MS: I think my older nephew was born while I was on leave, going between Germany and Vietnam and I sent him one or two koala bears and some boomerangs.

LC: That was good, doing the family thing.

MS: Yeah. I brought some boomerangs home with me and somehow they’re all gone now. I don’t have any left. I don’t know what happened to them.

LC: Did you find it at all difficult to return to Vietnam?

MS: A little bit. I was back in civilization and I hate to imply that Vietnam was uncivilized but let’s say I was back in a society much more reminiscent of the United States.

LC: There was a familiarity there.

MS: Yeah. Everyone spoke English; it was a modern city, not ravaged by war. Temperatures were temperate rather than subtropical; it was urban rather than rural, etc, etc.

LC: Sure. How long did you actually stay with the assignment in DaNang?

MS: Four months.

LC: How did it come about that you left that posting for your next assignment?

MS: Basically I told Major Thompson, I asked him, “Is there any chance for me to get out on the field so I can really do what I’ve been trained to do? I find this job stagnant and not challenging.” He said he understood and it turns out there is an opening coming up in one of the sub-sectors so they sent me down there. I went to Mo Duc sub-sector, which is the second southernmost sub-sector in Quang Ngai province. Duc Pho was just south of us and Quang Ngai province was the southernmost province in I Corps.

LC: And what did you know about Mo Duc before you got there?

MS: Nothing.
LC: Did you even know where it was?
MS: I looked it up on the map.
LC: Once he said that it was possible to go down there did you jump on that and say, “Yes, I’d like to do that?”
MS: Yes, and I was down there like a week later.
LC: Really? Okay, I was going to ask that. That’s fast. Tell me about where you lived. Did you actually live in Mo Duc Village?
MS: Well, there was a military compound just outside the village. It was the compound where the mayor, who was also the local commander. The mayor of the village was an ARVN Captain and he was the commander of the Regional Forces Popular Forces there which are the equivalent of our National Guard.
LC: What people call the Ruff Puff?
MS: The Ruff Puffs, right.
LC: So he was both within ARVN and a commander of the Regional Forces and the mayor. He was all of those things.
MS: Right.
LC: Okay. What was his name?
MS: I don’t recall.
LC: What was your impression of him? For example, how old was he and did he speak English?
MS: He was a lot older than you would expect a Captain to be. The story I got from the people on my team was that he was politically unpopular so he would never get promoted past the age of Captain.
LC: Any idea what the source of that was, the unpopularity?
MS: He really tried to do his job and not just loaf around and apparently in his chain of command the dedication maybe was not as high as it could have should have been but his was.
LC: I see, and that made him a bit unpopular?
MS: Yeah. Of course he would rock the boat to try to accomplish his mission, which made him a very good person to work with.
LC: Yes, I was going to say that sounds like a pretty good ally to have, at least in terms of the things that he could control. What was the size of the sub-sector? Can you give us a sense of that?

MS: Population?

LC: Yeah.

MS: I don’t know. If course most of it was very rural, except for the Mo Duc village itself.

LC: Which was about what size? Any idea?

MS: No.

LC: Okay. And were you the only intel advisor down there or was there someone else?

MS: I was working for a Lieutenant.

LC: Okay. Who was that?

MS: I don’t recall his name.

LC: What was his MOS? Was he also MI?

MS: He was MI, yeah.

LC: And the two of you would work with the mayor?

MS: Well actually we worked with his intelligence people.

LC: How many did he have? What was his personnel compliment for intelligence people?

MS: I don’t know.

LC: Did you have a particular liaison that you worked with?

MS: There was one person I worked with and basically it was a matter of again, mostly record-keeping. When anything came up for one of us to go out in the field with them the Lieutenant always decided to go himself and never would let me go.

LC: He wouldn’t let you go?

MS: Well, he always chose to go himself. He said, “I’m going to do it. You stay back here.”

LC: Did that kind of disappoint you? Did you really want to get out there?

MS: Yes, but by the same token I knew it was dangerous and I’d be putting myself into danger so it was mixed feelings.
LS: Well, Michelle, can you talk a little bit about the general situation in the Mo Duc sub-sector while you were there? What was the security situation like?

MS: We had an unofficial arrangement with the Viet Cong. We left them alone and they left us alone. Part of Mo Duc sub-sector, we were building a dam for the farmers for irrigation and we had a civilian from CORDS with his own translator out in the sub-sector who was responsible for that and he would be working with his counterparts for getting them supplies. We paid for it and basically the Viet Cong left that alone because they could have sabotaged it very easily if they wanted and they left it alone because I guess they knew that it helped the farmers and if they did anything to it, it would get more public opinion of the local community against them; which is just the opposite of what they wanted and needed. But the few times we came under attack; like there was one night when every sub-sector in southern Quang Ngai province was attacked at the same time, in every case it was strictly mortars. The mortar rounds landed due north of the flagpole in the center of the compound exactly three hundred meters north of the perimeter of the compound.

LC: You’re kidding.

MS: I am not kidding.

LC: That is astounding. Did you guys all put this, how long did it take to put together the fact that that was true? Did you assess that the day after the attacks?

MS: Oh, it was assessed very, very rapidly. The exact distance was not known until the next day but we knew that yeah, they’re landing north of the compound and someone took a site and said, “It’s exactly due north of the flagpole.” The next morning they were able to due range finding and measurements and every one of us said, “It’s three hundred meters north of the compound.”

LC: Unofficially, what kind of message did you think that was sending?

MS: It was sending a message that, “Hey, we were ordered to attack but we’re honoring our unofficial commitment not to attack you directly.”

LC: How long had that kind of unofficial understanding existed? Do you know?

How long was that in place before you arrived and Mo Duc?

MS: I don’t know but it was one of the first things they told me when we got there.
LC: No kidding. And was it still more or less in place when you left?

MS: Yes, it was. This did not apply to US installations and troops. This seemed to be strictly between the Viet Cong and the local Vietnamese government because US troops were attacked on the road, snipers did shoot at us, they did occasionally attempt to mortar US installations but they did not attack any of the Vietnamese compounds, the sub-sector headquarters.

LC: You mentioned the road and I’m thinking that you’re probably referring to Highway One.

MS: That’s correct.

LC: Okay. Can you talk about the security situation actually on the road, say the difference between night and daytime travel?

MS: Basically you didn’t travel at night.

LC: Okay, period?

MS: Period.

LC: Were you ever shot at when you were using the road?

MS: Not that I can recall.

LC: Did you at any time when you were over there feel yourself to be actually in danger?

MS: There was one case where we thought we were being attacked. Actually, there was a number of cases where we thought…any time these mortar attacks came we went into defensive posture.

LC: Yeah, I would think.

MS: There was one case where we were in defensive posture. I was armed at the time with an M-79 grenade launcher, which was not my normal weapon. We got word from our counterparts that the Vietnamese bunker at the edge of the compound, or at the outer perimeter had been overrun by VC (Viet Cong) and that bunker was visible from our position. As a matter of fact it was almost due north of us. It was due north of the center of the compound and we were at the north edge of the compound about halfway between the center and the eastern edge. So I was ordered to fire rounds at the back door of the bunker to try to blow it open.

LC: Sure.
MS: And then a guy on our machine guns saw someone crawling down the path from the bunker towards the compound so he fired some shots there and said, “Steiner, follow my tracers,” so I shot. About a half hour later we stood down from the position and went back to bed. The next morning they found a body there where he and I had been shooting. It turns out that the bunker had not been overrun. What happened was that there was rifle fire and a lucky shot went through one of the firing courts and hit one of the three guys in there. The other two guys panicked and ran back and reported they had been overrun, saying that the third guy had been killed. The third guy had not been killed. He had been wounded. He was the one crawling back. He is the one that I killed. Well, I don’t know if I killed him. There were machine gun rounds in him and shrapnel from the M-79, both of which could have been fatal but we don’t know which actually killed him.

LC: When did you find out his id, that he was actually an ARVN?
MS: The next morning when they went out and recovered the body.
LC: And how did you cope with it?
MS: I don’t know if I’ve completely coped with it. I don’t know if you heard me choking up when I told you about it.
LC: Yes. Most people don’t know when they’ve been in a situation like that and you actually found out right away. Michelle, I’m very sorry that that happened and it sounds like a circumstance that just was chaotic and created and maybe fueled by panic.
MS: Since the day I retired from the Army I have never touched a firearm.
LC: I would believe that. That wasn’t your end of the Army anyway, really.
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: That wasn’t really your end of the military anyway. You were not weapons and weapons handling and all that stuff. I mean I know you were trained in it but you were really working…?
MS: Well, it’s like every other soldier. I had to qualify with a firearm every year.
LC: Sure, but it’s something that you’ve now left completely behind.
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: You’ve left that completely behind now.
MS: Yeah. I can’t quite say that I have never touched a firearm. A few years ago
I took some courses in self-defense and one of those courses was in defense against an
armed assailant and in the fights in the course, when disarming the assailant, yes, I
touched a weapon. But I have never handled one per se that I can recall.

LC: Michelle did you enjoy what you were doing in Mo Duc?
MS: I can’t say I enjoyed it or did not enjoy it. It was a job and something I did.
LC: Were you anxious to leave Vietnam as your time there grew shorter?
MS: Actually, I was seriously considering extending for six months.
LC: Can you tell me why you were thinking about that?
MS: As I said, even though I didn’t enjoy the job I thought I was doing a
necessary job.

LC: What made you feel that? What within the work you were doing felt
important?
MS: That we were working towards the identification of—working towards
ending the war. Also there was a matter of getting thirty days free leaving and other
benefits for extending so I was thinking of doing it. And then there was an engineer unit
about a klick up the road from us. Its mission was maintaining Highway One. The
Captain who was commanding that engineer unit extended for six months, took his
month’s free leave, went home and visited his wife and kids, came back, and two weeks
later was dead. That’s when I decided I did not want to extend.

LC: What happened to him? Do you know? How was he killed?
MS: He was killed by a sniper. And I said, “You know, I was going to extend but
why give them a second chance at me like he did?”

LC: At what point where you making that kind of decision and thinking about re-
extend?
MS: It was a month or two from the end of my tour.

LC: And once you had decided that you weren’t going to request an extension,
what did you find out about your next posting? When did you get orders for a new
assignment?
MS: Somewhere along the lines, and I forget how, I found that I was going to be
going to the CONARC MI detachment, the Continental Army Command MI Detachment

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at Ft. Myer, Virginia. It was a small detachment. I remember receiving letter mail, well, in those days that was only kind of mail, from my sponsor, welcoming me to the unit, etc, etc, etc, and I corresponded with them. And I forget exactly how I was originally notified that I was going there. It may have been the letter from him. And then when I got to… but I never received orders. I had an assignment alert but never had received official orders so when I got to Saigon and I was on my way out I spoke to the NCO who was processing us as we were getting off the bus. He said, “Oh yes, you’re assignment has been changed. You’re going to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas.” They reassigned me to the 112th MI group at Ft. Sam Houston.

LC: Did you have a particular reaction to that, going back to Texas? Not Ft. Bliss this time, but Ft. Sam Houston.

MS: No, this was San Antonio. It surprised me that they’d make a last-minute change. I never did find out why they made the change but I had to just reorient myself, so to speak.

LC: Michelle, do you remember actually departing from Vietnam? Do you remember flying out?

MS: Yes, to a degree.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me whatever you recall?

MS: Okay. After we got processed we were told to report to the airport, a certain spot at the airport itself at a certain time. I think it was like seven o’clock at night, or five. I know we flew out at night and in the meantime just killed time on the base on Tan Son Nhut. So I wound up going to the movies (laughs) and I don’t think that I’ll ever forget that on that particular day I saw this absolutely terrible movie called, *If It’s Tuesday This Must Be Belgium.*

LC: Okay, wait, Troy Donahue, am I right?

MS: I think so.

LC: And I can’t remember her name.

MS: Sandra Dee?

LC: Someone like that, yeah. (Laughs)

MS: I think Jackie Gleason was in it.

LC: Yeah, I have to agree with you. It’s pretty bad.
MS: (Laughs) But I loved it.
LC: Okay, good.
MS: Because I was leaving Vietnam. I loved it.
LC: Yes, it seemed appropriate to the moment. (Laughs) That’s funny. So flying out, do you remember what route you took or any of those details?
MS: Let’s see. We were waiting on line to get on the plane and it was one of these things. As soon as the incoming troops got off the plane, we were getting on it while they were refueling it and restocking it with food.
LC: Sure. Did you see those guys?
MS: Yeah, we saw those guys. They walked right past us. If I remember correctly when we came into country it was the same thing. We walked right past the troops. And were told, “If any of you are caught heckling these newbies you’re being pulled offline and you will be rescheduled for another flight.”
LC: Well, that was good incentive to just be quiet.
MS: I don’t know if they would have carried it out but that’s what we were told. So obviously none of us did. We took off at night. They closed all the lights in the cabin, had us pull down all the window blinds and we took off almost going straight up. It was a steep of a climb angle that a 707 could handle. That’s what we did.
LC: Do you remember how you felt?
MS: I felt good. “I’m out of here, I’m out of here.”
LC: Was there any noise on the plane? Did anybody cheer?
MS: I think we all cheered.
LC: Where did you fly into in the States?
MS: We flew into Travis.
LC: Did you actually arrive at San Francisco or did you arrive at the Army base there?
MS: Well, we arrived at Travis and basically we were responsible for our own transportation once we, no, no, excuse me. They bussed us to Oakland Army Terminal from Travis and fitted us for new Army green uniforms and basically fitted us for the uniform, told us to go to the mess hall and get our free steak dinner and come back and pick up our uniforms and pick up our duffle bags which they stored for us and we were
on our way. We were given money somewhere along the route for transportation and advanced travel but I forget if it was at Travis or back in Vietnam.

LC: Were you going to have any time in the civilian world before reporting down in Texas?

MS: Yeah, I had a month.

LC: What did you do?

MS: I went home. My father and mother picked me up at Kennedy Airport and drove me home.

LC: Did you see, along the way in those travels, did you see any anti-war protestors at the airport?

MS: No. I didn’t see any anti-war protestors, I never got spit on, I never had anyone shout anything to me. I know other people did but I didn’t.

LC: Tell me, if you can say anything, about your parents’ reception.

MS: They were very happy to see me alive.

LC: (laughs) I’m sure they were. I’m sure they were.

MS: While I was in Vietnam, I forget what the cause was but someone delivered a telegram to my folks. Of course the door knocked, they opened it and they see this Western Union courier and they got very panicky. But it had nothing to do with me. I don’t even recall it. They told me what it was but I don’t even recall what it was. Of course what they didn’t know in those days, they would not have been notified by Western Union if I had been killed or injured.

LC: Because why?

MS: Because in those days during Vietnam it would have been someone in an Army uniform making a personal notification.

LC: You spent maybe a month or so there with thirty days of leave?

MS: Right.

LC: Was it good to be back in New York?

MS: It was very good. I got back just in time for the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

LC: Okay. Did you watch much of that on TV?
MS: I did. And after seeing Chicago, I said to my sister and to my aunt, “You know, I think I’d rather be in Vietnam than be there. I think it’s safer in Vietnam.” I was very upset with the Chicago police. I was very upset with them playing “Happy Days Are Here Again” at the convention when the country was so on edge.

LC: What about that particularly got under your skin?

MS: It sounded like they were divorcing themselves from the reality of the world. There were no happy days.

LC: It was beyond ironic.

MS: It was beyond ironic. I had some very strong arguments with my aunt, Sheila. She was a very, very staunch liberal Democrat, very anti-war, and she was talking about some things and I’m saying, “You know, we’re getting killed over there Aunt Sheila, and what they’re talking about there isn’t going to help us.” She was talking politics. I was talking soldiers on the ground. So we were talking across and we finally agreed just not to discuss the war with each other anymore.

LC: I was going to ask if she was able to hear you speaking from your own experience.

MS: I don’t think she was. I don’t think I really heard her. We just agreed that we better not discuss this with each other.

LC: Did you have a particular view on either Humphrey or Nixon at that point and what their plans, and I’m speaking particularly about their stated plans for the involvement in Southeast Asia?

MS: Well, how shall I put this? In those days I was a lot more conservative than I am now. Backtracking, when Kennedy was killed, about a month later I was in the book section of the PX (Post Exchange) and saw a copy of Conscience of a Conservative by Goldwater and thought, “I’m going to be voting against him but the least I can do is hear what he has to say. Not what other people say he says but read his own words.” So I bought the book and wound up voting for Goldwater.

LC: Is that right? On what basis? Would you mind saying? What was the key thing for you?

MS: I agreed with eighty percent of what he had to say in the book at the time. I disagreed with what he had to say about Gary Powers and U2. That’s the only thing that
really sticks out in the book that I remember. But I wound up voting for Goldwater. I think Goldwater was greatly misrepresented. Even to this day I think that Goldwater was greatly misrepresented by the press and by his opponents and even by his supporters and he was not nearly as right-wing back then as he was made out to be and as he turned out to be later in life. He was definitely later in life not as right wing as he was made out to be in ’64. I voted for Nixon in ’68. I just did not like Humphrey. He came across to me as phony. I think I would have voted for LBJ if he had stayed in the election but I have a hunch that if he had stayed in Nixon would not have run against him.

LC: I think that’s…

MS: I think the GOP (Grand Old Party (Republican Party)) would not have picked Nixon if LBJ had stayed in the race in ’68.

LC: What about Robert Kennedy? Did you feel some kinship with his thinking about the Vietnam War or was he also too far to the left?

MS: I read an article by him in the newspaper while I was in Vietnam. He wrote something about the Tet Offensive and basically he was totally off base. He was really disparaging the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese government. I knew, not so much from personal experience but from things told me by people who were there and experienced it that he was wrong. So I wrote him a letter raising various points of discussion about what he put in his letter. I received a letter back from him. It started off, “Dear Sargent Steiner,” S-a-r-g-e-n-t.

LC: Oops.

MS: So my comment was, “No, I’m not his brother-in-law. That’s not how you spent Sergeant as a rank.” The rest of his letter was a plug for his book that he had just published.

LC: Is that right?

MS: Yeah, he did not add some general platitudes about the war; he did not address any of the points I had raised in my letter.

LC: So it was your feeling this was just a general form letter and not responsive at all?

MS: That’s correct. That was my feeling. And that maybe he actually signed it but he did not dictate it.
That sounds exactly right.

I’m sorry?

LC: That sounds exactly right, yes. I think you got it exactly right. Let’s talk about your going down to Texas for the assignment to the 112th. Michelle, what was your job? What job were you given down there?

MS: I was going to be working finally, well, I shouldn’t say finally, but again in the field I was trained for, the work I was trained for doing background investigations.

LC: And did that please you, to get that kind of assignment at this point?

MS: Yes.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the organization of US Army military intelligence domestically within the US and where did the 112th fit into that cosmos?

MS: Okay, there was a…at a previous time each US Army in the US; 1st Army, 2nd Army, etc, had a military intelligence group assigned to it. Somewhere along the lines there was a US Army intelligence command and all these groups were then assigned the intel command in support of these US armies. That was the situation in 1968 so the 112th was in support of I think it was the 4th Army, which was headquartered at Ft. Sam Houston so the 112th was headquartered at Ft. Sam Houston. Our basic mission and primary mission was to conduct background investigations for security clearances. We had other missions of investigating security breaches on Army installations, possibility of counter espionage, although the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) within the continental US had primary responsibility for that. We also had the missions to do security inspections and surveys of units and installations within 4th Army. As a newcomer in the unit I would start off primarily doing the background investigation interviews, interviews of references, records checks, etc, like I had been doing in Germany.

LC: And like in Germany were the subjects of these investigations—were they primarily military personnel?

MS: They were primarily military personnel but they could also be civilian employees.

LC: Civilian employees of the US Army, I take it.
MS: Right. When I say military personnel, specifically Army personnel. The Air
Force and Navy did their own investigations of their own personnel.

LC: And like in Germany did you also have at least as part of the mission to look
into people who had previously been within your jurisdiction?

MS: Right. A lot of the people who would be the subjects of our investigations
were recent enlistees who had lived there before they enlisted, or draftees because the
draft was still in effect then, and who were getting ready and they needed a security
clearance in order to go to AIT or for their job after graduation from AIT. And
somewhere in that line since they lived their whole life or part of their life in our area
they said we’d be investigating them even though they’re not stationed in our area.

LC: And was your assignment there to last a year or so?

MS: It was to last until I was reassigned at some point.

LC: So it was open-ended when you arrived there?

MS: Yeah, just like most Stateside military assignments are opened ended.

LC: Can you describe the people that you worked with? How many people were
in your office and what section were you in within the office?

MS: I was in an office in downtown San Antonio. There were maybe a dozen
people in the office. The group was divided into regions and this office had both…and
each region basically accounted for a state.

LC: And how many states were there?

MS: I can’t think of how many states were in 4th Army but I know it covered
Texas and Louisiana and I think New Mexico and Oklahoma and I don’t remember what
else, if anything else. The office I was in had both the region headquarters and our field
office headquarters. The field office had primarily San Antonio, including military
installations within San Antonio and the outlying suburbs.

LC: Michelle, what was your rank at this time?

MS: I was a Staff Sergeant.

LC: Did you have any particular cases that were of special interest or did the work
for you become routine?

MS: Actually I stayed in that office maybe two weeks. What happened was
to have been slated for group headquarters and not to the region. The region commander said, “I have Steiner. I am not letting him go.” The group said, “You can’t keep him there because he is excess to your authorized strength.” The commander said, “Well, I’m short of strength up at Ft. Hood. I’m going to transfer him there then.” So I would up going up to Ft. Hood after two weeks at San Antonio.

LC: And why was the commander keen to keep hold of Steiner?
MS: Basically it was a pissing contest between him and the S-3. It wasn’t me. I was just a body.

LC: You were a pawn in their large game.
MS: I was a pawn in their battle.

LC: So as a pawn then you were moved up to Ft. Hood.
MS: Right.

LC: And you were still with the 112th?
MS: Right. I was at the Ft. Hood field office of Region 1.

LC: And still working all the background investigation work that you described?
MS: Right.

LC: But from this different seat, basically. Were the subjects of the investigation that you conduced substantially different demographically or in any other way from what you would have been doing down in San Antonio?
MS: To a degree.

LC: Okay. What was the difference?
MS: Basically because San Antonio and Ft. Sam Houston was a fairly small base in a major metropolitan area. Most of our investigations in San Antonio would have been for recent enlistees and draftees and new officers coming in from ROTC and fewer investigations of active duty soldiers. Ft. Hood had a corps headquarters and two full divisions plus other military organizations in a small city of about thirty thousand so most of the investigations there were for active duty people whose clearances were being upgraded or renewed or they’re being reassigned to a duty that requires a clearance but they’d all been in the Army for a period of time already.

LC: I was going to ask you whether this work stayed exciting and interesting to you. You’d been away from it for a little while.
MS: It was interesting. I got to interact with people a lot and to the surprise to
myself and a lot of other people I enjoyed it, interacting with people and talking to
people.

LC: Do you think it was something that you were sort of coming into your own?
MS: I had actually come into my own on that back in Germany.

LC: Okay, so you were kind of returning to that, if you will.
MS: Right.

LC: The political climate in the country, not necessarily down by Ft. Hood but in
the climate generally of course was becoming more and more anti-war during the time
period that you were there in late ’68 and then into 1969. Were you aware of that in any
kind of local way? Was there any local impact to that broader souring on the war?
MS: Well there was a very strong anti-war movement, not strong but I’m not
saying large, there. There was a club in Killeen that was sort of like the headquarters for
the anti-war movement. I don’t think I was ever in it but it was described to me. Beaded,
incense burning all the time, very flower-powered type thing. There was an underground
newspaper on post called The Fatigue Press which was very anti-war. There were some
people, some civilians off-post organizing anti-war stuff. They had national support. I
don’t know which of the many anti-war organizations they were part of or affiliated with.
I should say I don’t remember. I do recall there was a time where the leader of that group
was stopped by police and his car was searched completely. They couldn’t find anything
and they called one of the detectives from the police department detective’s division. He
came out, reached into the car, picked up a shred of vegetable matter as they put it and
said, “This is marijuana.” They sent it to the police lab, which analyzed it as marijuana,
but in the course of analysis it destroyed the entire whole shred. So the guy was charged
and tried and this whole episode made Playboy Magazine in one of their columns because
Playboy was very anti-war and very pro-drug, etc, etc, or at least pro-marijuana. I think
the guy was convicted but it was overturned on appeal or something like that. I actually
got to meet two of the people, a married couple, who were very forefront in the anti-war
movement, both of whom were on active duty at the time and that got me into a little
trouble in the fact that I was suspected of socializing with them.

LC: How did it come about that you had met them?
MS: I met them at the snack bar, or her. Apparently I guess they had targeted me and I didn’t even know who they were at the time and I made the mistake of once I found out who they were of not reporting it even though I did break off contact with them. And that got me transferred back to Ft. Sam Houston to get me out of the area.

LC: And did you have any particular feelings about that relocation?

MS: Well basically it was, “You have twenty-four hours to get back to Ft. Sam Houston. All the Army is going to pay is twenty-five dollars moving expenses for you.” So I wound up telling my landlord at the apartment, “I’m going back to Ft. Sam Houston. My rent is paid up to the end of the month. Some time before the end of the month I’ll find a way to move all my stuff out of there.” So after I got down there they arranged for someone from the supply department to pick up one of their panel trucks and drive me up to Killeen and load my stuff and bring it back down.

LC: Was there any kind of cloud over your head when you arrived back at Ft. Sam?

MS: Oh definitely.

LC: How did you purge that? How did you get out from under it?

MS: Well basically what happened was I was told, “You’re given a second chance.” I would up in an office that processed the security investigation stuff, farmed out the leads, collated the reports when they came back in to go up to higher headquarters. And about two months later we got a new commanding officer who basically, looking over the records said, “I don’t want Steiner in my unit,” and they transferred me to Atlanta.

LC: That would be Ft. McPherson?

MS: Right.

LC: And when did you actually go out to Georgia then?

MS: In July of ’69.

LC: Was there a sense in your head that bad paperwork was now following you?

MS: Well, I knew that the commander at Ft. McPherson was told of the circumstances and when he interviewed me when I came in he told me that only he, he told me which three or four people at the group headquarters knew and that nobody else
would know and these were all very high-ranking people in the group headquarters and
that as far as he’s concerned I’m on a clean slate.

LC: Was that reassuring to you?

MS: Yes.

LC: Did you believe him?

MS: Yes.

LC: What did you have as your assignment? Now you were with the 111th?

MS: That’s correct.

LC: What was your assignment?

MS: Can we do a big rewind before that?

LC: Oh absolutely, any old time, Michelle.

MS: Okay. While in Vietnam I picked up some pen pals. While at Ft. Sam I kept
in contact with one. We had never met each other but we decided that after we meet and
had some nice long talks and some time together we’ll consider getting married. We had
a lot of phone calls also, of course. I had put in for leave to go back to New York and she
was from the New York area. I had put in for leave to go back to New York for Passover
in ’69. Our group commander turned me down because that leave would have put me in
the hole and I was under a cloud. I have a hunch that if I wasn’t under the cloud he
would have let me go back with the leave in the hole. So I didn’t go back so I wound up
going to Passover services in Ft. Sam. And at Passover services I met Sharon. That was
on April 2nd of ’69. On April 19th of ’69, Sharon and I got married.

LC: Wow!

MS: Yeah. We just hit it off. It was like I’d met my soul mate. Of course
explaining to Barbara what happened, the pen pal was a bit of a problem (laughs).

LC: A little dicey, yeah, but you managed it.

MS: We managed. Sharon was a student at the medical school at Ft. Sam. She
was a practical nurse before she came in the Army and she went to the basic medical
course and wound up being a 99-Charlie which is an Army Clinical Specialist. So two
and a half weeks after we met we got married. Then came July and they shipped me to
the 111th at Ft. McPherson.

LC: Yeah, in Atlanta.
MS: Okay. Sharon in the meantime had graduated her course and had been assigned to the hospital at Ft. Sam, Brook Army Medical Center. So she put in the paperwork to be transferred from Ft. Sam to Ft. McPherson.

LC: What happened with it?

MS: It was eventually at approved but at our own expense. It was for the convenience of the soldier or something like that.

LC: Okay, which means you guys had to foot the bill for moving?

MS: I’m sorry?

LC: You had to pay for her to move?

MS: Right. So all our personal belongings were shipped under my orders. Okay. One of the first things that they did when I got to Ft. Sam, they made me the NBC (Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical) or CBR (Chemical, Biological, Radiological) officer, whichever term was in use at the time. NCO, not officer, and sent me TDY (Temporary Duty) to Ft. McClelland, Alabama to the chemical school for four weeks.

LC: Where you were to learn…?

MS: How to be an NBC or NCO, all the goodies or additional duties for someone who could maintain the gas mask and do the NBC training and all that stuff in the unit. I was two weeks in to that four-week course when Sharon got transferred so basically she flew to Atlanta and then flew from Atlanta to Alabama. Oh what’s the name of the city?

LC: Anniston?

MS: Anniston, thank you, which is where she had taken basic training. That’s the only place they had basic training for WACs in those days. So she got there on a Thursday night or on a Friday evening, I forget. I picked her up at the airport. After I finished classes on Friday we drove back to Atlanta. I had wanted her to just fly into Atlanta because it was on Friday and I’d arrange for someone in my unit to pick her up at the airport and take her to the apartment. She insisted on coming out to Anniston and riding back with me. It just cost us a little bit extra for her. So basically we did that, spent the weekend together, I made sure she had enough money for taxi fares because I had to drive back to Anniston and she would have had to take a taxi to and from the post every day for the next two weeks but I’d be back for a long weekend of course. So basically that’s what we did and she got assigned to the unit in the hospital. Basically my
duties at the 111th was I was working in the headquarters shuffling papers and handling
reports from agents in the field. It was very similar to what I had been doing at the 112th
headquarters.

LC: Now the agents in the field, what kinds of things were they working on in
1969?

MS: The same thing that I had been doing at Ft. Hood.

LC: Okay, so still background investigation things?

MS: Right.

LC: Were there people with the 111th or for that matter with the 112th earlier who
were making observations on civilians who were involved in race-related issues at that
time?

MS: Race related? Not that I can recall.

LC: Okay. Do you know anything about the work of say the 111th in observing
civilians who were involved in any kind of nefarious activity?

MS: No, because it wasn’t like at Ft. Hood. I did not notice any anti-war
sentiments among the soldiers at Ft. McPherson. At Ft. Hood there was a lot.

LC: But much less so in Atlanta at that time. And how long did you stay at Ft.
McPherson?

MS: I stayed a year.

LC: And when you left where did you go?

MS: I went to the Defense Language Institute East Coast Branch in the
Washington, D.C. area.

LC: And how did that placement come about?

MS: Actually I had volunteered to go to Germany and Sharon had gotten pregnant
while we were in Atlanta and I put in my request that the transfer be delayed until after
the baby was born. The baby was due in August of 1970 and I wound up coming up with
orders to go to language school to study Korean.

LC: Had you asked for that?

MS: No.

LC: Do you know how that came to you?

MS: It came out of the blue.
LC: Wow. Because that’s a big change.

MS: I don’t even know if my request to go to Germany had anything to do with it. The problem is that the baby was due on August 3\textsuperscript{rd} and I was to report to language school on September 13\textsuperscript{th}. So basically what happened was Sharon flew up to New York at the beginning of her ninth month. She had to get a medical clearance to show to the airlines that she was allowed to fly at this late date. About a month later on the first of August I drove up to New York.

LC: Now her home was in New York. Had she gone home?

MS: No, her home was in Nebraska. She went to my folks’.

LC: Oh, I see, so she moved in with your parents?

MS: Basically.

LC: Temporarily.

MS: Temporarily, yeah.

LC: And they were still living in New Rochelle, is that right?

MS: No, they’re both dead.

LC: Oh, I meant at that time.

MS: At that time, yeah.

LC: Yes, of course.

MS: As a matter of fact, they had changed apartments after my sister got married and moved to a smaller apartment. But Sharon moved in and I left on August 1\textsuperscript{st}. No, I couldn’t have taken six weeks leave so my reporting date must have been sooner than September 13\textsuperscript{th}. I think my reporting date was like September 6\textsuperscript{th} and school started on the 13\textsuperscript{th}. But anyway, I drove up on August 1\textsuperscript{st}. I left on a Friday. I stopped in the D.C. area, visited my friend Mike, who I mentioned a number of times who I met at Ft. Bliss, and he had arranged for Sharon and me to have an apartment about a block from where he lived. I think I had mentioned that last interview. And basically I stopped in at the, I spent the weekend with him and then Monday morning stopped at the rental office to sign the papers to take possession of the apartment a month later. I drove up to New York to my folks’ home and we spent the month there. Sarah was born two weeks late so she was born on August 23\textsuperscript{rd}. I guess she was originally due on the 10\textsuperscript{th} or somewhere around there because she was born about two weeks late, which means the doctor wouldn’t let
her come down with me because I had to go about a week later. So I drove down to D.C. a day or two early before I had to report in, spent some time with Mike learning the area and stuff and then reported to school on the day and about two or three weeks later Sharon flew down with Sarah and we basically spent the next forty-seven weeks with me studying Korean. It was the East Coast branch of the Defense Language Institute, which no longer exists, the East Coast branch at least. They were headquartered at the Anacostia Naval Yard. However, at that point they did not do any instruction themselves. They had things farmed out to civilian language schools.

LC: And is that how it was for you? Did you have a civilian?

MS: That’s how it was for us. However, basically our language school had facilities in two or three floors of one building in Crystal City and the whole building was actually, and not just that building, was owned by the Navy or operated and rented by the Navy. The language school facilities were, as I said, the top two or three floors of that one building. And they used all the DLI techs and DLI (Defense Language Institute) equipment and basically I stayed there for a year. We drove back to New York every few weekends and for the holidays. Sharon’s parents came out to visit us I think over Christmas. No, excuse me. They came out to visit us when we were in Atlanta for a while. That’s when I first met them.

LC: You had already met them.

MS: And then when we were at language school we went out to Nebraska to spend the Christmas holidays with them.

LC: So that would be Sarah’s first Christmas?

MS: That would have been Sarah’s first Christmas. She was less than a year old. She had a cousin who was about three or four months older.

LC: Okay, so I take it from this that Sharon is not Jewish.

MS: I met Sharon at Passover while she was studying for conversion and she converted while we were in Atlanta.

LC: But the grandparents in Nebraska wanted to have Christmas for Sarah. Is that fair or they just wanted to see her then?

MS: Say that again, please.

LC: Sharon’s parents that were in Nebraska wanted to see Sarah.
MS: They wanted to see all of us.
LC: At Christmastime, but all of you, yeah of course.
MS: Yeah, they accepted but maybe not approved of Sharon’s conversion.
LC: I wanted to ask you about the language training for a minute. It was a forty-seven week course I think you said and your instructor was a civilian.
MS: Right.
LC: Who was that? Do you remember the name?
MS: His name was Lee, Mr. Lee. L-e-e.
LC: How long had Mr. Lee been in the US and was he a language teacher by profession or do you know?
MS: I think he was a language teacher by necessity. He needed the money.
Rumor is that he had to flee Korea because of his very leftist or his activities as a student at the University of Korea was not approved by the Korean government.
LC: Any idea how long he’d been in the States when you knew him?
MS: Years.
LC: Many years?
MS: Years. I don’t know how many but not a short time.
LC: How many people were in your class?
MS: Let’s see. About half a dozen. Maybe eight.
LC: And were they all similarly situated like you? Were they E6s or E5s?
MS: We had from E3 or 4 all the way up to E7.
LC: Did you know what the preparation of the language training was meant to do for you in your career path?
MS: It was to teach me how to speak Korean so I could work probably in a liaison capacity or do interviews with Koreans in their own language.
LC: How did you do as a language student?
MS: I graduated with an eighty-two percent grade and I scored a 2-2 on the language test. That’s two in listening comprehension and two in reading comprehension. I think their goal was for a 3-2. It may have been for a 2-2. Are you familiar with the language ranking evaluations?
LC: Yes, generally. I’m more familiar with it from the Foreign Service side.
MS: Yeah, because 5-5 is considered native speaker. 0-0 is considered you can’t understand a word or read a word.

LC: And was it relatively easy for you or was it difficult and dreary and a pain?

MS: It was difficult but enjoyable.

LC: Really? You found in it something you could get a hold of?

MS: I had to really work hard at it but I didn’t find it dreary.

LC: Were you given any additional training about Korean history, Korean culture…?

MS: That was incorporated into the language training.

LC: Okay, so the lessons that you had the formats and so on, the content that was delivered was informational for you as well?

MS: Right. I remember one lesson we had where there was one short story we had to read in Korean. It was very puzzling to us until we realized it was a whole set of puns in Korean.

LC: (Laughs) And it took a little bit to figure that out?

MS: Yeah, because part of it, when translated into English said, “A young man speaking to an elderly man. The elderly man is passing the young man’s house. The young man is sitting on the bench and the young man says to the… the older man says to the young man, ‘What is that?’ and the young man says, ‘It is a hat,’ and the older man says, ‘Thank you,’ and walks into the house.” Okay, that doesn’t make any sense, does it?

LC: Right, it’s just kind of not much.

MS: But the sentence, “It is a hat,” in Korean sounds exactly the same as, “Please come in.”

LC: (Laughs) Okay. And when you realized that, that’s kind of a moment when you start to think you can start to understand a little bit.

MS: Yeah well this is like about three quarters of the way through the course.

LC: Yeah, and it takes a while. That’s right.

MS: Yeah. And then we started rereading it with this in mind and then we were able to put things together. Like the verb, “to paste,” like to paste something on a wall
also is a homonym for, “to mail a letter,” even though they’re spelled differently. Once you start catching on to these things the language comes alive to you.

LC: Yes, it feels a little more fun and usable and interesting. Of course you knew that the likelihood was that you would be sent to Korea.

MS: Of course there’s always a big joke in the Army that when you’re a graduate of a language school you never get sent to a country where you can use it.

LC: Is that right?

MS: It’s a standing joke but it does not back with reality.

LC: Okay. (Laughs) When did you get your orders that you would actually be going to Korea?

MS: Oh, about two or three months before I graduated.

LC: How did that sit with Sharon? She had her own career.

MS: Well by then because Sharon had gotten pregnant she was out of the Army. In those days there was no choice and basically she was a stay at home mom.

LC: And was the plan always that she would go with you to Korea?

MS: No, because it was an unaccompanied tour.

LC: Was it a tour that had a finite conclusion to it?

MS: Yes, it was a one-year tour.

LC: One year. Okay. And when did you actually leave for Korea?

MS: I left for Korea shortly after Labor Day of ’71.

LC: What did Sharon do? Did she stay in the D.C. area?

MS: She stayed in the D.C. area. She had a job at Alexander City Hospital, found a babysitter.

LC: And so that end of things seemed to be kind of handled when you left?

MS: When I left it did seem like it was kind of handled.

LC: So you were able to go over with maybe a little less worry than you might have otherwise gone with.

MS: Right.

LC: Can you tell me about your posting in Korea? What were you doing?
MS: Okay, I got there and it turned out I was put in an assignment where I didn’t need to use the language at all. It was attached to the 8th Army Inspector General’s office.

LC: G-2?

MS: Inspector general.

LC: Okay, inspector, the IG. And what was your job?

MS: My job was part of his inspection team, the team that went out and did the IG inspections. There were two of us attached from the MI unit there and I’m trying to remember the unit number. It was an allied battalion and don’t quote me on this. I think it was the 501st MI battalion but I really don’t recall. It’s surprising how much I’ve forgotten about unit ids.

LC: Well, you were in a lot of different units over the years.

MS: It’s been over twenty years since I retired.

LC: That’s right. Exactly.

MS: Basically the two of us did all the security inspections. Someone in the IG team decided that the security inspection involved all security so we wound up inspecting security of arms and ammunition as well and all the physical security, which kept the team from having to have an MP type person on the team to do those inspections.

LC: Now did you go to different facilities and compounds to carry it out?

MS: We went all over the country. The only places we did not inspect were units internal to the infantry division because they had their own IG for that. We did inspect the infantry division headquarters.

LC: Now was this something that you enjoyed? This was different again from what you had done before.

MS: Actually I found it very enjoyable.

LC: What parts of it did you like?

MS: All of it.

LC: Were there specific things? Did you like the travel, did you like moving around?

MS: Well, yes. I got to see parts of the country. Most of our inspections basically were around the Seoul area so basically it was just travel out to the site in the day and
then travel back. There were times where we would go out for a week or sometimes
we’d chopper down for the day and chopper back. Sometimes we’d go out on the road
and drive from one installation to another and be gone for a week or two. Sometimes we
wound up choppering down and staying a week and choppering back. We usually stayed
in military facilities. Occasionally we stayed in civilian hotels.

LC: Now this is a team of how many would usually go on a site inspection?
MS: Well, let’s see. A Captain, two Majors, four or five NCOs, sometimes a
specialist attached to us like when we did chemical units they attached a chemical officer
to us. I guess maybe a good dozen people.

LC: As a member of this party did you have a specific duty that you were
responsible for or did it change with the different sites that you went to?
MS: As I said, depending on what the unit had we’d inspect their personnel
security records, their classified documents security, the physical security of the
installation, the securities of their arms and their ammunition and that’s basically what it
was.

LC: Were these all announced visits or unannounced?
MS: IG inspections are always announced.

LC: What kind of lead-time did a unit that you were going to visit get?
MS: Usually a year.

LC: A whole year?
MS: Well, basically, because they knew they would be inspected once a year and
it was always the same time of year.

LC: And they had to have documents in order as well as the physical placement of
materials and men in the right places?
MS: Uh-huh.

LC: If you found violations I’m sure there were grades of difficulty that you
identified. Can you talk about that system of identifying the different levels of problems?
How did you keep track of what was a serious problem and what was just kind of a minor
oversight on the part of the unit that you were inspecting?
MS: Basically these were self-defining. If I was looking at the classified
documents logs and asked for a document and they couldn’t find it that was a very
serious, that would flunk them. Also for classified document security, what we would do is we would go through the log and depending on how many documents they’d have we’d ask for a representative sample. With a small enough number of documents we’d look at a hundred percent. With a very large number of documents we’d look at maybe ten percent. I don’t think we every inspected a unit where we had to look at fewer than ten percent. What we’d do is we’d ask them to retrieve the documents, bring them to us, compare the document to its description in the log, and examine the document to make sure everything was marked properly. We’d also go into their safe, take out documents and then search the log for the documents to make sure the document was logged and do the same inspection on the documents. We’d examine the facilities they were stored in to make sure those met standards and that’s how we did classified document security.

LC: So you did it from both directions, both from the log to the document and from the document to the log?

MS: Oh definitely, yes.

LC: Did you ever identify in the time that you were over there, any breaches to speak of with regard to classified documents?

MS: Breaches as in…?

LC: Not breaches of procedure but actual serious problems with maintaining the physical security of classified documents.

MS: We found some logs where they couldn’t locate the documents. That’s about the most serious we found.

LC: That’s pretty serious. In that event, now not speaking about a particular examination or inspection that you did but just in general, when you found that kind of discrepancy, a document missing that ought to be there, what was the procedure?

MS: Well they would know of course that they couldn’t find it and they would do a hundred percent search. I think in every case where this happened they eventually came up with the document. It was misfiled or it was left on someone’s desk or something. I don’t recall ever finding a situation where there was an actual compromise.

LC: What kind of consequences would there be for these kinds of violations short of actual security compromise?

MS: Well that would be an automatic failure of the inspection.
LC: And that goes on people’s records?
MS: That’s on the unit’s record and of course when like a commander receives his
officer’s evaluation report I’m sure something like that would be mentioned. We had a
few cases that were very rare where a commander was relieved on the spot as a result of
our inspection. Of course we don’t do the relieving. His commander does. I think one
of the most interesting things was the security of arms and ammunition that we did.

LC: Tell me a little bit about that.
MS: Weapons had to have what they called triple barrier security. The room in
which the weapons were stored had to have two lock barriers, either a double gate either
with a lock on it or it’s a room within a room with each room having a lock, plus the
weapons have to be locked in the arm rack. If any one of those barriers was missing it
was an automatic failure of security of arms and ammunition. My partner and I learned,
we were taught by our predecessors, on how, if it’s at all possible, to take a weapon apart
inside its arms rack and take the weapon out of the arms rack in pieces.

LC: Is it possible?
MS: If the arms rack was not properly made. What happened was when they
switched from the M-14 to the M-16 it became very easy to field strip an M-16 in the
arms rack. They had to do a modification of the arms rack and welding some plates in
place, one for each weapon so you couldn’t pull the pin out that allows the weapon to be
broken in half. Once you break an M-16 in half in the arms rack it’s very easy to get the
weapon out of the arms rack.

LC: You could just slip it out in two pieces then.
MS: Just slip out the two pieces. And the placement of those plates was quite
critical. A lot of times they were welded too far away which gave you enough room to
do this.

LC: Now did you encounter then in inspection a lot of places where there were
problems with that?
MS: I’d say anywhere when we got started…and remember our predecessors had
been doing this before us. When Dave and I got started we were able to I’d say get at
least one weapon out of an arms rack without trying every weapon in the arms room but
get at least one weapon out and when we started at maybe one in four units we inspected
and by a year later we could still do it in maybe one in ten.

LC: So this was kind of a chronic problem.

MS: Yeah. Now the thing is putting this in perspective. In order to get to the
arms rack to do that someone would have to get through two locked gates first so even
though the criteria was that’s an automatic failure of security of arms and ammo, I think
it was an unrealistic thing. But we had a few other things where in one unit I recall there
was an M-60 machine gun locked in a rack; and Dave and I had never been that up close
to an M-60 before in our life. On a table in the arms room was the user’s manual, the
field manual for the M-60 machine gun that had instructions in it on how to fieldstrip it.
So following the manual we field stripped the weapon and took it out of the rack. In the
exit briefing when the unit commander addressed the inspection he said, “I wouldn’t have
thought it possible to field strip and M-60 in an arms rack and I realize with these two
jokers, “and that’s the word he used and he used it in a complimentary way really, “If we
had thought to lock up the manual they wouldn’t have been able to do it.” And Dave and
I were nodding at him. One of the units we were inspecting, Hawk Missile Battery, the
batter commander was one of the guys I was stationed with in Hawaii when I was in Air
Defense Artillery. He had wound up going to Officers Candidate School and the
battalion commander of that battalion had been a Captain at the G3 air defense office in
Hawaii when both of us were there and we had worked for him. Not directly under him
but we remember him and he remember me once I reminded him. He’s the one that told
me that West Point officer I had worked for became a dentist. It’s amazing how things
tie together.

LC: Yes, it’s almost like old home week in Seoul, Korea or out at the missile
battery. Michelle, let’s take a break here for a minute.

MS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive and Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Michelle Steiner. Today’s date is the 19th of March 2004. I again am in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and Michelle is speaking to be by phone. Hi, Michelle.

Michelle Steiner: Hi, Laura.

LC: Michelle, tell me a little bit about your transition from Korea to Ft. Bragg in 1973.

MS: Okay. When we left Korea, had we really finished about Korea?

LC: Well if there’s more, go ahead and tell me whatever you recall. If there was something unsaid go ahead.

MS: Okay. Did I mention about bringing my wife and daughter over there?

LC: No, they were still in Washington.

MS: Yeah, in Alexandria, Virginia.

LC: Yeah, the Washington area, yeah. Go ahead. You got them to come over? You were able to manage that?

MS: What happened was that Sharon is not a great money handler and she ran into some very strong financial problems there while we were separated so we figured the best thing to do was to bring her and Sarah over to Korea. I could not get a command sponsorship but I could bring her over at my own expense. I got permission from the Army to do that, found a place to live, extended my tour there an extra six months so that it would be a year and a half tour instead of a one-year tour and it was about the sixth-month point when they came over so we stayed there for another year.

LC: Now were you living on the economy as they say?

MS: Yes, we were living on the economy. We found an apartment. There were a lot of, there were a lot of embassy and consulate people not from the US but from other countries like India and we had some Indian neighbors. That’s why I remember India in particular. It was very nice for Sarah because she got to play with Korean children and Indian children and whatever other countries there were. Mostly, I won’t say third world because I don’t consider India a third world nation; but non-European let’s say, which
would be pretty accurate, actually. And Sarah doesn’t remember anything of it except for some very isolated memories.

LC: She was only what, a year and a half or two years old?

MS: She was a year and half when we got there and two and a half when we left.

We lived at the Mapoe apartments and whenever we went back to the apartment from the base, quite often we would take a taxi rather than the military shuttle bus, especially on weekends and we’d get in the taxi and I’d say, “Mapoe apaateu,” which is Korean for Mapoe apartments, and after a while Sarah started thinking that a taxicab was a mapoe. I don’t think she ever extended that with cars in general.

LC: Okay, just taxis.

MS: Maybe, yeah. But anyway it was a nice tour. It was a lot better living on the economy with your family than living in the barracks or a Quonset hut, especially in the winter. We would entertain friends there, my coworker and some other friends we made. They did not object to coming to a home and having a home cooked meal. (Laughs)

LC: I bet. Now were you quite popular socially because of having your own place?

MS: Not really. We just had a small circle of friends and quite often it would be going out. One of my friends who’s still a distant friend now, he brought his wife over for a month when he took leave. Instead of taking leave and going back to visit he brought her over and I forget if they stayed in a hotel or they managed to wind up house sitting. I think they were staying in a hotel because we never visited them in a house.

But we had a lot of time together. In those days Sharon had very bright red hair and Mary, not my Mary but Steve’s wife, is albino and one evening we were out at one of the Korean nightclubs and Mary and Sharon went to the bathroom and just about every woman in the nightclub got up and went to the bathroom and followed them.

LC: They were a matter of some curiosity.

MS: Yeah, because especially someone with white hair and the pale skin and the pink eyes and someone else with flaming red hair…

LC: Did Sharon cope well with being over in Korea?

MS: Oh yes. She loved it there. She had always been very interested in Asian nations’ cultures so we would go with the family down into the marketplaces and places
that GIs don’t go to often, tourists may go to but that are very interesting. And when we were in Japan later we did the same thing. But no, she really enjoyed it. And for the only time in our lives we had a maid.

LC: Really?

MS: Yeah, she came in I think two or three days a week and did dishes. While she was not there we tried to keep up with the dishes ourselves of course but if she’d come in on a Wednesday we’d know don’t to bother doing the dishes from Tuesday because Miss Kim will do it. And the she vacuumed, well no not vacuumed, but she swept and dusted and did laundry and all that other stuff for us.

LC: How did you come to have that arrangement? Was she someone who worked for other military personnel?

MS: Actually, I think the rental agent of the apartment complex referred her to us or us to her.

LC: And did you have a chance to speak with her much, Michelle?

MS: To a degree.

LC: Did you find out anything about her and her life or her background?

MS: Well she was in her twenties, lived with her parents and was saving up to go to college. There was a language barrier even though I had gone to the language school. My Korean was better than her English by my Korean wasn’t all that great because I didn’t have a chance to use it on duty already.

LC: Exactly. You had mentioned that before.

MS: Yeah, because the object when I went there was I was supposed to working a job where I would be using the language but it turned out that just at about the time I got there someone who had details from the IG office was leaving and one of our highest priorities was to replace him and I was the newest person there so I got it. I loved the work, though, as I said. I think we described that in the last session.

LC: Yeah, and I just wanted to ask on the language session, just to sort of double back to that for a moment, did Sharon pick up any Korean? Was she able to?

MS: Not really.

LC: Okay. Did she have any difficulty negotiating sort of daily things like going shopping and getting around town and stuff?
LC: Okay, so English, she could get by pretty well even though she didn’t have…?

MS: Right, because her shopping was at the commissary.

LC: Entirely?

MS: Ninety percent. I think we bought all our food at the commissary and I remember one day we were in an outdoor market and there was something she wanted to buy. I think it was an infant carrier and she was negotiating with the woman who was running the stall. Basically they were writing numbers back and forth on a sheet of paper. So there are ways.

LC: Sure, absolutely, absolutely. Is there anything else that you recall about your time in Korea that you wanted to include that I forgot to ask you about?

MS: Not really. That was about it.

LC: Okay. Now you said you had extended your tour by six months so you knew essentially when you would be being relocated?

MS: Yes, because I would have known anyway because it was a thirteen-month tour and we extended it six months to make it a nineteen-month tour.

LC: When did you find out what your next posting would be?

MS: I guess it was about two months in advance, maybe three.

LC: And what did that turn out to be?

MS: It turned out to be Ft. Bragg, North Carolina.

LC: Was that to another MI group?

MS: Right, it was actually to an MI company that was in support of the 18th Airborne Corps. No, no, excuse me. We were not in support of the 18th Airborne Corps. We were primarily in support of the non-tactical units at Ft. Bragg.

LC: Let me ask you first of all, where did you and Sharon live and or around Ft. Bragg?

MS: Oh, we lived in on-post housing. That was our first experience with on-post housing.

LC: Can you talk to me a little bit about that? What was it like?
MS: Basically it was a two-story townhouse. You know, I had to go through an orientation on it and basically it’s like you’re expected to do all the chores you would do if you owned your own home like replacing washers and faucets, etc, etc, etc. I was thinking, “But I’m renting in effect. All this kind of stuff is normally what the landlord would do.” But no, in the Army you get to do it. (Laughs)

LC: So you get cut both ways. You have no equity and you have to…?

MS: Right. But I don’t pay rent either.

LC: Oh okay. Well, there is that.

MS: Basically, my rent is what my quarters allowance would have been if I lived off post.

LC: I see. But that’s with the accountants really. You never saw any of that.

MS: Right, yeah. Oh, backing up a little, on our way home, what we wound up doing was getting permission to fly commercially instead of on military aircraft or military charter.

LC: Why was that?

MS: I applied for it and arranged it. We flew from Seoul, Korea to Tokyo and we spent I think four days and three nights in Tokyo on leave and then flew to New York.

LC: And did you see your folks at that time?

MS: Yeah, we flew back to see my folks. We spent time with my folks then.

LC: And when you went down to Ft. Bragg, Sarah was two and a half?

MS: Right.

LC: Was there any accommodation made for very young children like her in the way of giving parents a break or an educational program or anything like that?

MS: You mean by the military?

LC: Yeah.

MS: No, she was really too young for that still. They did have a childcare center on base and when Sharon started taking some courses at the local community college, we put her into the childcare center, which in a way was sort of like a preschool but normally preschool starts at four. But you know it was mostly an activity center to keep a nursery, more or less.

LC: And Sharon got a break. Now what was she interested in studying?
MS: She was a practical nurse and she was trying to go for an RN.
LC: Did they have courses that were going to be helpful to her in that?
MS: Yes, they had an RN (Registered Nurse) program but the thing is, before she could even get into the RN program she had to take some courses in subjects that she never took in high school that were prerequisites.
LC: Okay, so they had that available?
MS: Like chemistry.
LC: Sure, exactly. What college was it? Do you remember the name?
MS: It was a community college in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I don’t remember its name.
LC: Now tell me a little bit about what your new job was.
MS: Okay. This was basically of tactical nature in support of the units on Ft. Bragg that were not part of 18th Airborne Corps because 18th Corps had its own MI unit and the 82nd Airborne Division had its own MI unit. I think the 82nd was there but I know Corps headquarters was there. And basically we were doing security inspections and surveys and stuff.
LS: What kinds of units were on the fort that were not tactical units?
MS: I can’t remember its name but it was a fairly large unit with a classified missions or a lot of classified documents in it. Most of our work, we didn’t do that all often, most of our work was sort of like make work just like the Nike missile unit I was in at Ft. Bliss. Everything was in the training state. We didn’t get to do background investigations because the intel command field office there did them but when units went out on the field we’d go out and inspect them sometimes. There was a big field exercise for the National Guard down in Ft. Stewart near Savannah, Georgia that we sent security advisors down to.
LC: Did you go on that?
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: Did you go on that, Michelle?
MS: Yes, I did. Basically we wore armbands to indicate that we were not part of the unit that we were evaluators but even though we wore those evaluator armbands we were actually working as security advisors and not evaluators, which added a bit of
unrealism to it because we were there but not there. As far as the opposing forces were concerned because we wore the armbands we were off limits to them as if we were evaluators. But we were working in the command headquarters for the units providing advice and assistance and if it had been a real war and we had been there of course there wouldn’t have been evaluators either. We were acting more as people attached to those units for function so it was a very weird situation.

LC: What was the rationale behind that?
MS: I don’t know.
LC: There may not have been any. I don’t know.
MS: Knowing the Army there could very well have not been any.
LC: (Laughs) Can you give an overall appraisal of how satisfied you were with this placement that you had at Ft. Bragg?
MS: It was one of the lesser enjoyable assignments I had.
LC: Were you taking any action to get yourself reassigned?
MS: No, I didn’t.
LC: How did it come about that you moved on from there?
MS: Well, I was there about six months and in one of Robert Highland’s science fiction novels he was talking about the government bureaucracy he said there’s a fairy grandmother department. A little old lady wearing tennis shoes and with white hair who works from three to four pm every Friday will occasionally bestow upon someone a gift. Of course this is entirely fictional but the reason I brought that up is I was touched by the fairy godmother department.
LC: Okay, that sounds right (laughs). And what was the result?
MS: I was sent to temporary duty for six months to Ft. Huachuca for MOS cross training and then to the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California to study Japanese for a year.
LC: Talk to me a bit about the cross training. What was the new area to be in?
MS: The new area was Area Intelligence Specialist.
LC: What did that mean?
MS: Basically it was human collection and that’s all I can say about it.
LC: All right. And you trained on that for the six month TDY period?
MS: Right.
LC: Can you tell me anything about your family arrangements for moving to
Arizona?
MS: Basically the Army would pay for transportation to Monterrey for my family
because Ft. Huachuca, even though it was six months, was TDY en route. So basically
once I got to Monterrey I could claim travel expenses I think. I’m not sure because I
know we moved a lot of our furniture and stuff to Ft. Huachuca I think. It’s very hazy.
LC: That’s okay.
MS: It may have been we got a furnished apartment and had all our stuff in
storage. Yeah, actually, I think that’s what it was. Our stuff went into non-temporary or
long-term storage because I was going to be on TDY and basically we drove back up to
New York, spent some time there and then drove out to Ft. Huachuca, stopping in route
at Ft. Bliss, Texas for a few days because I wanted to show Sharon Ft. Bliss and El Paso
because I really enjoyed my assignments at Ft. Bliss and I was hoping possibly to retire
there in the El Paso area so I wanted her to see it. And I introduced her to some friends I
still had in the area and then we got to Ft. Huachuca, got into a motel or desk quarters,
rented an apartment and basically stayed in the apartment for six months while I was in
class.
LC: Was she able to work during that time or continue to go to school?
MS: No, she stayed home and took care of Sarah. We actually got to Ft.
Huachuca about a week early or maybe even two weeks early before my class began
because when I left language school I asked for two weeks leave. Not language school,
I’m getting that confused with something else. When we left Ft. Bragg I asked for two
weeks leave and they gave me four and I didn’t want to use up all that leave so we got
there two weeks early. Most of the time I was working in the orderly room of the student
company where I’d be assigned but they let me take a three-day pass and we drove up to
Las Vegas. My folks were there on a gambling junket and Dad arranged with the people
who ran the junket to put Sharon and me on the junket, which meant we got free room
and food. The guy did this as a favor to my dad and also waived for us the gambling
requirement. Because normally if you go on a junket you have to guarantee you’ll
gamble at least two thousand dollars.

LC: And that was waived for you?
MS: What?
LC: That was waived for you?
MS: It was waived for me. We were considered part of my dad’s junket but we
got our own room.

LC: Sweet. (Laughs)
MS: Yeah. So it was fun. That was my first time in Vegas and we got Sarah and
Sharon to see my folks again. It turned out that it was the last time that Sharon ever saw
my mother or that my mother had seen Sharon because before we could get to visit them
again she passed away.

LC: “She,” being your mom?
MS: What?
LC: “She,” being your mother passed away?
MS: Yes, while we were in Japan. But after that junket we were staying on
Arizona or further west and our folks were back in New York. So once the class started
basically it was routine. Spend a lot of time or all day in class, a lot of time in the
classroom in the evening studying because it was a classified class. We couldn’t do any
work outside the classroom. And basically that’s how the six months went. The class
started I think in like October. We had a two-week break for Christmas and we drove out
to the West Coast and went to Disneyland. During that trip or before that trip I managed
to contact an old high school buddy of mine who lived in San Bernardino and visited
him. Actually it wasn’t a high school buddy. We had gone to different high schools but
we grew up in the same apartment housing in the Bronx and I hadn’t seen him in over
twenty years. No, no, excuse me, in about fifteen years, fourteen or fifteen years. We
saw each other in ’60 or ’61 just before I joined the Army while he was home on leave
from the Navy and this was December of ’73 so it was twelve years.

LC: Was that a good kind of reunion? Was it a good reunion?
MS: It was nice but we realized we really had nothing in common any more and we exchanged a few letters after that and then lost contact completely. I have absolutely no idea where he is or anything.

LC: Now your training materials were all classified so that kind of stayed at home. Did you get to get out and around in Arizona at that time?

MS: Uh-huh. We got up to Tucson quite often, almost every weekend, got up to Phoenix maybe once a month, got into Mexico a few times. Oh heck, Agua Prieta and I can’t remember the name of the other city and it’s bigger than Agua Prieta down Highway 19 coming down off of Highway 10. Oh well, I just don’t remember.

LC: That’s okay. Was it clear to you while you were at Ft. Huachuca that you would go from your cross training period there to language training? Did you already know that?

MS: Right, yes. That was on my orders before I even left Ft. Bragg.

LC: Okay so in I gather the spring of 1974 you then moved to Monterey?

MS: Right.

LC: Can you talk to me a little bit about the Defense Language Institute, the curriculum and your instructors? Any memories of those things?

MS: Uh-huh. It was basically set up; the language school had been there for years and years and years. It was originally the Army Language School and then when Defense Department integrated all the language schools and called it Defense Language Institute it became Defense Language Institute West Coast Branch. We had members of all services there. Basically we had six classes a day running approximately one hour each. Three of them, then we broke for a two-hour lunch and then three more hours.

Every night, just like when I was studying Korean, we had to memorize dialogues every night. So it was about two hours a night of homework and memorization.

LC: And you’re studying Japanese, right?

MS: I’m studying Japanese.

LC: I wanted to clarify. Were you studying an equal balance of speech and writing and reading or was it heavily one way or the other?

MS: It was probably slightly tilted towards speech.

LC: But you were also learning Kongi?
MS: We were also learning Kongi and Hiragana and Katakana.

LC: And how did you do with the characters?

MS: I did fairly well.

LC: Did you find it difficult or did it kind of come to you?

MS: It came to me easier than the Korean did because a lot of the Kongi and the
Korean Hanja, a lot was the same and the studying overall was easier because I had the
experience from studying Korean. So I had some of the language study habits ingrained
already. Where I graduated the Korean class with an eighty-two percent I graduated the
Japanese course with a ninety-two percent.

LC: Wow. That’s impressive.

MS: We had one student in the Japanese class who I think had something like a
ninety-eight percent, one of the Air Force guys in our class.

LC: Now tell me a little bit about the other people in the class? Do you remember
aside from him having done very well on the final, do you remember other people in the
classes and what backgrounds did they have?

MS: Well, let’s see. We had a Navy commander or lieutenant commander who
was being assigned to the Embassy as a military liaison. He was taken aside from some
of our classes to be given individual instruction on some of the more diplomatic forms of
the language. We had an Air Force Lieutenant, we had an Air Force NCO, and we had
an Army private who was going into what was then the Army Security Agency for voice
sensitive radio stuff. We had an African American Army E-7 who made E-8 while in
class and he was an interrogator and because he made E-8 and the assignment he had
been scheduled for was an E-7 slot they cancelled that assignment and he wound up
going to Ft. Ord just down the road from us after that to become a 1st Sergeant. I
remember the Navy commander was talking about the stupidity of the Army of wasting
all this money for language education for the guy and not having him use it and we said,
“That’s because he got promoted while in class,” And he said, “Well, they should have
known he was up for promotion.” “Yeah, but there’s no guarantee he would be
promoted.” Anyway, there was a little inter-service rivalry. Monterey was a wonderful
place. It’s a place we would have loved to have been able to go to find retirement but it
would be way too expensive for us. We really enjoyed it. The class took some field trips
to local Japanese restaurants and up to the Japan Cultural Center in San Francisco.

Sharon and I, we took trips driving down the coastal highway and went to Big Sur. We’d go up to San Francisco on our own occasionally or the Bay Area. We went to Santa Cruz to the beach boardwalk and we really enjoyed ourselves.

LC: Now the course lasted for a year, is that right?

MS: Right. Forty-seven week class time, plus a two-week break at Christmas plus another one-week break because they wouldn’t let you go more than six months without a break and as it turned out because of the starting time of the class we managed to get a one-week break in addition to the two weeks at Christmas.

LC: So the course came to an end in April of ’75?

MS: It came to the end in April or early May of ’75, right.

LC: I just want to step aside from the course of your career at this point to ask if you were paying any attention at all to events in Vietnam at this time? This is at the time of the fall of Saigon.

MS: I was, yes.

LC: Did you watch that on television, the fall of Saigon and the pictures of the helicopters on the roof of the embassy?

MS: I sure did.

LC: Did you have any particular feelings? Did it bring anything up for you and what did you think about the conclusion of the US involvement in Vietnam in that manner?

MS: I had very mixed feelings. I was glad that it was over. I felt and still feel it was implemented by the political apparatus in the US. They were telling us, “Fight a war!” But tying at least one hand behind our back. Backtracking a little, when I was in Korea I remember reading in the paper, probably the Stars and Stripes, although it may have been the International Herald Tribune, that a small village in Vietnam called Mo Duc was overrun by the Viet Cong Army and was now under Viet Cong control. If you remember, the small village of Mo Duc was where I spent my last five months in Vietnam.

LC: I absolutely remember and I wonder what went through your mind.
MS: Basically I was hoping that the Dai Uy, which was Vietnamese for Captain, who was a village chief, was safe and that all the other people I had worked with were safe.

LC: Have you, Michelle, made any kind of effort over the years, not just recently but over the years, to find any of the people that you served with and contact them and find out what happened?

MS: No, I never made any effort. However, I have occasionally bumped into some of them. Not recently. Actually, the most recent was like about twenty years ago.

LC: But at the end of your career you would occasionally see people?

MS: Well, after I retired I wound up living in Sierra Vista for a while outside Ft. Huachuca and I had written a letter to the editor for the local newspaper and somebody else who had been retired was living there who had served with me in Vietnam saw my name in the paper, looked it up in the phone book, and called and said, “Are you the one who served with me in DaNang with the Phoenix program?” At first he introduced himself of course and I said yes. So he came over and visited and we chatted and never saw each other again.

LC: It was interesting though, I’m sure, to have someone…

MS: And later on in my career like when I was at Ft. Bragg, on one of our trips up to New York I stopped at Ft. Mead where I think it was 1st Army Headquarters was there but the Inspector General there was Colonel Horton who had been the Inspector General in Korea. I stopped and paid him a visit and asked him if he would write a letter of recommendation for my warrant officer application and he did. And there are a few other people who I had served with in Vietnam. Major Thompson, who I had managed to track down somehow, I forget, and I wrote him a letter asking for a letter of recommendation for my warrant officer application. I had actually applied for warrant officer twice. Once when I was at Ft. Bragg and once when I was at DLI on the West Coast in the presidio of Monterey.

LC: And while you were at the presidio did it come through? What happened with that?

MS: Well, I went through the board and everything but I had not heard anything by the time I graduated the course.
LC: And did it ever come through?
MS: Yes.
LC: Okay. When did it actually come through?
MS: While I was in Japan, about a month after I got there.
LC: But between the time that you were in Monterey and the time you went to Japan did you have another short course in Arizona?
MS: Yes, I went back to Ft. Huachuca to the non-commissioned officer’s advanced course.
LC: And that lasted how long?
MS: Two months. Eight weeks.
LC: And can you tell me about that? First of all, what were your classmates like in terms of their careers? Were they at the beginning of their careers of like you, mid-career?
MS: This was an advanced course for senior NCOs.
LC: For senior NCOs, okay.
MS: So we were all E-7s. I think there were a few E-6s on the E-7 list. I got promoted to E-7 while at Monterey, by the way.
LC: Okay, yeah.
MS: So I was Sergeant 1st Class at that point but when I got there I was a very junior Sergeant 1st Class. I was one of the junior people in the class except for the few E-6s on the E-7 list were ranked lower than me. I bumped into a few people who I had either gone to school with years before or with whom I had been assigned somewhere along the way.
LC: Now what was the content of the course? Can you tell me about the curriculum?
MS: The curriculum was mostly leadership, the traits of leadership, deeper overviews of the intelligence organization and structure and that sort of stuff.
LC: And was it, for you, mostly review kind of things?
MS: Most of it was review. Almost all of it was review.
LC: At what point did you get your orders for Japan? Obviously you knew that’s where you were going to go.
MS: I got my orders for Japan while I was in Monterey, which was temporary
duty en route to Ft. Huachuca.

LC: Okay, I see. And what was the length of the posting to Japan?
MS: It was a three-year tour. Overseas tours in general are…if it’s a hardship tour
it’s one year to thirteen months. If it’s not a hardship tour it’s three years if you’re
married and have your dependents with you or two years if you’re single or if you’re
married and your dependents are not with you. The one exception that I know of is in
Germany where it’s three years regardless of marital or dependent status.

LC: So I assume then from that the plan was that Sharon was going to go back
with you to Japan this time.
MS: Yes, she was command sponsored and traveled with me and the government
paid her travel and my daughter’s travel also.

LC: Okay. And your daughter at this point is what, turning five?
MS: Yes, we went there in June of ’75 and she turned five in August.
LC: So she’s ready to more or less start school.
MS: Right.

LC: What schooling arrangements; well, first of all, where were you stationed?
MS: We were stationed at Camp Zama.
LC: Which is where?
MS: Which is a suburb of Tokyo. It’s located near the town of Sagamihara. I’d
say it was west southwest of Tokyo if I remember correctly.

LC: Tell me a little bit about the living arrangements that you had.
MS: Okay, when we first got there we were in a hotel-type of arrangement. You
know, transient family. Then while we were waiting for family quarters they put us into
temporary housing at an Army depot in the Tokyo area where I had to take a bus to get to
and from work, a military shuttle bus, until my car arrived.

LC: So you shipped your car over?
MS: Excuse me?
LC: You shipped your car over?
MS: Yes. And they had us scheduled to, actually; I think we even actually got to
look at the quarters. Basically they show you three sets of quarters and you choose which
one you want. And I forget whether we got to actually look at them or not but then my
warrant officer appointment came through. We had been there maybe a month.

LC: Now what difference did that make for you in terms of, for example, basic
things like where you were going to live and all that?

MS: Okay, well, that meant I would be eligible for officer’s quarters rather than
enlisted quarters so then we got to look at quarters again or for the first time because I
don’t remember whether I did look at them before we were notified of the appointment.
This meant that we got larger quarters basically, and it was in a different section of the
housing area.

LC: Now were you quite please for that to finally come through?

MS: Oh yes.

LC: Did you throw yourself a party or anything?

MS: Uh-huh. I invited people from my office.

LC: Super. Now what about Sarah? What arrangements were made for her?

MS: She started kindergarten shortly after her birthday.

LC: On the base?

MS: On the base, yeah. The Department of Defense has public school,
kindergarten through twelfth grade at all overseas locations. Not all installations. I know
in some cases in Germany the students actually stay in the dorms Monday through Friday
and then go home on weekends because the nearest government school was so far from
the base where their parents were living.

LC: Now as parents were you able to be somewhat involved in the school, like for
example, did they have a Parent Teacher Association or that kind of thing?

MS: I don’t know if they had a Parent Teacher Association but if they did we
didn’t join it but we did get involved in conferences with her teacher.

LC: About how many children in her class?

MS: I don’t recall. I’d say maybe twelve to twenty.

LC: Were they getting any education about Japan as well as the regular…?

MS: Oh yes. They even took field trips.

LC: Really?

MS: Yeah. I don’t know if they did in kindergarten.
LC: Maybe the next year.
MS: Yeah, but in first and second grade I know they did.
LC: Where did they go? Do you remember any of those?
MS: Oh, they went to Japanese restaurants, they went one time to a go-kart course, they went to museums and I really don’t remember any more details.
LC: Okay. Did Sarah pick up any Japanese?
MS: Not really.
LC: So she spent most of her time, I’m assuming, on the base and when she went off it was either with the teachers on those trips or with you?
MS: Right.
LC: And what was Sharon doing?
MS: For most of the time Sharon was a stay-at-home mom. For part of the time we were there she was working at the *Stars and Stripes* bookstore at the Navy base that was a few miles away from where we were.
LC: And what did she do there? Was she selling or reselling?
MS: Yeah, she was a clerk or cashier.
LC: Did she enjoy that?
MS: Yes, she did.
LC: And what about you, Michelle? What were you up to?
MS: Well, before I got my warrant officer I was going to be working in the MOS I was training for at Ft. Huachuca in humans and that’s about all I can say about it. After I became Warrant Officer, the warrant officer position that they gave me was based on my old MOS, counterintelligence, so I couldn’t work in that office anymore. And as a matter of fact, I was excess to the allocation in the unit. Apparently the people at DA thought I was assigned to the group headquarters in Hawaii for some reason.
LC: So there was some confusion around that?
MS: Yeah, because they reassigned me to the unit in Japan. Normally when an enlisted person is catching direct commission or is appointed warrant officer they are transferred out of the unit they are in. In this case they assigned me to that unit. It may be because they thought I was…I don’t know but it said I was being assigned from the 504th MI group to the attachment in the 504th MI group. They may have done that as a
fiction, knowing I was in attachment then already but they had no place else in Japan to
send me and I’m sure they couldn’t justify spending the funds to send me outside of
Japan only a month they spent all the funds to send me to Japan.

LC: And what information were you getting about all of this or was it all kind of
happening over your head in the personnel section?

MS: Basically what happened was I walked into my office after lunch and the
office commander said, “Steiner, I’ve got some good news for you.” And I said,
“What?” He said, “Guess.” And I said, “They want me to go and look at quarters.” And
he said, “No.” I said, “My car had arrived.” And he said, “No.” I paused and I said,
“My warrant came through?” And he broke out into a big smile, stuck out his hand and
said, “Congratulations.”

LC: Do you remember his name, Michelle?

MS: No, I don’t. And then he (laughs) said, “Go to detachment headquarters and
see the personnel officer. He has your orders.” So I saw him and then they told me I had
to have a physical like within forty-eight hours. What happened, I found out, was my
orders were actually sent to the group headquarters in Hawaii and then sent to the
detachment and normally it would have been like two or three weeks notice to have this
physical completed so our personnel people had to pull some strings with our contacts or
call in some favors with their contacts at the Army hospital to get this physical rushed
through before the deadline because there was a deadline of the date I had to be
appointed. All of this had been done before I had even been told.

LC: Right, exactly. Just to clarify, am I right in understanding that the 504th MI
group headquarters was in Hawaii?

MS: At the time it was in Hawaii.

LC: Where in Hawaii?

MS: I’m not sure. I think it was at Ft. Shafter but I’m not really sure.

LC: Now once all the paperwork SNAFU (Situation Normal All Fouled Up) had
been clarified your work involved what kinds of things?

MS: I’m sorry?

LC: Your work involved what kinds of things?

MS: Before I made warrant or after I made warrant?
LC: Afterwards.
MS: Afterwards I was in the detachment headquarters basically processing intelligence reports that came through from our liaison section.
LC: Can you tell me anything about the kinds of reports? Were these based on open literature or other sources?
MS: From all sources, mostly from human sources.
LC: Okay. Can you tell me anything about what the general mission was? Were there particular targets that you were keeping under watch?
MS: A lot of the leftist dissident groups within Japan and the rightist dissident groups also, for that matter.
LC: I see. Is there anything more you can tell me about that?
MS: Not really.
LC: You stayed there the required three years, is that right?
MS: That’s correct.
LC: Now, this is talking about your post-warrant officer work. Did it change substantially while you were there?
MS: Not really.
LC: And by processing reports do you mean that you were contributing to them or were you making sure distributions were correct?
MS: I was reviewing them. I was, in a number of cases, retyping them into more legible English because a lot of these came in in Japlish if you’ll pardon the expression. I was determining which of these was more than routine and needed special handling or needed to be brought to the attention of higher ups.
LC: So you were kind of triaging?
MS: In a way. All of these reports did get forwarded but I would triage, to use a medical term, as far as importance and which can be just sent up to higher headquarters without my superiors at our level needing to know about it.
LC: How many people were in the office?
MS: There were two of us, myself and an NCO.
LC: And was this work something that you enjoyed?
MS: Not really.
LC: And why was that?
MS: Because it was paper pushing.
LC: Instead of working with people?
MS: Right. It was also very dry. I didn’t like trying to rewrite other people’s
work.
LC: Were you using your Japanese language training?
MS: No, because everything I got in was in English.
LC: Did you use it at all?
MS: Not on the job. If I hadn’t made warrant officer and had stayed in the job
that I was assigned to when I first got there I would have used it extensively.
LC: Sure, okay. But because things sort of changed course the actual work you
were doing was qualitatively different.
MS: Right.
LC: Is there more that you can tell me about your time in Japan? Anything you
did, for example, that you enjoyed?
MS: Well, we went out and did a lot of sightseeing and tourism but all within a
day’s drive from where we lived because there was so much to see there. There were
other things we would have loved to get down to, Kyoto and other places, but there was
so much we could do and see very close where it didn’t cost as much. Like getting to
Kamakura was an hour’s drive or an hour and a half train ride. Kamakura is one of the
most beautiful and cultural centers of the country. At one point it was the capital so there
were a lot of Buddhist and Shinto shrines and temples in the area and it has a wonderful
beach. Sharon got involved with the Brownies when Sarah joined the Brownies and
Sharon wound up being a pack leader or troop leader or whatever they called them and
she took her Brownie troop on a field trip to Kamakura and asked me to come along with
them to help keep the kids in line and because I spoke Japanese better than she did, which
was in her case virtually nonexistent. They have a number of amusement parks and we
took Sarah to amusement parks and my buddy Mike, the one who keeps popping up
every so often in my life, he was working for the Red Cross at the time and he was on an
audit trip of Red Cross offices in the Far East so he came and we got to spend some time
with him while he was audit the Camp Zama office. We went to an amusement park with
him and Sarah and Sharon. He had a few dinners at our house, etc, etc, etc.

LC: Michelle, did you ever observe any moment of tension, and I’m speaking
now outside of your official work, between American service personnel or their families
and the Japanese?

MS: No, I didn’t. That’s because I never really observed that much interaction
between American service personnel and Japanese other than myself.

LC: Sure and nothing untoward ever happened with you or your family?

MS: No, not at all.

LC: Can you describe the general tenor of your interactions with Japanese
meeting you and your family?

MS: It was all quite pleasant. In most cases it was interacting with storekeepers.
Occasionally we’d have conversations with people on the trains or subways because they
always like to practice their English. There was one case in particular where I was
walking in downtown Tokyo and I got lost so I stopped and I saw a man on the street and
said, “Sumi masenga,” which means, “Excuse me, please.” And he said, “Sorry, no
speak English.” And I said to him in Japanese, “But if you notice, I’m speaking
Japanese, not English.” (Laughs)

LC: That’s very interesting. (Laughs) I like that.

MS: He muttered something and walked off because he didn’t want to talk to an
American, even in Japanese.

LC: Right. It wasn’t the language that was critical I guess for him.

MS: I guess.

LC: I want to ask a bit more of a retrospective question, but again on the steam of
the observation of tension. Did you observe any racial tensions between, say, blacks and
whites during the seventies in your career within the military? Were there ever times
when African-Americans and whites within the service didn’t get along so well?

MS: Just a little. While I was in Japan I had the opportunity to give a talk on the
Army Equal Opportunity Program and I was talking about things and our 1st Sergeant
who was African-American said, “Are you talking about affirmative action?” And I said,
“Yes,” and he was anti-affirmative action.
LC: Did he let you know why?
MS: Basically because he made it on his own without having to need affirmative action so he felt it was not necessary and that it was insulting to blacks.
LC: How did you handle that?
MS: I basically explained that I think his perception of affirmative action is incorrect and explained the official Army policy.
LC: Which was…can you say?
MS: Which was basically make sure everybody has equal opportunity. I stuck basically to my lesson plan and gave the party line, so to speak.
LC: And kept moving.
MS: What?
LS: And you just kept it moving and kept the talk moving.
MS: Yes. Now a few moments after that he stepped out of the classroom to have a cigarette. Word got back to me from some people who did not attend that session but attended a different session was that he stormed out in anger. I said, “No, you can ask him. He stepped out to have a cigarette. It was not in anger at all.” Apparently he concurred with that when someone asked him about it.
LC: Was this someone you were seeing on a regular basis?
MS: Say again?
LC: Was this man someone you saw on a regular basis?
MS: Which man? The 1st Sergeant?
LC: Yes.
MS: Well he was the 1st Sergeant of the unit so everybody saw him daily.
LC: And was it fine between you and him?
MS: Oh yeah, we had no personal problems. He realized I was teaching the official Army viewpoint and he could accept that. It happened that I agreed with the official Army viewpoint. We had some cases where people had to give classes like that where their personal opinions were different but they were professional about it and taught what they had to.
LC: When did you get notification about a new assignment?
MS: I got that notification maybe four or five months before and the notification said I was going to Ft. Carson, Colorado.

LC: Is that what actually happened?

MS: No. About a month or two later things came in saying I was going to Ft. Hood, Texas. I called branch and asked why and he said, “Well, we have this new concept called CEWI (Communications Electronics Warfare Intelligence) and Ft. Hood is a test installation for the CEWI so that takes priority so you’re going to Ft. Hood.”

LC: Now, this is seaweed?

MS: C-E-W-I.

LC: Okay, now what does that mean?

MS: I don’t remember. (Laughs) The concept was an integration of all intelligence disciplines whereas before things were a lot more compartmented. They were trying to get a more integrated approach.

LC: So at Ft. Hood there was a test project rolling this out to see whether…?

MS: Right. Not so much a test project but a reorganization under the CEWI concept. And I was going to be assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division is military intelligence, actually.

LC: Is that actually what happened?

MS: No. I wound up exchanging letters with my sponsor at that unit and then when I got home on leave…Oh, by the way, backing up, when we left Ft. Huachuca to go to Japan we drove to Nebraska to visit Sharon’s folks and we spent some time with them and then we actually drove to visit each of her brothers and sisters after leaving her folk’s home and spent a few days with two of her three brothers. The third one was in the same town as her folks and her other two brothers lived in different towns and then we drove to visit her sister who lived in yet another city, all within Nebraska. And then we drove out to Travis Air Force Base and dropped the car off to be shipped and then flew out to Japan. That and the Christmas trip when I was at the DLI East Coast were the only two times we ever visited her folks. Her folks visited us a few times but that’s the only time we visited her folks. But anyway, after leaving Japan, again we arranged for a commercial flight instead of a military flight and we got on a short-bodied 747 and flew nonstop from Tokyo to JFK in New York City. Fourteen-hour flight.
LC: In 1978?
MS: ’78, right.
LC: Wow, okay.
MS: That was interesting.
LC: Very much so.
MS: I think we got like five meals and two movies.
LC: Yeah, it sounds kind of harrowing but interesting nonetheless. Now you saw your folks after that and had some leave?
MS: What?
LC: You had a bit of leave at that time and saw your parents?
MS: Right, well, my father.
LC: I’m sorry, yes, of course.
MS: Yeah, my mother passed away while we were in Japan.
LC: I’m sorry. I had forgotten that.
MS: It’s okay. So we stayed with my father and I forget if he had remarried Ann already. No, he hadn’t but they were living together. Anyway, while I was there I called my sponsor at this 1st Cav Division and he said, “But we were told that your assignment was cancelled. We were told you’re not coming here.” So I called my assignment manager at branch, at Military Personnel Center in D.C. or Arlington, actually, and he said, “No, you’re still on orders for Ft. Hood. Give me a moment and I’ll find out what’s going on.” What happened was Ft. Hood transferred me or changed my orders on post from that MI detachment to the 504th MI group, which was in support of III Corps Headquarters. Which reminds me, the MI group when I was in Japan was not the 504th. It was the 500th. And while I was there they had moved the headquarters from Hawaii to Japan so basically we wound up co-locating between Detachment N and the group headquarters all co-located together. But that did not affect the job I had.
LC: Right, but I’m glad you noted that the headquarters had moved to Japan.
MS: I had meant to mention it but I had forgotten.
LC: Now at Ft. Hood you were with the 504th in support of what unit?
MS: The III US Army Corps Headquarters. Ft. Hood had one corps headquarters and one infantry division. No, excuse me, one armored division, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armored, and the 1\textsuperscript{st} Cavalry Division.

LC: And from that anyone could believe that Ft. Hood is huge.

MS: Yes.

LC: Tell me about your housing arrangements there.

MS: Okay. Basically we bought a house. It costs us thirty-three thousand dollars, it was about twelve hundred square feet, it was built just after the Korean War, I believe. Yeah, just after the Korean War. The house was about twenty-five years old, the original purchasers had lived in it for fifteen years and we were the fifth owners. So after the first fifteen years it changed hands about every two years. Now when I was at the 504\textsuperscript{th} Group I was actually assigned initially to the counterintelligence platoon of Company B, Operational Security of the 163\textsuperscript{rd} MI Battalion, which was part of the 504\textsuperscript{th} MI group.

LC: And what was your work?

MS: Our work was to support the non-divisional corps units, including corps headquarters for counterintelligence and operational security.

LC: Can you tell me what that actually means?

MS: Basically we did security inspections and evaluations of units both in garrison and in the field.

LC: Now were there units posted in the field that you did actually go and visit?

MS: Yes.

LC: Okay. Where were they?

MS: Out in the field in Ft. Hood. As you said, Ft. Hood is a very big place.

LC: But not off the base? You weren’t going off the base?

MS: No, because they did all their maneuvers on base.

LC: And no part of them was assigned overseas during the time you were there?

MS: No, that’s correct.

LC: And you were there from ’78 until when?

MS: Until ’83.

LC: Until retirement, basically?
MS: Right. And there were a lot of reorganizations there. The 163rd was disbanded and everything came under the 303rd MI Battalion and those of us in counterintelligence there were mostly reassigned to work out of the Corps G-2 office for a while and then there were some other reassignments and I wound up working I think my last two years of those five years in the S-2 office at the 504th Group Headquarters.

LC: Did you work change substantially with these many reorganizations?

MS: Yes. Basically was I was doing for my last two years was I was doing administration for security clearance paperwork. As requests came through from the Battalion S-2 I reviewed the paperwork for the accuracy, completeness, and I also prepared the paperwork for the people assigned to the group headquarters itself.

LC: Okay. Were you enjoying this work? Was it more people oriented?

MS: It was more people oriented but it was still a lot of paperwork but I was working with a great group of people in the office. That was the first time, working in that office was the first time it occurred to me that, “Yeah, I’m getting older.”

LC: Really?

MS: Yeah. We had a private assigned to us as a clerk and I had enlisted in the Army before she was born.

LC: And that kind of hit home?

MS: That hit home. “I was in the Army before you were born.”

LC: Yes, that’s true. You were. That’s true.

MS: Not you, I mean.

LC: Oh, well, it is actually true that you were in the Army before I was born.

(Laughs) But you thought this of her?

MS: Right.

LC: Did it shake you at all or did it make you want to plan for what was going to come next?

MS: It did shake me a little and make me realize, “Hey, you’re not as young as you used to be.”

LC: And what impact did that have on you? Did it spur you to be thinking about what you wanted to do after retirement?

MS: Not really.
LC: It just kind of shook you a little.
MS: Not even shook me, it just awakened me.
LC: Did it change anything for you?
MS: No.
LC: Okay, it was just one of those moments.
MS: Just one of those moments.
LC: And were you giving thought to what your life would look like after your retirement?
MS: No.
LC: No?
MS: No. (Laughs) I’m the type of person who takes things as they come because I know things will always work out right and because I believe that they usually do somehow.
LC: It’s unclear which drives which but in any event, it comes out well.
MS: Yeah.
LC: Is there more that you can tell me about the work that you did while you were at Ft. Hood?
MS: I could get down into minutia but basically I covered the salient points.
LC: Okay. Can you tell me about your retirement?
MS: Well basically I had been at Ft. Hood for going on five years. With very few exceptions the only warrant officers at my unit who left did so by retirement. There was one or two who did get finally transferred out but they had been there for like six or seven years before they got transferred out. So when our branch managers came to visit us and fill us in on what’s going on in the Army and every thing I asked him, “What’s the chances of getting transferred out of here?” And he said, “I’ll look into it when I get back.” And he said, “Well, basically, all I can do now is send you to an infantry division in Germany or back to Korea,” and back to the old unit I had been in, not that he knew I had been in the unit before because that was when I was enlisted. “But to do that you’d have to request it.” I said, “Can I get an accompanied tour in Korea?” and he said, “Well, all I can do is send you to the unit and you’d have to negotiate with them about getting an accompanied tour if they have any slots left. But you can’t do that unless you’re on
orders for that.” So after discussion with Sharon we decided that I would put in for Korea. If I could get the accompanied tour we’d take it and if I couldn’t get the accompanied tour I’d put in for retirement. So I submitted the paperwork volunteering to go to Korea, came down for Korea, called the admin people in Korea or called the people in Korea at the headquarters. I wanted to speak to the S-3, the operations officer and couldn’t get a hold of him so I would up speaking to the battalion adjutant who said, “No, there’s no way we can get you a command-sponsored assignment.” So basically I had two months from the date of my levy to put in for my retirement and putting in for retirement would be I’d have to retire no later than six months or the end of the month in which six months past the date of the levy came in. So I called the branch manager and said, “I decided I don’t want to take the Korean assignment so I’m putting in for retirement.” And he said, “Yes, I can support that.” Now the only reason I was able to put in for retirement is because I had over twenty years of service. Otherwise I had no choice. Of course I still would have had the choice of not putting in the request in the first place. So I retired on May 31st 1983. My first day on the retirement rolls was June 1st which gave me a total of twenty-two years, two months, and twenty-two days active duty. The only reason I remember that is because of all of those twos. (Laughs)

LC: Right. (Laughs) Now, Michelle, was that a sad day in any way, the 31st of May?

MS: No.

LC: Were you anxious to get on with something new or did you want a break? How did you approach it?

MS: Well once we decided I was going to retire I told Sharon, “Where do you want to live?” We made a list of every place that we would consider living. We then crossed off all those places that were too expensive to live in, all those places where we didn’t like the climate, where it would be too cold, all those places where we didn’t like the social climate, which left us a list of maybe about four or five cities. We verified to make sure there was a VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) or military hospital at each of those places because while we were at Ft. Hood Sharon got a job with the VA hospital in Temple, Texas, which was about thirty miles away and she wanted to stay civil service, which meant basically VA or military. So she sent off requests to, well, we started by
calling the hospitals in those four or five cities because all four or five cities had either
military or VA hospitals or both in one case. Three of those cities said they had openings
for practical nurses so she sent out her civil service job applications for in-service transfer
to three of them. One of them came back rejected because they had no openings even
though three weeks earlier they told us they did. One of them at Bliss Army Hospital at
Ft. Huachuca, Arizona came back saying, “Yes, we have an opening, we’ll hire you,” and
the one from Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso we never heard from. So we decided
to move to Sierra Vista and Ft. Huachuca.

LC: How close is that to the fort? Is it the city right next door?
MS: Ft. Huachuca is within the city limits.
LC: Is it a safe guess that you’ve lived in Arizona more or less since then?
MS: No, it’s not a safe guess.
LC: Okay. You’ve moved somewhere else in the interim?
MS: Right. We moved there, bought a house there. We had some friends there
and one of them was a realtor. We bought a brand-new house, had it built for us, we got
there on the 1st of June, leaving Killeen on the 31st of May, spent the night en route in El
Paso which was about the halfway point or maybe a little further, got there in the
afternoon, they had arranged a motel for us and it took three and a half weeks before our
house was ready for us to move in because they had started building it back in about
March or early April. We got there, Sharon started working shortly after we got there, I
was looking for want ads in the paper and found that they wanted somebody. A company
needed course writers for Army correspondence courses in my field.
 LC: That was good.
 MS: So I applied and I found that I got interviewed and I was one of two people
 hired.
 LC: And how long did you do that, Michelle?
 MS: Let’s see. I started that job sometime in July and in January the Army
cancelled the contract and that was the only contract that this company had in the area so
I was out of that job. However, in November two months earlier I had started a part-time
job selling computers at a new computer store that opened in Sierra Vista and that was
basically selling gray-market Apples plus software for various computers. And in
January just about a week or two after I lost the other job the store I was working for became an authorized Apple dealership.

LC: This is actually pretty early in the PC revolution, I mean the desktop.

MS: This was ’84.

LC: That’s still pretty early.

MS: I had owned an Apple computer since October of ’78.

LC: But you would have one of not too darn many.

MS: That’s true.

LC: So you’re a diehard Mac fan, I’m thinking.

MS: Well back then it was Apple II but now I’m a diehard Mac fan, yes.

LC: Michelle, can I ask you some general questions about your status as a veteran?

MS: Yes.

LC: I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the Veteran’s Administration and generally do you feel that it’s been properly resourced by the federal government?

MS: No.

LC: Okay, why?

MS: I had no contact with the VA other than being married to an employee until I moved out where I am now in July of 2001. For twelve years before here, after six years in Sierra Vista I was in Silicon Valley working in the computer industry, mostly for Apple, and I had no health benefits through my employer. After moving out here I had no health insurance so I went to the VA. I went in like late July to get into the system and I couldn’t get my first intake appointment until November.

LC: Now this is just trying to get to see a physician in the first instance for a general physical?

MS: Yeah, the first intake physical, the first intake appointment.

LC: It was almost six months or five months?

MS: Let’s see. August, September, October, about three and a half months.

LC: I’m sorry, three. But you had to wait just for that initial appointment?

MS: Right. And if the VA had the money to hire more caregivers it wouldn’t be that long of a wait.
LC: What kind of care? So you’ve been utilizing the system since late 2001?
MS: Right.
LC: And what’s your appraisal of the care that you’ve received once you got in the door as it were?
MS: With some few exceptions, excellent. During that interim wait I had a problem with my shoulder so I went to the emergency room and basically the doctor there who I saw was very rude and I think incompetent. Basically he had them take x-rays of my shoulder, said, “The x-rays don’t show up anything, take this prescription to the pharmacy and if it doesn’t clear up in ten days go see your primary care.” I tried to tell him, “I can’t get to see my primary care until November because I’m not in the system yet.” He didn’t want to hear it. It turns out I had had this problem already for two or three months and it was a problem very similar to one I had had on my other shoulder a decade earlier and that had required surgery to correct. I figured if I could get them to see it early maybe they can do something without the surgery. Basically it was, “Get out of here.” “Where’s the pharmacy?” “Go ask out at the front desk.” I had to bite my tongue from saying, “Are you really a doctor or are you just a janitor pretending to be one?”
LC: Was that incident…did it sour you a bit or did you think that was just him?
MS: I thought it was just him. So anyway, in November I got to see my primary care person who is a nurse practitioner but they told me, “If you’re uncomfortable seeing a nurse practitioner we can switch you to an MD.” But after speaking with her for that one session I had no problems with her. Since she worked under the supervision of an MD if something was beyond her scope she had the resources. So she got me an appointment with an orthopedic surgeon. She referred me to them. The only way I could get to them is through referral. The doctor there, he wanted to take a very conservative approach so basically he gave me a cortisone shot which didn’t work. I went back to my next scheduled appointment with a different doctor in the clinic and he wanted to try physical therapy. Basically what wound up happening is I had surgery on my shoulder. I had physical therapy that was working somewhat but not enough so I wound up having surgery on my shoulder about a year after I first went to the ER on the first complaint and by then the surgery was really required.
LC: And so that’s what ended up happening? You had to have the surgery?
MS: Yeah. Other than that I have had no problems and no complaints other than
that one doctor and the fact that they didn’t take a more aggressive approach to my
shoulder initially.
LC: But institutionally…?
MS: Institutionally I have no problems with the VA medical system.
LC: Do you see the broader VA, beyond the medical system, do you see the
broader VA as an advocate for you as a veteran or a nemesis or something in between?
MS: Neither.
LC: Nothing?
MS: Nothing.
LC: Because you haven’t had that much interaction with them?
MS: Right. My only other interaction with the VA ever was a home loan after I
retired from the Army and basically it was that everything went through the loan
company and they did what they needed with the VA and gave me the forms to fill out
for the VA and all that.
LC: And that went smoothly.
MS: I’m sorry?
LC: That went pretty smoothly.
MS: Yeah, that went smoothly. No problem.
LC: Do those benefits, that home loan option and the medical and if you’ve
accessed anything else I don’t know, but is that adequate to compensate you for the
service that you gave to the country?
MS: That plus my retirement pay. Oh yeah, also with the VA because of my
service in Vietnam, I think I mentioned this that I have a ten percent disability for
diabetes.
LC: And they assumption there is what, that the diabetes is related to…?
MS: The assumption is that the diabetes was caused by Agent Orange and by law
anybody who served in Vietnam is presumed to have been exposed to Agent Orange.
LC: And from your point of view is that a good policy?
MS: I think so.
LC: Not just because at this point because you are deriving some benefit from it but in general do you feel that was a good decision?

MS: Yes, definitely.

LC: Okay. Have you ever had any sort of negative response to you because you were a veteran? I’m sure that most people don’t know just walking down the street but have you ever applied for a job or any experiences where your veteran status was a problem?

MS: No. One interesting thing, one job I was accepted for and this was for a major corporation, after I was hired and I was at Human Resources filling out paperwork she said, “Oh good, you’re a Vietnam Era veteran and you’re over forty. That helps our EEO statistics.” (Laughs)

LC: Yeah, what do you think about veterans of the Vietnam era having their own affirmative action classification? Is that a good thing?

MS: Considering how a lot of veterans were treated, yes, I think it is.

LC: Why do you say that?

MS: I don’t know if it’s still necessary now but during the Vietnam era and right afterwards there was a lot of prejudice against the Vietnam vets and that EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) worked for us and ameliorated that somewhat.

LC: So you think it’s fair?

MS: I think it was fair then. I don’t know if it’s still necessary.

LC: I also want to ask you a general question again, this time about something that you alluded to earlier this afternoon when we were speaking about policy making in Vietnam. Can you give your appraisal now of US involvement in Southeast Asia again just in general terms? Was it a good idea? If so, why? If not, why not?

MS: Well, now in retrospect I think we shouldn’t have been there.

LC: Why not? What makes you think that, Michelle?

MS: Basically the situation in Vietnam was between two tyrannical governments, one that was in the Soviet sphere and the other one wasn’t. The only reason we were there in my opinion is because the other side…we basically adopted anything that was anti-Soviet in those days. That’s the only reason we were there is because Ho Chi Minh
was in the Soviet sphere or at least was a Communist. So we weren’t there to help fight
for the Vietnamese people. We were there to fight against Communism.

LC: And is that, in your mind, insufficient to commit the kind of forces that the
United States committed?

MS: Yes, I agree. Yes, it was insufficient.

LC: Okay. Michelle, is there anything additional that you would like to add to
this interview that perhaps I didn’t ask you about? Things that you may have thought of?

MS: Oh heck, let’s see. Not really, nothing that comes to mind offhand.

LC: Okay. Well, I want to thank you for participating.

MS: Okay.