Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Tony Gleaton. Today is August 19th, 2004. I’m in Lubbock, Texas. We are in Lubbock, Texas, in the Vietnam Archive interview room, the Special Collections Library, on the campus of Texas Tech University. It is about 10:22AM, Central Standard Time. Tony, why don’t we start with some biographical information? Tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about growing up.

Tony Gleaton: I was born in a woman’s hospital in Detroit, Michigan, in 1948. My father had been a— at that time he was a young policeman. His family background was that his—he didn’t know that his—Mr. Gleaton, Wayne Gleaton, who we have thought was his father was not his father. Mr. Mayberry was his father, and this was somebody that my grandmother had married or had been with and then the relationship dissolved. My grandmother, my paternal grandmother, Francis, strong, tall, powerfully built, somatically black woman, fourth grade education, who owned a beauty shop, and this was in the black neighborhood. It wasn’t in the black bottom, which had been the classic ghetto in Detroit, but it was—when I came to know them in the early ‘50s, it was in moderate—it’s in the middle class black neighborhood. William, her husband, had been a numbers man. The purple gang had taken over his operation. He was simply had a drug store, drug store/café, down the street from there. He was the kind of guy that had a new Cadillac every year. He was very dapper, you know. My father wound up doing that too. My father just loved clothes. I think I was a great disappointment to my father because I—it really didn’t make any difference to me half the time after a certain point.
But that was my father’s side. My father’s side of the family had money. I think it was because of the illegal operations that my father’s stepfather had done. I never knew that my grandfather was my step-grandfather. We had an extended large family on that side. On my mother’s side, my mother’s family was much more socially prominent, but without any money because her father, who had been the head of the black YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association), had died. Now he was somatically black, very dark, but his wife, Ruth Woodson, was very fair. She could pass for white so she was able to buy a house in a particular area. He had died in the middle of the war. He had the kind of position where—the YMCA back in the ‘30s, Associate For Blacks, was one in which it was a betterment of the race kind of organization. You would have people like G. Carter Woodson come in. You’d have black intellectuals, other black intellectuals other than him would come in. So the family would be aware, would know these people because it was my mother. She was the oldest daughter. Uncle Theodore was the oldest child. He was a couple years older than my mother. Then there was my aunt. It was my Aunt Yvonne. Then I had a middle aunt. All of them had gone into education except for Theodore. Theodore was brilliant. He could make things with his hands, a machinist, but he—it was, in a way, a ne’er do well until much later. So, when my mother’s father died it, threw the family into dire financial straits and I don’t know how my grandmother did it but my grandmother was able to keep things together and get everybody through college. Well, what I didn’t realize was that my mother was—I never knew my mother drank until she died, until a couple years before she died. Now I realize, it came out that she had drunk—she drank everyday of her life as an adult, like a pint of liquor or half a pint. I never knew. Never. Never until she was older and sick and then the alcoholism became really obvious. Then there were times—I mean because she had always been the matriarch of the family. My father was a cop and abusive and really, quite violent. I mean I think my earliest childhood memory is like him trying to kill her. It wasn’t a pretty picture sometime. The fact that he was a cop, it’s not like she could go a lot of places for help because they—I remember one Christmas Eve we were hiding upstairs at my grandmother’s, my maternal grandmother’s. My father was outside, probably with a gun, and he wouldn’t go away. They called the police and the police kind of talked to him but not a whole lot. So I think a number of different times as a childhood I’ve at
least, at least four times we had to move out and live somewhere else and they were
separated. It turns out that like my dad—my dad was a cop in the ‘50s, a black cop in the
‘50s with these other young black Turks who had been in World War II, had come out,
who—this was right past the era of b-bop. This was in Detroit. There were all these
guys, they would like go drinking in different places. It’s like one time I came home and
my father was like passed out. There were all these liquor bottles all around. His friends
had been over, after their shift they were drinking. It was like, it was like some serious
shit. He was like a real—I don’t know if it would’ve been child abuse then, but like now
it would have been because we got the shit beat out of us. Not with a fist but with a hand.
I mean not with a hand, but with a belt. I think even to the day my father died I think that
if—I was like really passive aggressive with him as an adult and I don’t think I’ve talked
to him more than twenty times as an adult.

RV: Really?

TG: Well, yeah. Like shit I went through that as a kid. I wasn’t like—I had free
will after that. Just like after the Marine Corps I never really joined anything. I never,
ever joined anything again. Never became a part of anything that would dictate that I
would have to do anything other than what I decided for that day. I think my therapist
said a couple times that that’s why I chose the kind of work that I do. Then half the time,
now, later on, I think there are some issues in my life that as a kid you can gloss over, but
later on you realize that they were issues that should have been dealt with. Part of that is
I don’t really know how to have—I don’t think I really know how to have a relationship
within a family kind of context. I think growing up I always looked for other families to
be with and I did it often. I did it with—I practically lived at my girlfriend’s house, but
then again I never got to the point where I wanted to take over and be a head of
household. So, I don’t know. That’s what—

RV: When did your parents pass away?

TG: My mother committed suicide I think about six or seven years ago. My
father, he died of cancer about three years ago. No, it’s got to be—wasn’t three. Okay.
Six years ago for my dad, five or six years ago for my dad, eight or nine for my mom.
They had remained friendly for the rest of their lives even though—she never went out
with another guy.
RV: They did separate?
TG: They did separate. They finally divorced, but she kept him on her health insurance. I mean I wound up becoming my father because I was abusive in my marriage and had to go to therapy for it. I married someone exactly like my mother, I mean, which is I guess the story of all our, of some. So, I mean I grew up in that kind of environment. Detroit, this was before Detroit had changed. Detroit I sort of looked at as a very small Chicago at that time.

RV: What was it like? Describe the city as you remember it.
TG: Oh, it was—we lived—I think we were the first blacks in the neighborhood that we lived in and within that neighborhood there was—I had an Iranian friend. I had a Polish friend. I had a—we had a couple black friends and we had, you know, like Scot-Irish. So, I mean, it was just all there and we were just kids. Ramses, Ramses was Iranian or Iraqi. He might’ve been Iraqi because he would draw jet planes with Soviet insignias on it because that’s where they had come from. Then Bobby Mehan who was—there was a huge Polish community in Detroit. He was there and then—we were just all there. Threw water balloons at people that were driving down their car, you know, in the summer with their top down and just doing all kinds of stuff. We would ride our bikes to Palmer Park, which was maybe five miles away. This was up until the time I left there before I was ten. So we would ride our bikes downtown and walk back home or take the bus up there and walk back home or play war. We had this empty lot called The Jungle, which was right next to what eventually became like the Barry Gordy’s compound because we lived—we were in a working class section, but two streets over there were huge estates, the kind of places that like the Archdioceses would own. I mean, you know, where you have, I mean—my ex-wife’s house in Los Angeles is on four lots, but these places were like on ten lots. So, I mean I had a really, fairly, fairly normal—I existed within a fairly normal milieu there. There was a huge blow up in my family and my father’s parents were sympathetic with what was going on with my mother. My grandmother helped my mother move completely out of the state and move to—I mean she would get beaten up like bad. I think that’s why the reason I never really respected my father later on. My brother got to be friends with him and I just, I wasn’t going—I wouldn’t even drink. For the longest time I would not even drink. There came a time
when there was a dilemma because I realized I liked beer, but I didn’t want to drink
because I was torn because I said I would never do this, and going now, “Don’t, don’t,
don’t, but I like it.” I didn’t even have a taste—I think the first beer I had was when I
was in. I think I had a San Miguel somewhere, but that was later. I had this sort of a
searing tear in my life as a kid because at the end of the summer before I went into the
sixth grade there was a huge blow up. My mother relocated to Los Angeles. We didn’t
know anybody there, no family, no nothing. She started a life there and then eventually
reconciled with my father and he came out. He could no longer be a cop so he had to like
get other kind of jobs. He was like a janitor, then a bus driver—

RV: Did he get sober at that point?
TG: No. No because we still had to do it—we still had those episodes in L.A.
RV: Tell me about your brothers and sisters. How many—?
TG: My brother, one brother older, took the brown of everything as a kid. Shy—
well, I would say sensitive kid, but grew up, had to lead the house. I mean, everybody
left the house as soon as they could. Why the fuck do you—like, “Oh, gee.” Why stay
around? He wound up, he was a really tall—he and I are the same person. He and I are
the same—we’re different versions of the same bullshit. So we came to L.A. My
parents—I went to a school—it’s really funny. I went to a school, I went to a school in
which—I didn’t realize the significance of it till later—where there were a lot of kids
who were Japanese and their parents had been Nisei and their grandparents senseis. So
they had come out of a direct parental history of relocation camps. But these were just—
we were just kids, you know. We grew up in L.A. without that sort of—we grew up sort
of wild and free because we didn’t have that sort of parental locus or extended family
locus, no cousins, none of that. We were just doing what we were doing. We were sent
to—my mother at this time, by this time, had started teaching. She had to make sure that
we were going to schools in which the minority of the kids were black. So we went to
schools that were like primarily Jewish. So, like during the high holidays, it was just like
fifteen black kids in a class being baby-sat from the entire school because nobody else
was there. Now, growing up—I’m going to flip back to Detroit—when my mom—my
mom was sent by her father to Hillsdale College in northern Michigan. She was the only
black woman there. She’s very fair. She’s really beautiful. Okay? I didn’t realize she

had large breasts until my friends would—they were like—my mom! You know? So, she was really gorgeous. I think that kind of pressure that she had to live a public life, not only in that but also being, being the daughter of the head of the black YMCAs it was just akin to like being a preacher’s kid. You’re like on the spotlight. Even though they were in a social milieu that was the elite, but they couldn’t—they didn’t have the money to back it up and she basically married below her station when she married my dad. I don’t know how much that played into the things that happened later on. Well, my mother was getting her teaching credential at Wayne State University. Because of the fact that she was African-American—and she was fairer than I am so it’s really hard—you couldn’t, you know, you had to like, you almost had to like wear a nametag to realize that she was black, but they closed down the department rather than allow her to be in it. Because what you had to do was, part of the requirement was you had to live in a group house because she had a home-ec major and they weren’t having that. They weren’t having that at all. So, I didn’t really—but I didn’t really see discrimination but I must have picked up on it because I think one day I was mad at some kid that was walking because we lived two dark blocks—we lived two houses from the school, the elementary school I went to.

RV: This is in L.A.?

TG: This was back in Detroit. I’ve called some kid a nigger as he goes by. My mother took me in and gave me—well, gave me a whip for it and then explained to me that we ain’t havin’ that. Okay. But I was young enough to know, picked up what society valued and didn’t value. I always thought since I was like light and cute and had green eyes and all that I was like, you know, I was like different. To this day I still at times play a color card, which is an interracial version of racism in my own life, in my own mind.

RV: How do you do that?

TG: Well, I’m just saying—you know, I’ll just say very derogatively, “Oh, look at them.” Or I’ll look at somebody, I will look at somebody—don’t really do this now, but I would look at somebody and there’s just the paper bag test. If you were lighter than a paper bag then you were okay. If you were darker than a paper bag then it wasn’t even a question unless you just had lots of money, but even then there was that stigma that was
going to be on you. I was more than willing to buy into that, which I think one reason is why—I mean when they did the Brown vs. Board of Education, when they had one of the law, one of the group of lawsuits that contributed to that when the black psychologist went to the school and asked the kids to pick out the dolls that they most favored. You could see, Peter Jennings doing the same sort of thing later on in South Africa asking this girl what doll she wanted.

RV: I remember that.

RG: Like shit, it’s no question. I could see all the signs everywhere.

RV: Was your brother darker?

TG: No. Same as me with blue eyes. Blue eyes, thinner—always—I mean, hoes would come to him as a kid. I mean, he was like fucking everybody. I mean, he was like fucking the most beautiful women. It was like a joke. My facility was with people. His was with more with women. I don’t think I had—I mean, I’m looking back at my relationships with women and just realizing that most of the women were really dismal. I mean, even though I’ve been friends with a lot of girls afterwards, it just, I mean, it got to the point where I’m picking damaged people all the time.

RV: So your relationships with people in general are better than your personal relationships with women?

TG: Yeah. Yeah. And also I—yeah. But we need to go into that later on because I don’t know how much of what happens later in my life plays into that.

RV: Okay. Let’s talk about L.A. What was it like? This was in the mid-‘50, ’59?

TG: ’59, ’60. It’s the ‘60s in L.A. I mean, well, I thought there was not a lot of smog except I guess there was. Just a different kind, just a different kind of place. I mean, my reaction to it—to me it didn’t seem that much different from Detroit except I realized that the distances were greater, but one thing that happened is that see we left in the middle of the night and I never saw any of the people that I grew up with again.

RV: Didn’t say goodbye to them.

TG: I never saw them again. I think I saw—I mean, we went back five years later—and we were a handful. I think I was there, bought this really great, fake, leather coat and it was the middle of the summer and I was determined to wear it. It was that
kind of deal. Then I dyed my hair black for some reason. My grandmother almost
kicked my ass since she had to like get rid of all that shit so. I mean we were there, we
was like playing. We was playas, but, you know, we were just—I was getting ready to
go into high school. We just thought, we just knew it. It was just stupid kids.

RV: What kind of student were you?

TG: I had Bs and Cs. I never was really interested in that much stuff. I mean I
read. I was a voracious reader. I read, read, read, read. And punishment? No problem.
Books in my room. No problem, probably call me. Call me when I’m off—just let me
know when I can go out. I go to the movies now the way I used to read then. I just
would read adventure stories. Things about guys on ships and stuff like that. When I
was in high school I never thought I’d want to work in an office. I thought maybe I could
be a forest ranger or something. I wasn’t in any sort of college prep program. I got to
college. I mean, when I got to high school I played on football teams—I went to L.A.
High. It was a very integrated school. It was a quarter black, quarter Asian, quarter
Jewish, quarter Anglo. You know, had all the shit going on there. Mary Pickford’s—I
remember there was a time I really wanted to go out with Mary Pickford’s granddaughter
and she couldn’t go out with me because I was black. I was commiserating, trying to
make her feel okay about it like what was I thinking about. Not fuck you but, you know,
don’t feel bad. I mean I really understand. I met my, Rochelle, my eleventh lady,
eleventh grade English class, and she had a crush on Blake. Blake was this white
swimmer and she’s a black girl. She’s really beautiful. Her aunt was a performer on the
Playboy circuit and aunt’s name was Demita Joe. She sung up in the Catskills and sang
down in Florida. My girlfriend’s family, they were the kind of family that they had
property and they never let it go. So, she was—this is a girl that shopped at Saks and
Bonwits. Black girl that shopped at Saks and Bonwits, she wasn’t fucking around. She
is really beautiful. I mean they gave her a ’66 Mustang for her high school graduation.
There wasn’t a lot of that going on back then. We had—I think her parents, her and her
mother conspired to like make it sort of okay that I went out with this other girl who
didn’t mind, wanted to sleep with me because she wasn’t going to do that. So it was like
kind of—looking back, realizing the kind of things we were going through, I could just
realize that there was some unhealthy—I mean I think one time I scarred my face with a
rosebush thorn so that she would feel empathy. So, maybe not—which other than being stupid just gives a person, might give a peek at how unhealthily I might be looking at this. So, I grew up in L.A.

RV: What’d you guys do for fun in L.A.?

TG: Oh, went to the beach in the summer. We’d go everyday. I’d ride, we’d ride those surf mats. Instead of surfboards they had the rubber mats that you would—then we learned how to body surf. We were up in the old muscle beach and we got to the point where we would—I think at times we would have been, maybe for a while we didn’t have a car and we would take the bus out there. Then we would take the car out there. It seemed like and then we would go out there alone. Then we would do stuff—

RV: You and your brother?

TG: Well, and the family too. We would go with the family. We had a pretty—I played football. My father was like really critical about stuff. I mean I wasn’t the best player. I wasn’t the worst player. I had like a lot of potential, but I just wasn’t, I don’t think I was really motivated into it.

RV: Do you remember what position you played?

TG: Oh, yeah. I played tackle on defense. Then we had—because we had a really good team. I think over three years, I think we lost no more than five times, maybe six. We didn’t lose a lot. We were finally city champs the last year I was there, or it might have been the last two years, but I know for sure it was the last year. So I got a lot of perks because I was on the team and really noticeable. “Oh, he’s playing ball.” I’d go. So, I mean that was okay. I wasn’t prepared to go to college.

RV: Was it expected or were you encouraged?

TG: Nobody really said anything. You know, which was not the way my mother grew up. We just sort of—my father had me taking Latin and stuff in junior high school, which I was just like, “What? Are you out of—I’m not doing this. Can I have some Spanish foods?” Like, “What are these new kind of flare”—because this is chubby checker and everybody’s doing the twist. We would steal clothes from stores. We would shoplift and we would hide them at different places and then change on our way to school until one day our parents saw us and called the school. My mother knew she didn’t buy those clothes. Then we got jammed on that shit. We were doing all kinds of shit. We
were like drinking and going to—I mean we weren’t really bad. Oh, I think we stole a
car and worked on it. Someone stole the car and then we borrowed it after they stole it.
Then it was the kind of thing where the police chased us and we actually all got away
free. So, when I watch those things about the car chases in L.A. even though none of
our—“Oh, those kids.” I’m going, “Oh, yeah, mother fuck it up with you.” I was like
stealing beer from—I got busted for—an off-duty cop busted me for trying to lift the
generator out of a cement mixer so I could make a doodle bug, which is like a go-cart.
Parents were not happy. Then I think I got busted for stealing beer at the Thrifty’s, which
is like Eckerd and this was like we were—this was before I was seventeen. They weren’t
happy, but I wasn’t a bad kid. I mean they had some bad kids. They had some kids that
wound up being murderers in the kind of style that they make a TV movie about kids I
grew up with. I guess I knew kids that died in hold ups and robberies and stuff, but I
think that’s just part of being young and being—I wouldn’t say necessarily a minority but
just being, you know, people being taken hold up by the street. I learned some really bad
habits because once I got back from Vietnam my brother was sort of a player and didn’t
really work, work for like twenty years. He lived with women and did deals, maybe in a
way sold drugs and did scams or buy up credit cards. This was all before the time of
computers where you could like actually get away with stuff. So yeah. I would do that
and I think when I was at Berkeley we were like buying traveler’s checks, reporting them
lost, and then spending them.

RV: What year did you graduate high school, Tony?

TG: ’66.

RV: Were you all aware at all of Vietnam, what was going on in Southeast Asia?

TG: No. You know, I mean—I don’t know. I mean I guess I—well, I must’ve
been because I joined up and I knew there was a war, but I don’t have a recollection of
being aware of it. I don’t really—you know, I mean I look at Johnson. It’s like if you’re
black it’s kind of hard being nostalgic. If you’re not the majority of those countries it’s
kind of hard to be nostalgic for the way things were. Unless you go way back and then
you’d have to be indigenous. I mean Johnson, you know, if Kennedy had not died there
would not be—Johnson would’ve never gotten through the legislation that he got as far as
civil rights and the Great Society and all that, which really in a way affected—I didn’t
know it because I was, you know, Head Start and all that. I didn’t know what that was about. Or Sesame Street, there was like—I was already like, it was like way beyond me. I guess his attempt to build a Great Society, which was side tracked by the war. But I think he paid a price and then to me he was like a man about it because he said, “Okay, fine. I’m not running. I’m not going to run again. I can see there’s a problem.” But I guess guys like Dean Rusk and all those who—was that the guy who wrote the book a couple years ago?

RV: McNamara.

TG: McNamara. Oh, yeah. I don’t know. There were a lot of people that didn’t—I don’t know. I was never mad at Johnson. I had always felt beholding to him because of the things that had happened. I didn’t really know about the war. I don’t think I was politically aware. I mean I was just—whatever the status quo was it was cool with me, you know, because what the fuck. It’s not like—you know. I mean, you can’t certainly get people to join the military if they actually knew what war was all about.

That’s—so I—

RV: What was expected of you when you graduated high school? Were you free to do whatever you wanted to do?

TG: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was—yeah. I actually tried—I went up to live in Monterey but couldn’t live up there because I was a minor. I wasn’t twenty-one. I couldn’t sign up for junior college because my parents didn’t—I didn’t have a legal guardian there. The guy I was working with at the flower shop actually wanted me to share his bed and I’m going, “No, no I’m not doing that one.” It was like the first—it was one of the times—even though I didn’t sign up to play ball in junior college I did come back and got into junior college late. My old coach helped me, got in, and— because they think that—because what did we do? We were in high school all-star game that summer, and then I went away. I finally came back and went to a—played at a junior college which had not won a game in I don’t know how long.

RV: This is after Vietnam?

TG: This is before Vietnam.

RV: Before? You came back from Monterey down to L.A.?
TG: Yeah, because I was only a third couple weeks. See, this was the summer I graduated. Gee, I had a lot packed in that summer. I think I had my first job as a janitor. I couldn’t get to it because it was at night and I was cleaning, just had to have a job, wanted a car. It’s just didn’t have any money, not a whole lot of direction. Went to, finally got into—in that September, went to—this is September after my high school graduation—went into East Los Angeles College, played ball there. Didn’t—actually, the only course—I took this one course that had me do photographs and it was my first sort of entry to art other than the ceramics course I had in high school. I really had a good time about it because it made me look at architecture and stuff like that. All the good kids that I had gone to school with were, you know, were at Berkeley and UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) and all that. That was not part of my life. You know, it just wasn’t.

RV: Did you realize at the time when you took this photography course that—?

TG: No.

RV: I mean was this something that you had to do?

TG: Yeah, it was just—yeah. It wasn’t even a photography course. It was a course in which utilized photography.

RV: It did appeal to you?

TG: Yeah. Well, I did really well in it, but it’s not like I said, “Oh, I’m going to get a camera.” I didn’t know anything about that. I didn’t know about art. I only know what others, what the stereotype of art was about where I would have to—the time that came for me, when it got time for me to go to art school, this was after Vietnam, this was after going to UCLA, I thought that, you know, I had to—I had it completely wrong. I thought that I had to leave what I had known and look at, start going to foreign films and dressing a certain way. I didn’t realize that the work that I would do, the most meaningful work that I would do would simply come out of me being who I was and what my experiences have been and where I come from. You just don’t think of it in those terms. So, after junior college I sort of fished around and sort of did a dismal one semester and then barely went to school the spring semester and then forgot the—I don’t know the exact sequence of events of how I came about joining, but I realized what it was
to sort of get attention from my girlfriend or to sort of like go, “Ha, look at me.” It was, I volunteered for the draft and once I did that I joined the Marine Corps.

RV: Why the Marine Corps?

TG: Oh, because of her connection with it. My father hated the Marine Corps because they wouldn’t take him. I mean, they didn’t even—I don’t even think they had black officers until Vietnam or right beforehand. So, but you know I mean I knew all about Chesty Puller. I mean once I got in the Marine Corps, Chesty Puller and John Basilone and Smedley Butler and Vandegrift. It probably would be really interesting to sit down and talk, if you guys would sit down and talk to drill instructors who had been there and knew what they were getting these guys ready to do even though there was no way that they could ever impart to them what they were going to have to deal with. I think the first, I mean—they referred to me as Lena Horne’s brother when I was in boot camp. But I got dropped from my original recruitment platoon and was put in correctional custody, what a motivational platoon. This was like you ran everywhere you went. You ran and sang, and you were just, you had, you were just controlled completely. By the time you came out of there you were tight. You just, you know—climb it. How high? Run. How—you know? Whatever you needed to do. You couldn’t even get out of bed at night. You slept under locked guard. You couldn’t get out. You had to pee in your soap dish or something. It’s like they would give a fuck. You were like—yeah.

RV: Why did you get placed into this?

TG: I think because—

RV: This is right when you went into basic they just took you?

TG: No, no. I was in my platoon, must have been into the fourth or fifth week. I was supposed to lose weight and I think I wasn’t—I needed to be motivated. They felt that, okay—did I go to the rifle range yet? I think we were getting ready to go to the rifle range. They dropped me. I did two or three weeks in this other thing. Not a problem. I could’ve been the guide on. I was almost the guide on in the next place I went to.

RV: So it worked.

TG: Oh, yeah. They did what they had to do.

RV: Where was your basic?
TG: Oh, MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot). MCRD, and nobody was getting out alive. Like motherfucker you’re here. I mean, it’s like—it wasn’t like the fifth, it wasn’t like the ‘40s in the Marine Corps. It wasn’t—and I think it’s after that with some slight reforms because I think some people had died at Parris Island, but it was more like, it certainly isn’t what goes on now. It ain’t like, “Well, what do you think?” It ain’t none of that, “Well, what do you think?” or, “Are you doing okay?” Like fuck you. They were going to—they had to make you be a certain way. They had to mold you. I mean, you were a captive audience and that was the only time that they were going to have to make, to maybe save your life later. Because you didn’t—by the time you got here you were on your own because you weren’t, you know, you were there eleven doing what you wanted to do.

RV: You’re pointing to the picture of your graduating class.

TG: From IRT. No. This is Infantry Training Regiment. This is what everybody goes to after they leave basic.

RV: Right. So after—when you get to this point you’re on your own. Before that you’re molded?

TG: Yeah. They did a hell of a job. It’s amazing what they can do.

RV: Tell me what it was like. What was your typical day like? What would they do?

TG: Well, you’d get there—I think you got there in the middle of the night and then you’re completely broken. You’re shaved. They put you in these new really, these clothes that you don’t know how to wear, and you troop around. You give up every—whatever you had before you came there you don’t have anymore. You’re completely breaking with that—I think you’re supposed to write, they make you write your parents. I believe that’s the situation. But it was like you get this stuff and you become part of this little wolf pack, which in a way has its own life because it knows who’s the strongest and who’s the weakest and it will self-police. It will learn how to self-police itself to get people to do what they need to do. Either that or it will break you. In a way it’s almost Darwinian. It’s so funny. Matthew Modine used to be my roommate in New York.

RV: Really?

TG: Yeah.
RV: Actor Matthew Modine?

TG: Yeah. So to see him in *Full Metal Jacket*, which—I don’t think they ever
got it right with the Vietnam movies.

RV: Well, I want to ask you about *Full Metal Jacket*. That was actually
supposed to be taking place during the time, basically around the time that you were at
MCRD. That time period. Was it realistic, what they portrayed, that first half of that
movie?

TG: Well, the guy killed himself. When I’m saying they pushed you to the limit
yeah I guess that could happen. That could happen. I don’t have a personal relationship
with the DI (drill instructor). So all I’m going to do is know what I know as an adult and
think back because I never asked them what the deal was. But they were, they were there
to save your lives because you no longer—never again did you have that kind of, did
somebody have that sort of control over you until maybe you got to platoon level in a
fighting situation and then again. Okay? But at boot camp, you go to infantry training.
Then you go to your specialty training, what you’re going to do. Then you join a unit.
Or actually we didn’t even even join a unit. We joined the unit of guys getting ready then to
be—it’s like an ITR, Infantry Training Battalion, but for getting, gearing you for Vietnam
like the guys that are going to Fort Hood now getting ready to go to Iraq. So, we did that
and it was, you know, it’s—

RV: What do you see right now in your mind when you’re thinking about
MCRD?

TG: What I’m thinking about MCRD I’m thinking about later on, I’m thinking
about getting ready back at Camp Pendleton. I went from MCRD to Camp Pendleton for
this, to another part of Camp Pendleton for the radio school because I was a twenty-five,
thirty-one. Then another part of Camp Pendleton to ready you for deployment for
Vietnam. Then when I got deployed to Vietnam—I think they offered the fact, I think
they asked me if I wanted to play football for them. I go, “Well, I didn’t join the Marine
Corps to play football.” What the fuck is this, you know? Little did I know that Marine
Corps football was probably worse than combat. But then they sent me to Okinawa. I
went to Okinawa and I worked at—it was at Camp Hansen, and that was like pretty
strange. I worked on a battalion level, or regimental level. It wasn’t—we just worked as
radio guys and—

RV: Why radios? How did you get there?

TG: That was my—I don’t know. That’s what they put me.

RV: They told you.

TG: Yeah.

RV: You did not select that.

TG: Oh, it’s the Marines. You ain’t selecting nothing. You didn’t select nothing.

You could ask—I think maybe you could select, what, to go into force recon. I think you
can ask for that. But it’s—I was just a number on the board. They didn’t give a fuck
about me. Nobody came up to me and asked me what I wanted to do. There was
somebody that said I was going to do this. So we did that at Camp Hansen. But going
back to when I was—see there were Quonset huts when I was at MCRD. You could see
the different, you could see the different, you could see that all the different platoons and
whatever states or readiness they were in, so you could see those wide-eyed, scary, bald
headed, sloppy dressing first couple of days. Then you’d see those guys that by the time
you come back from the rifle range everybody’s in cadence. Everybody knows what to
do and how to do it, and they’re just honing in their skills.

RV: That was about mid way through?

TG: I think that’s mid way to two-thirds.

RV: How were you with the weapons?

TG: I think I qualified. Nothing really big. I don’t think I ever had to fire my
weapon. I just didn’t want to—I had—what did I have? Oh. I had a .45. I wanted like a
revolver. The only way you could get one is to get your parents to send you one, which I
guess I could’ve done. My dad sent me like some Courvoisier. I go, “What the fuck am I
going to do with”—I gave it to my commanding officer. I guess he was just like
probably tickled. Courvoisier. Hey you got a coke or something, you know? You sent
me Courvoisier. How well do you know me? So, no, I just—I sort of remember training
but hardly, you know.

RV: But you got through and you did well? How’d you adjust to the military
lifestyle, I mean the taking the orders and—?
TG: I wasn’t a fool, but as I said I never joined anything in my life again.

RV: That’s why I asked that question.

TG: No. I was just—no. They told me to do something I would do it. I mean, and see, I was with some really fucked up guys at first. Camp Hansen and—I would work TDY (temporary duty) down to Vietnam. I’d go down and I’d work on the ship while they were doing operations. The guys would—I’d be on the battalion level on the ship or the regimental level, the command level on the ship, dealing with the guys as they went in, made assaults inland. I don’t know if it was helicopter or landing craft. I forget. It’s all in northern I Corps. So I never—I mean the Marine Corps taught me to sleep anywhere. I could sleep anywhere. All I got to do is be tired. I don’t give a fuck what it is I will—I’ll sleep on the floor of my office and people look at me like I’m out of my fucking mind, but if you’re going to go to sleep you’re going to go to sleep. I could sleep on a—if you can sleep on the top of cargo in a C130 out of the South China Sea with that kind of reverberation then you can sleep anywhere. I think doing that kind of stuff, I mean flying back and forth, you know, oh that was like the best thing. I mean it was like a huge adventure.

RV: Okinawa to Vietnam.

TG: Yeah, or just the whole thing. Once you got it going, you know—

RV: Before we go there do you want to talk about IRT and your radio school?

TG: I don’t even remember anything about it. I mean, oh, well, I broke my nose because—and a knuckle—I broke a knuckle because I had a fight because one of the cooks when I was in IRT, because we had to do some mess duty, I think, like a sergeant can like not like you and can have somebody else do the dirty work. So it’s that kind of thing. I forget what it was about. I think it was like—I think being in the military in those kind of situations was probably the malest thing I’ve ever done. I don’t really bond with males—I mean I do now, but not in that same—I mean, I don’t know if you know Alice Holsen. Alice described to me one day, she said, “I didn’t know who you were and I saw you. You were in the cafeteria and you were just looking. You were looking at people, at what they were doing, and you sat back and you were a little bit a part of it but mostly away from it.” I do that a lot, I think I do. I don’t know if that’s because of all that, I mean that kind of—I mean being in the military sometime can be the stupidest sort
of mental interaction in the fucking world with the way the guys deal with one another. So, I don’t know. I don’t think I was ever like a guy’s guy that way. I was going to be a guy’s guyette or something, you know. Just not quite there. So I don’t remember too—other than that, other than—I have trouble remembering anything other than that instance. Then we’re, you know, sitting around and we’re doing all these sort of weird, you know, crawling under barbed wire or doing these dumb exercises. You know and it’s—

RV: Do you remember any of your DIs telling you about Vietnam?

TG: No.

RV: Were you aware that you were going?

TG: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean this is the war. Yeah. No, no. No. When I joined the Marine Corps I joined to go to Vietnam. It’s not like I remember doing that, but I mean I was very aware of Vietnam. I think my wife’s, I mean my future wife’s brother had just come back so I didn’t think I was going to get stationed at an embassy in Europe. I knew I was—no. If you were in the Marine Corps in 1967 you were going to Vietnam. There was just no question.

RV: Now, did your joining the Corps and going through all that, what did Rochelle think? Did it accomplish any of your original task?

TG: Yeah, unfortunately, because we wound up getting married. We probably should never, you know—so, yeah. It worked, and unfortunately. I mean, we should’ve just been friends, but I didn’t know that. But now I can just be friends. Let’s not and say we did, okay? And that way, because—I’m a particular type of person. As much as I may look at family situations and settings or a guy with a girl and go, “Oh, that’s really nice,” all I’m going to do about it is say, “Oh, that’s really nice.” Unless I’m just totally into it then I don’t want to be bothered. I just—you know. There’ve been a couple of times over the last couple years where I’ve like really been into it, but other than that it’s like—just, you know, I don’t know.

RV: Why don’t we take a break?
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Tony Gleaton. Today is August 24th, 2004. It’s about 10:33 AM Central Standard Time. We’re again in Lubbock, Texas, in the Vietnam Archive interview room. Tony, let’s pick up where we left off. You were going to Okinawa. Do you remember how you felt, what you were thinking, when you went overseas going into the war zone? What was that like for you?

Tony Gleaton: I was going, “What the fuck am I doing in Okinawa?” I mean they got you ready for the war. What was Okinawa about? Okinawa was about—it just, no. It wasn’t really—I mean it was okay. I started volunteering to go to temporary duty to Vietnam.

RV: Why did you volunteer?

TG: Well, because it was like, I guess I joined the Marine Corps to go to Vietnam. I mean, you know, basic training, MCRD, and infantry combat training at Camp Pendleton wasn’t about going to Okinawa. I mean—yeah, no. It was just—you can know about Chesty Puller and John Basilone and Smedley Butler, all those guys. It wasn’t about Okinawa. If it was probably about Okinawa but, you know, twenty years before. Well, I just—I mean I didn’t know anything. I was a kid, you know? I was nineteen. I just thought I was going to war and that I got put, sidetracked to another place and it’s kind of—I had a girlfriend back in the States, Rochelle. I wasn’t really good at like dealing with prostitutes because I think the thing that I would—not that you know what to do anyway, mind tell you, but I think the thing’s that I would always want from somebody as far as sex aren’t really things that you can ask for or buy. Even though the Philippines does come close, Olongapo which, my God, has got to be the most sinful place, like the most amazing place, the most sinful place and the most amazing place in the world. I had never seen anything like that in my life, but the other guys had gone to Bangkok and stuff. But Okinawa was—I even forget who I was with. I guess I was operating out of a battalion radio. I was the radioman on a battalion level. I think over Christmas I worked at Kadena Air Force Base manning the radio.
RV: You went over in—?

TG: I went over the day after the Marine Corps birthday, which is November the eleventh.

RV: ’67.

TG: ’67. So, I was there on Okinawa, through Christmas. Then I—I don’t know if either before Christmas I did my first trip to Vietnam, and I think what happened—I can’t remember. If we flew down on a C-130 then I’m sure we didn’t land on a carrier. We probably landed at Da Nang, and then was probably choppered out to a landing assault ship and then worked as a radioman, as a liaison between the operations that were going on on shore and the command structure in the ship. I did that, I think, a couple times. Twice for sure, maybe three times. Then we came to the time when the buildup at Khe Sanh comes. They were looking for volunteers to go. So, I volunteered to go.

RV: To Khe Sanh?

TG: To Khe Sanh. Yeah.

RV: Is this January ’68?

TG: It’s got to be January/February, just because of how things happened. Because what happened is once I finally did do I then wound up spending I think a month in the hospital in Japan in Yokosuka and there were cherry blossoms out. Now, I never saw Japan. I mean with military flight you landed, got in a military ambulance, went to the hospital, stayed in the hospital, got out of the hospital, went back to another military flight and just flew the fuck out of there.

RV: Now, what happened when you went into Khe Sanh?

TG: I don’t know if it was a concussion, an explosion, or I was just running like a mother fucker and tripped when I blew out my ankle, but let me digress some. I don’t know where we—I forget where we would disembarked from the gutter at Khe Sanh, whether it was Dong Ha or Da Nang. But we would wait all day, we waited for a couple days. It was either—I think what was happening is that they couldn’t get the weather right and the ceiling was too low. I think we, I think even we went up there a couple of times but couldn’t land. But the time that I remember, as I looked out of the plane and looked down and it looked like a Hieronymus Bosch painting like, you know, it looked like hell. I mean there were explosions and craters. There was this one little, old, rough
red sort of West Texas clay. I guess the mud here reminds me of the mud there because
the mud here, well, you’d be stepping in that shit and it could take a boot off if it’s not
laced up tight. We finally did, we finally got in. I think it took us almost a week to get
there. We waited and waited and waited, but the military’s all about waiting half the
time. You’re sitting and you’re waiting and you don’t know geopolitical nothing. You
don’t know back strategy. You just know where you’re going to this particular place
because that’s where they said you’re going. So, it’s funny years later to read about it
and see why you went. I mean to, it’s—I forget. Who was the commander, who’s the
ground commander in chief in Vietnam at this time?

RG: Westmoreland.

TG: Yeah because he’s seeing, I guess, he’s thinking, “Oh, this is it.” He can
like—he’s thinking that he can just make a really huge point, not knowing that they’re
setting him up for like a sucker punch. So, I mean, I went. I got off the plane.

RG: What was it like landing in there? I’ve heard a lot of stories about how
difficult it was for planes to get on that strip because—

TG: Well, no, they touched down and they dropped the cargo thing. They
dropped the back hatch, I mean they lowered the tail gate on the C-130. I’m pretty sure it
was a C-130. It wasn’t a C-141, a C-130. They’re resupplying too. So they’re kicking
out palates of shit. You know?

RG: Did it stop or did it…?

TG: No, they don’t stop. It does not stop. It just—no, because it’s—no, it
doesn’t stop. Because they got, there’s shit happening everywhere. I mean there’s just
like explosions.

RG: This is your first time in combat. This is your first time being shot at. This
is your first time experiencing this kind of thing.

TG: Yeah. Yeah. I have a—some people have a flight response. I have like a, I
like freeze, which is not the best thing to be doing. When I’m like startled or scared I’ll
freeze. It’s like I don’t know if it really happens or I think it happens, but my body, I
can’t move it. I’ve got to like concentrate on one muscle and try to move it. Sometimes
you don’t know if you’re like just crazy or like incredibly fucked up or like on the cusp
between the two. So, they were flying around, we’re circling, we’re circling, we’re
circling, and then we—and I can’t really remember that, but I know we were up there for
awhile and then we land. They drop the thing and they kick the things out and they’re
saying that we—just get out of the plane. We ain’t stopping. I think what they did—I
don’t know if they did a touch and go or if they came, taxied down and then came back,
and turned around and came back and flew out—I don’t know—but whatever they did
they never stood still.

RV: How did you get out of the plane?

TG: Just running out of the cargo route because they were—they had to bring,
you know, they were resupplying people with—because I guess that was the main course
of resupply. It seems like they could have just for every Medevac that came in they
could’ve just had guys in the hospital get on those planes to get there, but I don’t know.
But that’s how I got there. I don’t remember when this was. I think now though I have
to—I’ve decided I was going to get, try to find after action reports and then also my old
military record details that says where I was at when. So this happened—I don’t even
know who I would’ve been with. I don’t know if that’s just 26th Marines, I forget. But
this was—so I got there, ran off the plane. My story is that there was an explosion as I’m
flying through the air. Okay? But I don’t know what happened. All I know is that I
messed my foot up. It was bad enough so they just Medevac’ed me right out.

RV: By what means?

TG: A helicopter. So I was put on there with other wounded guys, but I don’t
remember. I mean, because I know I was in there, I’m sure I wasn’t on there by myself.
I don’t know if I went to a—I think I went to a medical ship, but no, I don’t think—no. I
don’t know. But I know I wound up in Japan at the naval hospital at Yokosuka.

RV: How long were you there?

TG: Probably had to be there—you know, a broken ankle takes a while. So I had
to be there at least three to four, I had to be there three weeks at least because I wasn’t
going back to—they weren’t sending you back to Vietnam on crutches. So, I was there—
I forget how long I was there, but by the time I got back I went to 1st Battalion, 4th
Marines and I was with, I was with the people—where was I? Well, I was up in the
northern I Corps. I forget what town.

RV: This is when you got out of Japan?
TG: When I got back from Japan and I was reassigned. My main memories from Vietnam are from Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Mar Div. Okay? Those were the people that I spent time with from maybe my last five months, July, August, September, October, to November. Okay. I know I was with those guys then. Before that I think I was with 1, 4 but at the battalion level from when I got out of the hospital. But I was in the rear area at first because we did a convoy. I was a radioman in a jeep, and I think I was driving the jeep. We did a convoy to Hue. This was after the battle for Hue. So it’s probably in March maybe, March/April. The roads were mined. I think somebody hit a mine during the convoy. That’s a kind of creepy thing to be driving down the road and like—I can’t even imagine what dealing with an improvised explosive device must be. That’s like so bullshit, you know. So, we went into Hue, took us all day to get there. We stayed at the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) compound. Years later I was, I could relate MACV to the UN (United Nations). Like these guys, “Oh, there’s a range rover. Must be the UN doing good all over the place.” So, the MACVs weren’t too far behind though. They weren’t fucking around. They knew how—it was not what I was used to. For some reason I wanted to go—I had the jeep. I had my jeep. I could—and I wanted to go—I went on some errand that was like self-directed. I was driving around Hue like I’m back in L.A. (Los Angeles). Well, what happens is that by the time I started heading back they had already set the road blocks. That’s like a major deal to like—and I think I ran into some ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and they were not happy. They was like, “Mother fucker, no.” You would not—“Fuck you.” You could have just spent the night there and you ain’t going through here. Well, I finally got back—I forget. I don’t know where I went. I’m always like—I’m telling you, the story of my life is like one bridge too far. Like I’m going to go here, but no, no, I got to go there.

RV: Do you remember what Hue looked like?

TG: No. No. I didn’t see the Emerald City anywhere. It was just a place. I think that’s the one thing I sort of resent about Vietnam nostalgia because it wasn’t about the people there then and it’s not about the people there now. It’s still us wrapped up in our own shit. That’s the thing—I mean—they went through much more than we did. I don’t know. I get the impression that they were able to let it go.
RV: The Vietnamese?

TG: Yeah. But we can’t let it go. I don’t know. I think in a way it’s—as great as this country is that’s a real severe problem because I think we think the sun, it’s a sort of, the sun rises and sets out of our own ass. It’s like, we had 9/11. I mean, people are going on and on. Fuck it. A million people died in Rwanda. They’re still killing people in Hutu and Tutsi. Yeah, I mean, look what happened to Bosnia. People get so self-righteous about stuff and we live like kings here. I just—I don’t know. That’s—I don’t know. I think that’s the thing that dismays me the most about probably all of our focus on Vietnam, that to a degree we haven’t changed much. It’s just still about—I mean it was about us then and it’s about us now.

RV: That’s an interesting observation. How do you relate to other Vietnam veterans?

TG: No, I don’t. I mean, but maybe part of it is that I didn’t have to go through what some of those guys went through. I mean, I volunteered to go into an ambush because, yeah, it was, yeah, I had never seen one. Been lying around in the fucking weeds in the middle of the night, establishing a kill zone like what week of pre-school did they teach that in? The funny thing about it is while they went in to—I don’t know if it’s because I’m older now—but when they went in, when they were going in to like Iraq this time, even though I was not for the war, I was like ready to go. You know? But, which I think that’s just an old man’s musings though. I don’t know. You ask about—I met Ron Kovacs once a long time ago. It’s funny about what—I don’t know his story. Looking at the Kerry thing now, it’s so funny that he will talk. It seems to me that everybody desires—I have a problem with my leg, but I’m alive. Okay? I will thank, as much as I think I could get some benefit as a disability from the government, how can I break faith with all those people that were truly hurt or died just because now I find it convenient to ask for something?

RV: Was this the injury that you sustained at Khe Sanh still bother you?

TG: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Eventually it has broken two more times and there’s no more cartilage left so they had to put a pin in it, which it’s fused at ninety degrees. It’s just my ankle, but it makes a difference when you’re—if you’re trying to negotiate the hillside or even the sidewalks on a slight slope, it makes it hard. But I didn’t, I didn’t
protest the war and stuff when I came back. I didn’t really care. I mean, I was back and that was it. It wasn’t like—there was nothing I could’ve done anyway. It wasn’t—I don’t know. I mean, I wasn’t very political when I was a kid and I wasn’t very socially conscious either.

RV: The war did not politicize you?
TG: No, other than the fact that I came back and there was like a white bar with the way Vietnam was going and I felt like really fucked, but, you know.

RV: Tell me about Alpha Company. Tell me about your experiences with them.
TG: Captain Russom was the company commander and Ali was—well, before I went to him I was with battalion—I was the radio operator for the battalion commander for a while. That’s one of the days that I really remember because it was the night, it was the day—well, we flew west from—we flew west and I think it was—the 3rd Marine Division was, I guess, trying to deal with the 320 NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Regiment, which I didn’t know of until just this week. But we went west and I think we went into Laos. Okay? You got to realize that Khe Sanh is just right up not too far from the border anyway. I think the Ho Chi Minh trail snakes down and then there’s some feeder shoots that go into it there.

RV: Route 9 runs right into Laos and that was one of the entrances.
TG: Yeah. Yeah. Well, that picture I took was of Route 9, but I think that was later on because we just spent a, we did a lot of stuff around Route 9. Then we were—okay, so we were out there and then we were attacked that night.

RV: You were with the battalion commander?
TG: I was with the—yeah. I forget what job I was doing, I mean, but it was a 2531 so I was a radio operator. I was with the battalion commander and the assistant commander. He was a lieutenant colonel and a major.

RV: Okay. Were you at a Special Forces camp in Laos?
TG: No, no, no. We never—I think, you know, the good thing about where we were at like we didn’t have to worry about like Viet Cong because if the motherfucker was out there he was the enemy because there was nobody out there but them and us. Nobody living there. I think one time we saw an old lady sitting by the side of the road. She was trying to sell me some dope and I looked at her like she was like crazy. Like,
“Oh, what are we smoking dope for?” How can you be loaded and somebody’s like trying to kill you? What the fuck is that about? I still don’t understand that one. I mean talk about being—you’re already paranoid. I just don’t get it, you know. I never saw it. I saw it maybe in the rear, but I don’t—I think they would probably kick somebody’s ass if they were like smoking dope on a patrol or something. They were, were playing M-68 but maybe later on it was different. I don’t know.

RV: Okay. So what happened this evening when you went out there with the battalion commander?

TG: Well, I was there—I don’t know what happened. Well, I know the day after but I have to—see, in order to explain the day after I got to say what happened the night before. We were charged. The lines were penetrated. There were satchel charges. There must have been about ten or fifteen people killed because I saw a body stacked up on the LZ (landing zone) in the morning.

RV: Americans?

TG: Yeah. I mean heads just split open. I saw this—I will never forget it. There’s this guy that had a picture of this girl, his girlfriend. She didn’t know he was dead and I knew. I always wondered what that was like. I guess, I mean there were like probably so many people whose lives stopped because somebody that they loved died.

RV: He was holding her picture?

TG: No, it was just, it was on his body. It was on his body and it was—they were stacked like cords of wood. I mean it was just, I just remember that. That was the day that we found out Bobby Kennedy had died. Like, so what? It’s just another person that died. Now, I think what happened, I think one of the problems that we were in is that we were too far—I think the military is, the Marine Corps had a strategy in which the forwards fire support bases would lend support to people functioning out of the brush. I don’t know if we were too far away but they were walking mortars across that hilltop that afternoon. That’s scary.

RV: Where were you?

TG: I was at the bottom of the hole, but I was at the bottom and with a radio and sort of an antenna sticking out, but the lieutenant colonel was on top of me. They put me on the bottom. It was me, him, and the major. It was just—it was really scary. I think, I
think—to me like a guy like that’s like a real Marine. Even though he might have had to
tell me to go do something that would’ve put me in jeopardy, but I would’ve gone
because that’s what I was told to do.

RV: How’d you deal with your fear?
TG: Oh, shit, I was in the hole. I mean, I don’t know. It didn’t happen—it’s not
like, it’s not like I’m on perimeter duty and these guys are like—and it’s dark out there
and somebody’s coming. I don’t know how people do that. I just I don’t know. I don’t
know how they do that, but I never had to deal with that except in a few times like that
time and I think that night—maybe that, was that night—something like that happened
another night. Either it was that night, the night before or it was later on. But I think I
was like so tired I took my clothes off that night. Then the shit hit the fan. Then I’m
trying to get dressed without lifting my butt off the ground, which is impossible. I mean
you have, you got to raise up. I wasn’t raising up for nothing. So I’m like trying to put
these pants on.

RV: This was a mortar attack coming in?
TG: No, this was like firing and shit. I’m saying, “Oh, God,” fuck if I ever take
these pants off again.

RV: Were you armed? Did you have a gun?
TG: Yeah, yeah. I had a .45. I never had—I just, you know—I never had a—I
don’t think I used, I didn’t use an M-16. It was like a radio man could use a .45, like
think yeah—well, that shows you how much not the shit I was because if you had a .45 to
defend yourself, well, you’d be better off just shooting yourself because it’s like if it’s
getting that close—if you got a .45 and they got like an AK-47 then you’re fucked. Some
guys got shotguns. I thought that was pretty cool, but then again to have a shotgun
you’ve got to be relatively close. So, I don’t know. It’s like—maybe Vietnam was for
me like my own little life. I mean my life now. I got everybody else’s version of what’s
going on and I got my own little blithe sort of skipping through shit, like, “Oh, okay,” or
like I think God protects like animals and fools. Because I mean I—I don’t have, I mean
I was pretty lucky when I was there. I was with really good people. I was with people
who cared. I mean, I was—yeah, that lieutenant colonel was—he was really good. Not
that there weren’t other people. I think beforehand when I was back in the rear area like
when the time I was doing stuff going to Hue I think a staff sergeant there was just really
an asshole and sort of a racist too. I got a lot shit from him.

RV: What kind of racism did you encounter over there?

TG: Not much, but it was there. Sometimes somebody would like make
statements, you know? You look at them like they’re out of their fucking minds because
you’re from California and you don’t know what the fuck. Like don’t they all just like
blondes? Can’t we all just get along? I mean, what the fucks is this? Like what are you
living in the Stone Age or some shit?

RV: What would they say?

TG: I really forget, but it wasn’t something I would hear all the time. I would
just hear it. There are a couple times that I remembered it there. I remember people—I
mean my drill instructors making statements about me in a racial way, which I wasn’t
used to that. They would refer to me as like Lena Horne’s brother I think one time. But
it wasn’t, wasn’t—the only time I remember groups of black guys staying by themselves
was back in like Dong Ha where they would like get together in the evenings and
socialize. But, other than that, I mean I remember guys that we’d just—you were just
friends with whoever you were friends with. Now, after this time with—the early part of
June, June second or June third, when I was working at the battalion level I then went to
Alpha Company 1, 4 and my company commander was Captain Russom. I think it’s R-
U-S-S-O-M. Then there was Lieutenant Black who was actually a white guy. I think he
was a, I think he got a field commission or he was—I think there was a lot of that there. I
worked with a group of people that—on the battalion level there were radio guys who
dealt with bringing in, figure out where arc lights were going to go and bring in Medevac
helicopters and then direct fixed wing air strikes, which is, that was really cool. Like,
“Yo, over there.” Like, “Get these motherfuckers.” It’s like amazing. Then they had a
group of guys called ANGLICO (Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company), Air Naval
Gunfire. Yeah, but I wasn’t like a forward observer. I was just like right with the
company doing whatever they needed to have done. I think—I wish I had talked about
this twenty years ago because I could’ve remembered a lot more because now—I mean
it’s not like trying to figure out the stuff that you had to do when you were in childhood
where you could ask your brother. I don’t really have anybody to ask. Even though—for
a long time I sort of attempted to reach out to my company commander, but I just feel
awkward about—that was then and this is now.

RV: So you don’t have a lot of memories about what you did with Alpha
Company? You just were with the—?

TG: Yeah. I mean it was such a long, I mean I’ve had so many different lives
since then. I mean there was that and then it got, and then I got—I got back. I mean
there was the whole thing about UCLA and going to Berkeley and then being a fashion
photographer and then living in New York. I even go lived with the cowboys, and then
going to every country in the north, I mean in the new world. I mean after awhile it’s like
what the fuck.

RV: You talked about going on ambushes.

TG: I volunteered—they were going to go ambush. “Can I go?” and they, I think
they looked at me like, “Yeah, but”—I went. We walked out. I just followed directions.
We walked out somewhere and they told me what to do. Nothing happened that night.
Thank God. Kind of a, “What the fuck I was thinking about?” like, “Oh yeah, I want to
kill somebody tonight.” You know, it’s funny. I don’t have a gun now. I wouldn’t carry
a gun. I rode my bike along the Goodnight Loving Trail paralleling the Goodnight
Loving Trail was a year and where the apartments here said, “Well, tell me Jacob the
gunner, did you ever go to”—oh, no. No, no. They’d have to—somebody’s going to
come get some shit from me and then they can just take it. I probably killed people by
directing fire against them, but not personally. I don’t know if I could do that now. You
know, I don’t know.

RV: So you were a ground FAC (forward air controller)?

TG: I was a ground FAC with Alpha 1, 4 and then we would—one of the things
that I remember is we were going to go back. We were going back toward Khe Sanh and
I think we were looking—this is probably in September. Realize this is in Firebase Lou
and Firebase Robin. They were trying—well, there’s three—okay. I remember the day I
withheld. Okay? This was like where they dropped the mortars, like in June. I
remember that. Then I remember—what’s the name of the river? The Ben Hai that
separates the north from the south?

RV: I think so. Go ahead.
TG: We flew over North Vietnam and circled back.

RV: Ben Hai River.

TG: Then we jumped through the canopy, fifteen feet to the ground. I don’t know what the fuck they were thinking about. Then we started heading uphill. It was hotter than a motherfucker. It was hot. It was hot. It was like thank God for boot camp because you just, you couldn’t do it, but you knew you had to do it because you were carrying everything. We were on a move. We were sweeping south. Turns out we were trying to stop the 308th NVA Regiment or cut them off—308th or the 320th, I forget. I’ve got a picture—I’ll ask my brother to send it to me—and it’s a picture of me bringing in a dust off with like being, all my stuff being sort of blown back. It looks like we’re in a firebase because we’re in sort of partially forest and things are like—so I guess where they were going to land was just already blown away. But I remember that it was so hot. It was just hot and it was like people were like passing out from heat exhaustion. We went—I don’t know. We must’ve been out like a week or two. Then I think we found the enemy’s regimental camp and stuff like that. Some of those guys—I forget what they were called—but the guys would go down in those holes with their flashlight. Fuck that. Okay? This is always a small—I mean that’s, you know—I don’t know. That was like too much. I couldn’t have done that. But we did that. Then there was a time when we were going to go back to Khe Sanh or toward, you know—because we’re always working in that area, but this time as if we were going to Khe Sanh, even though we didn’t actually go to Khe Sanh. We went like away from it because the base at that time had already been—there was no reason to do—they had changed—I guess what they did was they had a fixed point strategy before, thinking that they would work out of fixed positions. Then it turns out that they were, they wanted to do more like a rapid deployment like the 101st and spread forward and just be air mobile and like go somewhere, work out of that area. So we didn’t really need that—I mean Khe Sanh was like, it was like a fucked up place anyway because it was like a lone airstrip like surrounded by all these other hills. Yeah. It’s obviously a Westmoreland—I don’t know what he was thinking about. But before we went back I mean I was scared to death. I was just scared to death and I told Sloan, I said, “Listen, I’m not—I’m just really gonna die if I ever go back there.” I mean, I was scared.
RV: Who’d you tell this to?

TG: I told the company commander. I said I have to be baptized. So, they got the chaplain. Before we loaded on—we got the chaplain and then they had the water buffalo and the company commander was there, and they baptized me and then we left. We were pretty, I mean—

RV: This is in northern I Corps.

TG: Yeah.

RV: Out on patrol for two weeks without—

TG: No. We were—no. We had already come back and we were going out to this other place again. Okay? Because I remember that we were going out of that, to that place.

RV: Near Khe Sanh?

TG: Yeah. Near Khe Sanh. There was the other time we flew over the Ben Hai River. Then there was, I remember—I was thinking about re-upping. Okay? Let me just stay another six months or whatever. Then they—we were out on deployment and what happened was that there was a short round from our own mortars. Those three guys dig in a big fox hole. I see the short round and I dive into it while they’re digging it with shovels. So it’s clear to everybody that it’s obviously, it’s time for me to go home because I have—you know what I’m saying? Because you—I could’ve killed myself with the shovel much less than the short, whatever the thing was that was going on. I was going should I stay, I mean should I—ah, I don’t think I really want to stay. But after that happened it was just sort of like, oh, well, I guess that’s a little post-it note from God to tell me like, well, no, you got to go because you can’t—you may think you’re like a bad guy and that you can stay, but you’re really not. During this time—I forgot when—but I got malaria. They sent me to Cam Ranh Bay. Fucking Army, so I’m there. But the only place that’s air conditioned is the hepatitis quarantine ward. So that’s where I started hanging out, not knowing exactly how really dangerous that is. But it’s like air-conditioned. You know, this is like fuck this. This is like, you know—so I was there. Actually got malaria again when I came home a month and a half after I got back.

RV: What was Cam Ranh like? Do you remember?
TG: Oh, it was just, just a place with a lot of huts. I never saw the beach, I don’t think. I’m the kind of guy that will go, will take a twenty hour bus ride from Guatemala City to the highlands up in Belize and pass by Petén, which is like the great Mayan city which everybody goes to, but not stop because that’s not where I’m going. I mean, I don’t take pictures of places when I go. I don’t take—every time I see something I take this picture of themselves in front of like a monument or something. I go what is that about. But when I was in Okinawa I took a photo class. The pictures were so horrible. Then I would also—where was I? For some reason I was on a LPH (landing platform-helicopter) again and I don’t know if this was when—I can’t remember why I was there. I mean, I don’t know if this was part of when I was TDY, probably it was because that’s the only time I was on like an amphibious assault ship. But they did a flight speed run to Subic Bay. That’s when I went to Olongapo, which was pretty—I mean fried dog on a stick, monkey meat, girls that you go in these—bar girls where they would just like kiss you on the mouth. It was just amazing. Oh, God, it was like amazing. I went to—I was going to leave R&R (rest and recuperation) to Australia, but I heard so many rumors about them not liking black folks that I wasn’t going to like take—I wasn’t going to be in a position like going someplace. Fuck that, you know. I just want to like—we didn’t want to take a chance so I went to—for some reason I picked Hong Kong, which was like really stupid. I mean it was okay.

RV: How long? For a week?

TG: I forget. I mean, I didn’t really do a lot. I think I spent the first night with a girl, but then it was going to—I miss my girlfriend. I just missed my girlfriend.

RV: Were you able to call her?

TG: Oh, yeah. We called—the MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) operator. Like three o’clock in the morning in Dong Ha trying to get through, sitting around in a line with like twenty other guys. There’s like my walk-in—I think one day I fell into a six foot ditch because it’s like so dark and no stars. I mean, you can’t see anything. You can’t see the hand in front of your face. So—well, no. I would go into the MARS thing and I would—the only way that my mother knew I was okay because I was charging the call to her. So, they got—she said, “Yes, we’ll handle.” She always
thought that was so funny. Yes, he’s charging the call to me, but he’s calling Rochelle.
Like okay whatever. So I would do that.

RV: Did you ever call your mom?
TG: No. I mean, I think I probably did but it’s like, I wrote my parents and I wrote Rochelle. When I went to—we were going to get married when I got back so when I went to Hong Kong I bought a tuxedo and some other stuff. What the fuck dude? We bought a set of China as a, for the wedding. I bought that in Okinawa. I mean if that was happening now I’d look at somebody like they were out of their fucking minds. Like, “Why? What? Yeah, go ahead, but I’m not doing it.” So, I mean I did those MARS calls. You got to remember, I’d get mail. Mail was like the best thing. It was like—I guess in a way I was home sick. It’s only—well, thirteen months seemed like—my mind was so separated by so many things. I mean I got to go to Okinawa and then I was flying back and forth and then went to Khe Sanh for half a minute. I consider that in thirteen months, of which I spent two months in the hospital two different times. I think one day I remember that I got them to okay that I—I brought in a flight. We were out of the field and I hitched a ride back with the pilots and they were going to bring me out the next day when they did another resupply. I got them to okay that yeah, I could go back. Then when I was—I was looking for cold weather shirts or something. I was looking, I was trying to do a deal. I forget. I was back there doing something, but it was like sort of a, like trying to be a scrounger. I mean, in a way like Vietnam was like this huge war game which in a way was—I mean—I got to see the war. I got to participate in it, really didn’t get into some like really hair-raising shit. It’s almost like Vietnam light or low carb Vietnam. So that’s, yeah. So, I mean I won’t have had any like fond memories. It doesn’t really, it doesn’t really work well in vets groups. Oh, shit I really liked my CO (commanding officer) and my company captain was my godfather. Smoke weed now?

Oh no, oh no. Father sent me Courvoisier. I gave it to the company captain. I guess they were tickled. In the middle of nowhere so you had the Courvoisier. What?

RV: He sent them to you in Vietnam as well?
TG: Yeah. He sent it to me in Vietnam.

RV: What would you guys do for entertainment?
TG: Oh, I think anything. Fuck around. It’s just a—I can’t sit around and talk. I don’t remember much about that.

RV: What about drug and alcohol use?

TG: I never saw a problem with it. I only drank, cold Coca-Cola and then come out in the field you’d get beer. They give beer or Cokes. Some guys were soda pop guys, other guys were beer guys. Get those steaks after being out in the field for a long time, come back and have a hot meal. I remember C rations we were like trading shit off. I used to love spaghetti. I loved the spaghetti. That was pretty good. I remember that one. Fruitcake with—you get the pineapple and the little cake. Fruit cocktail! So, C rats they were like—oh, I think beans and franks. Those were really great. Yeah. Nah, it’s like—I hate to say it, but it was sort of like a camping trip with dogs. You know?

RV: How’d you get along with the other people in your unit?

TG: Yeah. Sometimes I mean—well, there are some people that I just don’t get along with like the guy out at—Anthony had it out at the—and Randy’s almost always, he’s like always giving me like a hard ass, he’s like always fucking with me. Like every so often I get a guy like that every year and a third or something.

RV: Every year and a third?

TG: Well, it doesn’t happen all the time. There was a guy, Gregory Guiles, during—Gregory Diles—yeah—who was my nemesis during elementary school. Then I ran into him again in high school. He wound up being a triple murderer. They even made a movie for TV about him. That’s still—you remember the movie where Johnny Holmes was involved in those killings, those killings in or he knew about the killings?

RV: Mm-hmm.

TG: Yeah. He was the guy that killed those guys. No, I got along, I got along pretty well. I mean, there’s something about—I don’t know what it is cause I’m spoiled. Okay? I mean I’m like—I guess there’s like everybody, you know, the way things are supposed to happen and then like, well, this is here. Well, no, let’s just tweak this shit. This is, “Can’t we just do it this way because, you know, this is kind of how I want to do it?” I think what’s become evident now is as good as I am of doing photographs of people I’m probably even better with dealing with people. Going, you should get Sara to come in and do part of this interview. She’s one of the student interns and she has spent
the last couple days with me so she can see me just sort of cajole my way through the
fucking day or kid people or give people a hard enough time to where they’re going, to—
I mean, you’re doing it, but you’re doing it in a way in which it’s kind of like you’re
kidding them. It’s just, I don’t know. In a way it’s a good thing, in a way it’s like
problematic. I think the thing that makes me really good at doing that kind of stuff also
makes me really bad at very close interpersonal relationships because I know I care, but
at times I wonder how much I really do care.

RV: Well, I asked that question about your relationships with the other men there
in your unit based on what you had said in the last session about your difficulties forming
those relationships, and I was wondering if that—

TG: No. It’s more like a—I mean, no. I think—no, I had friends. I had not hard
guys, not slip guys, you know, and no I don’t fit in. Mostly the good guys, guys that
were easy going, but there wasn’t—it was only, I mean—Rochelle—it’s so funny that
Rochelle’s best girlfriend had a boyfriend who was in Vietnam the same time. His name
was Jess Brewer. His father was the highest ranking black officer in the LAPD (Los
Angeles Police Department), had been in the LAPD for forty-four years. Jess and I
became friends. Jess was a corpsman. He was the guy that was with 1,9 at Chu Lai, but I
had been up at 881. I think he has the Bronze or Silver Star. He’s the one that’s still
alive. But he and I, we’re both from LA. So we met there and then we got—we really
liked each other, you know. He was the kind of guy that girls would—in a way he’s like
my brother. Girls would walk up and like just give it up. I’m going like, “What the fuck
is this?” Like this never happens to me.

RV: Only in the Philippines, right?

TG: Well, yeah. Well, kind of. But no, this was like—we see each other
occasionally now. He’s got his own family. He went to dental school. He’s like a, he’s
a lieutenant general in the Army Reserve because he joined the Army to pay for dental
school at Howard. He’s got a real—he’s got two boys at Arizona State. You sort of,
sometimes you grow up and grow apart and then also you’re sort of like the Army buddy,
who’s like—I think one time I came to see him I was like living with the Indians up in
the mountains of Mexico. All their other friends are dentists. I’m not—you know, it’s—
I think they like me, but I don’t know where I fit in, if that makes sense.
RV: Did you feel like you fit into the Marine Corps or when it was time for you to get out did you want to get out?

TG: Oh no, no, no, no. I felt I fit in when I was over in Vietnam, but when I came back it was fucked. It was like a joke. I was with—it was like stateside Marine Corps?

RV: You left Vietnam in November ’68?

TG: Yeah. November ’68. Came back—God, I was only—came back to camp, came flew in to El Toro. Flew in to El Toro on Thanksgiving Day.

RV: What was it like leaving Vietnam?

TG: Oh I was just, like—I leave better than I come. I’m just leaving. That’s like “roar,” you know. If you go on those—I even do that now. I don’t put a whole lot of stock on a whole lot of stuff. I think I distrust things, or I tend to try to see through them. I mean I just had a conversation with Dean Thawel and then the guys up on the third floor and I’m walking up to them like this. I just had worked on nights and slept on the floor. I know it’s sometimes how midlife fits in. I don’t think I feel bad about that, but I just know I’m different in a way. I don’t know why I’m different. One of the girls here was talking to me. She said before she knew me she saw me and I stood out. I was over in the cafeteria. I was just looking at people. Just looking and just taking—I mean a lot of times I’m just a—not a voyeur—but I am a, rather than a participant I’m an observer. I don’t know if that’s because I’m an artist. I don’t know if that’s because I just no matter where I’m at I’m always other, but I’m even that when I’m with other artists. I don’t know. Sometimes I distrust art. I’d rather spend time with farmers than I think other artists. But then again I think my art comes out of that kind of experience where I deal with common folk and everyday people, in a way portray them as being heroic. So, I don’t know. When I left Vietnam I just got on the plane and left. I probably should have paid more attention because there are people that I didn’t see again ever, and I didn’t realize what that would mean.

RV: You regret that now?

TG: Yeah. I think intellectually I do or emotionally I do, but the reality of it is that once it’s over, it’s over. What were we going to talk about? What we did in Vietnam? I mean, it’s—I think in a way I’m either a very social loner or a loner who’s
very social. I mean because there’s a social patina there. I can exist—you know, I could
drive across country alone with no radio and just sort of hum tunes and just completely
amuse myself. On the other hand, it’s easier being a really nice person if you’re not
interacting with other people who really show you how not nice you really are. Do you
know what I mean? “Of course I’m a great guy. Oh, well, but in this situation I think
I’m going to have to be a shit.” I mean, you’re not thinking you have to be. You wind
up—“Gee, that wasn’t very nice. Why’d you do that?” I was just talking to a girl today.
I said, “I really would like to say what can I do to be a help, but I really don’t feel like”—
I only want to say it. I won’t actually want to be of help. I really don’t want to go to, I
don’t want to go out of my way on this one. I think what it is, a moment ago, I went with
anything. I don’t know.

RV: Why don’t we take a break?
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Tony Gleaton. Tony and I are again in Lubbock, Texas. It’s September 15th, 2005. It’s about 10:45AM Central Standard Time. Tony we left off in our last session—basically you’re coming out of Vietnam. I wanted to take you back to that time when you left that war, as far as the physical sense, and left the country and came back to the United States. Can you kind of go back and talk about those days of leaving and then arriving back in the States?

Tony Gleaton: Well, before I—the unit that I was with was Alpha 1, 4 and there was a Captain Russom and a Lieutenant Black. I guess Lieutenant Black was a field grade position because I think he reverted back to eventually an enlisted man. Black guy. Really nice. This was like a family in a way. Since then I got my DD214 and I could understand all the different places that I went even though—it’s really funny. When you’re in the service you don’t know the overarching perspective. You don’t know any of the geopolitical motivations. You just like whoa. Oh, get on the helicopter and we’re going to be going this long and this is what you better take. You don’t know what anybody else is doing unless the shit is really deep. I mean, it’s really in the shit and it’s just everybody seems to know what’s going on in a particular area, but other than that you don’t know nothing except who you’re with. I might digress for a second because there was a friend of mine, who was the endowed chair at Washington, University of Washington. He had a thing about—this was about when guys were going over to Iraq and there was something about all these black guys dying. I forget the political statement people here were trying to make, but I said to him, I said, “You know those guys didn’t die for you. They died for the people they were with.” And nobody—I mean these aren’t heroes. These are guys—hero, everybody that dies isn’t a hero. People that die just die. Some of the people die as heroes, but you’re not a hero just because you died and you may be a lucky.

RV: What made you think of that when you were thinking about Lieutenant Black and Colonel Russom?
TG: Well, because I—it’s not so much because I was thinking about them. I just was thinking about how men die or how women die. I mean, I don’t love it and didn’t—I was fixated on it, but I had been through that already. I had been through a similar event that sort of shook my world and that was Vietnam. That was to see people, piles of bodies, I mean stacked on one another. Kids just like me who were coming off of either, you know, didn’t make it to triage. It was Dong Ha, I guess. No, it wasn’t Dong Ha. Oh, it was—what was more up north, Dong Ha or—? Yeah, must have been Dong Ha.

RV: That’s right up at the DMZ (demilitarized zone) right on Route 9.

TG: Yeah. Yeah. Because I guess everybody sort of worked out of there when I was there. LZ Vandergrift and all that stuff. I thought that I—well, when I was there I thought that I would maybe reenlist, re-up for another thirteen months. That was a couple of days before I was supposed to go and we were up in some forward firebase and they were sending out—for some reason, I don’t know why—I think they were testing the mortars and we were like digging in. It was the afternoon. It was like kind of very relaxed. They put a mortar in and there was a short round. I dug in, I dove head first into a foxhole the guys were digging out. I had never done anything like that before. Then we all sort of decided, you know, it is—no it’s—

RV: Time for you to go.

TG: Yes. Time for me to go because it’s like, well, this was folly to think that I would stay but I—

RV: Were you staying, were you thinking about staying because of the people?

TG: I—yeah. I mean yeah. I mean I’ll tell you how—I asked to go out on ambush because I had never been on one. I’m just like what kind of fool is—I’m sure my parents knew they would like die. “Oh yeah, your son decided to go out on an ambush and”—that’s, you just go out there, kind of in the twilight, sit around in absolute dark. Boy, that’s pretty fucked up.

RV: Are you glad now that you did it, that you had that experience?

TG: Yeah. It’s a whole different—it was so many lives ago. It was so many lives ago. I think I’m glad for everything I did. I don’t think—in a way I don’t think I’m that unusual, but my wife says she doesn’t know anybody like me. She doesn’t know—I mean I volunteered for the draft and then volunteered for the Marine Corps. They sent
me to Japan. I volunteered for TDY duty in Vietnam. I volunteered then to go to Vietnam. I volunteered to go not only Vietnam but to go to Khe Sanh. I was just—well, I was a Marine. I wasn’t—it wasn’t—I had gone through all that training to do what Marines do. I mean, the worst thing in the Marine Corps is to like sit around stateside and polish shit. Good lord. It just kills me, but that was the last thing I ever joined. It was the last thing I ever joined. If there was—it was the last thing I ever did with anybody else. I got to the point now where somebody called me on the phone about me doing a class for some kids. Then they wanted me to come in to sort of learn how to do the class. I’m saying, first thing in my mind is, “You’re fucking lying.” I’ll call you on the phone and you can discuss it. I just—plus, I got to the point now in my life where I realize that I’m fifty-seven and I can’t do some of the things that I used to do. This last trip I took to Mexico my whole mantra was fifty-seven is not thirty-five. I just—not only can I not sort of sit around and spend copious amounts of time just waiting in a sort of, in a very indigenous way for things to come about. The novelty of that has really worn thin. I’m going, “Yo, what’s up? Are we going or we’re not going?” You can’t say that to people. You just can’t because that ain’t the way it goes. It’s not—even though you know the guys going to say, “Well, I’m supposed to leave at seven and it’s eleven o’clock but no, let’s just wait.” Then we’re going to say, “No, no. You don’t understand. I got to take a plane this afternoon. Plus I got to go to work.” No. You have a—and then at the very—yeah. So, this whole thing back to Vietnam—it was time to go. It was time to go.

RV: Were you sad or excited, happy? What were you feeling leaving and anticipating coming back?

TG: Oh, yeah. I just was going to come back to my girlfriend. I was going to get married. You don’t know what you leave behind. You just don’t know what you—I mean it was an experience that, it was an experience that could not be prolonged but it was also an experience that could not be replicated. I think throughout my life I dreamed several times that I had re-enlisted in the Marine Corps, had gone back to Vietnam three or four times. I always didn’t know if that was really true. Did I really do that? But no, I didn’t. I don’t know—I came back and I got married to my high school sweetheart, which we should never have been married. We should have just remained friends.
RV: How soon after when you got back?

TG: Three weeks.

RV: Wow. Where’d you come into? Did you come into California?

TG: Yeah. I came into—Thanksgiving Day I flew into El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. My mom was there with my girlfriend. Because we had never had sex and I think we had sex together—I mean we did everything else, but have intercourse, you know through high school. Then we actually had intercourse I think before, a week before the marriage and it was like such a bust. My God. Then it was—

RV: What was your mother’s reaction when you came back?

TG: She was just glad to see—I mean my mom was just glad to see me. You know, my parents—I wouldn’t even call my mom from Vietnam. I would go to the MARS station and call my girlfriend. My mom would realize that I was okay because she was paying for it. Because she would—this is why I don’t have children, okay? Because there’s no way that I’m going to inflict—I’m going to have some motherfucker fuck with me the way I did with my parents. Then, but we came back—

RV: What was it like? What was the atmosphere like? What was California like? Did you notice civilians, other military? Were you in uniform?

TG: No. It wasn’t like, it wasn’t like—my wife was at Travis when she was a kid and she told me that guys would take their uniform off before they got off base. I never had that experience.

RV: You were in uniform?

TG: Yeah. Yeah. It was the Marine Corps. This wasn’t no volunteer shit. I think there were some draftees in the Marine Corps. Then they had some two-year guys. Then they had some four-year guys. I was a three-year guy. They even had some guys that were six years. I don’t know how—it was like who did that. Six years. My god.

RV: Well, you didn’t encounter any resistance, any problems, anything like that coming back in?

TG: Nah. I mean I was middle-class black. I came back in ’69, ’68? No.

RV: November ’68?

TG: I joined in ’67, joined in ’67—well, maybe I did come back in ’68. Okay. ’68. Came back in November ’68 on Thanksgiving day. Was married before the end of
the year. Was married before the end of the year. Still had—wasn’t supposed to get out
till 1970. Got a work release thing, I had some scam going on where I was working at
the gas station and was supposed to be a gas station manager. They were trying to
transition people back into civilian life. I got this guy to let me work there.

RV: Meaning you could get out of the corps early?

TG: Well, not necessarily get out but I was still in the corps but I was away doing
this job. When I spent from ’60—got back, I went to Camp Pendleton and was at Los
Pulgas and I was with an artillery battery. That was like pulling hairs. I don’t know. I
just was probably not a good Marine or something. We did not see eye to eye. It was
just like stupid stuff. It’s not—it’s just stateside barracks life was kind of weird.

RV: Had your attitude changed, you know, like this is how I saw the corps and
this is how I saw my job before Vietnam and then when you come back from Vietnam
things have changed in your mind? Obviously from your experiences but and then being
stateside doing this job is probably going to be boring compared to where you just came
from, but did you sense anything had changed inside of you at that point?

TG: When I was a kid I didn’t know nothing. I just—I wasn’t reflective. I was
just back. I just wanted to be home. I got home. You don’t think you’re going to die.
You don’t think you’re going to get old. You don’t think any of that stuff. So I didn’t—I
was just there. I was there. I was able to reacquaint myself with a friend of mine, Jess
Brewer, who had been with, I guess, Bravo 1, 9 or something. I think he has a Silver Star
from 881. He was a medic. He was a Naval Corpsman with those guys and then he was
stationed at Camp Pendleton. We would drive up and forth, back and forth, to LA. We
actually had, also had jobs, after hours jobs. He was a cook and I was a bus boy at Ho
Joes in San Clemente.

RV: Just making some extra money?

TG: Yeah. I don’t know what they pay you now, but they didn’t pay you
anything back then.

RV: Did you and your wife have an apartment?

TG: Oh. She was not moving down there. She was like—this is a black girl that
grew up, went traveling in the Catskills in the summertime with her aunt who was an
entertainer from LA that would shop at Lord and Taylor and had a mustang as a
graduation gift in 1966, and who owned a house that we eventually lived in the servants’
quarters of that was on Country Club Drive. She was not moving. No. That was not her
world. She, you know, like, “love you and kinda.”

RV: Have fun at Camp Pendleton.

TG: Yeah, yeah. “Well, I’m not going down there.”

RV: So, she’s waiting for you to get out in April ’70 basically?

TG: Yeah. She’s kind of going back and forth to LA. I mean LA is only—

“Please come home on the weekends. I’m not moving down there.”

RV: How did that work?

TG: Eh, it was—well, she wound up—we still talk. This was my first wife. That
was I don’t know how many years ago and she wanted—I wound up being the—we had a
child that died in 1970. We had a contentious marriage. We weren’t—we were—it was
much easier for us being boyfriend and girlfriend and having a good life and not having
to pay for it. She lived at her parents’ house. I lived at my parents’ house. I spent most
of my time with her. I mean I spent most of my time—I mean growing up through high
school I would get home like nine o’clock at night from her house and—

RV: What happened, you said a child had died? What kind of—?

TG: We had a child. Nineteen, she was pregnant. I was like physically abusive.
I grew up in a family which—I mean the first thing I remember is my dad would try to
physically kill my mother. So I had those issues. I didn’t have coping skills. Those were
the coping skills that I had, which were inappropriate. It wasn’t until—I think I hit her
one time and her grandfather was going to kick my ass. I don’t think her father ever
forgave me, even though I looked at her dad in a way even closer than I looked at my
dad. I was later on very close to him in the last maybe ten years of his life. But we were
separated when she was pregnant during the pregnancy. Then I had taken her to the
hospital, I mean to the doctor’s office, and I guess she was in her eighth, late seventh
month or something on the eighth. Her water—she had placenta previa. She had to be
rushed to the hospital. Back then that baby’s—they didn’t have neonatal intensive care.
I mean I’m sure the baby would have lived then. I always used the fact of like the cut off
and my daughter would’ve been—seven days—she would’ve been thirty-five now. So I
kind of used that as a cut off of people that I will not date. Got to be thirty-six or older.
We didn’t get—we never lived together after that. We never lived together and she was devastasted at the death of her baby. I think, when—and I felt really emasculated because when I was there at the birth of the baby her doctor turned to her parents to find out what to do instead of me. So I’m going, “Oops.”

RV: So it was born as a stillborn?

TG: No, it was born and lived and died later that night. Then I had to go through—I mean as a young guy in the service I didn’t have any money. So, this was right before I got out of the—this is January. This is January of 1970. I was still in the service, but I was in the Veterans Special Education Program, which was an entrée into UCLA. They were getting vets to go through this program and then it was funneled in—no SAT, no nothing—but they would go into the program, actually went to the program twice. Didn’t pass it each time but was eventually let into UCLA.

RV: What prompted you to go in there? Was that the corps telling you to go in or did you, Tony, wanted to do this?

TG: Oh, no. I just was me wanting to do this. I forget for what reason. I mean I just—

RV: Education? Get a better job or set yourself up for a job?

TG: Well, yeah. I mean I was middle class. I was supposed to go to college. I just I don’t really remember—it’s not like I was dying to be anything particular. I remember when I was in high school trying to figure out what I wanted to do. My God, I never wanted to work in an office. I thought I wanted to be like a forest ranger or some shit like that. Could be outdoors. So I got into—matter of fact, the guy that was the head of the program went with me to the funeral home because the Navy Relief took care of it.

RV: So, you were eventually admitted but this was after you got out.

TG: Yeah. This was—I was admitted in I think spring of 1970.

RV: So, you got out in April and—?


RV: Fall of ’70. Okay. Let me ask you a couple questions about this transition from just below the DMZ in Vietnam to living back in the United States and you’re out.

TG: There was nothing for me. It was just, “Yo, what’s up?”
RV: Did you follow the war on TV or anything? The protests, all the stuff with Nixon, I mean just the whole—you come back the election of ’68?

TG: Yeah, but it didn’t—I didn’t think it was until I went to Berkeley and I think I was when Godfather came out. I remember we were in the show and there was the riots because there were—it was filled with tear gas. I mean I was, in a way, really apolitical. I mean, I was just—I grew up watching Sands of Iwo Jima, which were I guess made for recruitment for World War II but wound up setting up a whole other set of folks to do what, you know, to sort of follow the party line.

RV: And you were doing it?

TG: Yeah. I just didn’t think twice about it.

RV: When did you stop?

TG: I think all during the—I had friends during college that were—I had a friend at college whose husband was a primary legal activist against the war. Years later she was sort of rallying against what was happening in Guatemala but she would talk to me about stuff and I would go, “Whatever.” Like, “Hey, isn’t that girl really cute?” I was just, “Hey, what did”—

RV: It’s not what you were.

TG: Yeah. I was just, yeah, wasn’t—what did that have to do with me?

RV: How many people asked you about what you did over there in Vietnam?

Did your mother or your wife? Did they want to hear about what happened?

TG: No. I don’t think—I think there was a real seamless, I think there was a real seamless integration coming back but I think later on there came to be times when, there came to be a time when—I don’t know when it—I don’t know when I stopped fitting in. I don’t know if I never fit in but didn’t know it or stopped really fitting in at a certain time. When some guys were going up to live in the mountains in the U.S. I went to live in Mexico. I mean, it wasn’t until my mid-thirties, I guess, that I—after I’d been a fashion photographer, I looked at stuff and didn’t like what I saw but didn’t realize what I didn’t like was not endemic just to that one profession but it was just the way that life played out. Like being here at this library it’s like, “Well, from the outside it seems one way but in reality this is what’s going on and what should we really”—I don’t know. I just, I was—I don’t know how I got to where I’m at. I mean I’m here. I’m definitely
here, but I don’t know how I got here. I got here one step at a time. I mean there were  
random choices. Random choices but they were at the time, I guess if you look back you  
can just see this sort of, just straight line in one direction. I mean I’m at a point now  
where my job is to think. I produce photographs, but my real job is to think about things.  
Then those photographs are physical manifestations of that thought process. I was never  
a really good student. I just was not a good student at school.

RV: Did you get through UCLA?

TG: Oh, no. I didn’t graduate. I took six years. I was just like six years of  
boning babes. I got in the—I thought I was in the art department, but I was really in the  
design department, but I didn’t know the difference between art and design so it didn’t  
make any difference to me anyway. I just thought, “Well, maybe—all these projects look  
really neat and I guess I can get out.” Then one of my teachers said, “My God, you seem  
to have a real aptitude for photography,” and I started taking photographs.

RV: Is that when you first did right then?

TG: Yeah. Well, I took some at Camp Hansen before, but they were so God  
awful.

RV: Did you know you had an interest in photography?

TG: No, no. It wasn’t until I was like twenty-five or twenty-six. It just—

RV: It was this individual who kind of said, “Hey, you’re pretty good”?  
TG: Yeah. This is like—and I still have those. I gave my, those first  
photographs that I did for that project, which looked remarkably similar to the best work  
that I do now—it’s really funny. I’m looking at it, “Oh my God. It hasn’t changed a bit,  
huh?” I went down and I did these pictures of these guys who were homeless in  
downtown LA and this was back in ’72, ’73, but the pictures were poignant and non-  
judgmental and they were really kind of somewhat beautiful. They were really quite  
beautiful. So, that particular counselor, his name was Roy, who I am still—who was an  
academic counselor, took a real interest in me and helped me, was retroactively changed,  
let me dropped classes that I didn’t do well in. I spent more time in the counselor’s office  
trying to make things right than I actually did actually spent studying. I think—you know  
what I remember most about college is this one girl, Anglo girl, up in the design  
department, really beautiful. I forget I was talking to her one time and was trying to say
something and she said, “Guys like you don’t do, don’t take foreign languages.” I mean
it’s like—

RV: “Guys like you,” meaning—?

TG: Well, just like fuck ups. Just like you’re not here for that. You’re not here
to learn. I think the funny thing about it now is that years later I think Roy was like so
proud to turn on CBS or see me intelligently talk about an issue that is complex and
nuanced and he was saying, “Yes, yes, it was good for me to smoke dope with this kid
when he was in school.” It was like—I don’t know how I got from one, I got from one—
I don’t know how I got from like trollop to intellectual because that’s—I guess that’s
what I am now.

RV: But do you think that you were always were that?

TG: No, no. I was just—no. Well, I think I started—what happened was that the
sequence of events I was at UCLA from ’70 to ’75, and then I started going to the Art
Center School of Design, which was like the art school. It’s like up there with RISD
(Rhode Island School of Design). It’s a very, very good art school. It’s in Los Angeles.
I went there. At that time I think there had only been, I bet there had been no more than
twenty black photographers that had gone—twenty black guys that had gone through
their photography program. I had known one of the first, who I’d met. I thought I
wanted to be a fashion photographer because at that time that’s where it was creative and
it just seemed like there were beautiful women. There’s this whole—I mean I’d look
at—I mean I would live and die between the pages of a British Vogue looking at the work
of Giu Brogan(?) or Mary Claunt(?) and things like that. This was quite different for—I
mean I had come out of—I was a middle class kid coming out of Detroit, growing up in
California. Important that I grew up in California in the fact that I grew up outside the
bounds of sort of cousins and aunts and grandmothers who could shape you. I mean we
were just running the streets. One of the reason now, I look at my step-son, and he
spends—like I look at my wife and she spends time, she plays with him everyday after
school and this guy’s twelve. I’m going, “Gee, you know, I never played with my mom.
You don’t play with your mom.” They amuse each other and I’m going what the fuck.
We were like running the streets. I don’t know if there are more pedophiles now or less,
but it’s a whole different world than—I just don’t, I don’t know. But I also shut up
because I realize that this is a mom that truly loves this kid and that this kid has only
known two divorced parents and they both love him dearly and both come together to do
things with him. I mean, his father went to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology),
no, Cal Tech. His mom and dad are both real smart. So, I don’t know.

RV: Let me ask you this. How did the war experience play into this part in the
1970s and into the 80s?

TG: I don’t think it played into it until later on. The war itself—
RV: I’m talking about your war experiences. You know, what you participated
in and what you saw, what you felt, what you—?
TG: Yeah. But I was more on a tour in Southeast Asia than in the war. But you
mean there were times when I was scared to death, but I was too dumb to realize how—I
just was too dumb.

RV: You’re talking about post-Vietnam or during in?
TG: During. I mean I just was—I was the ground forward air controller with
this, with the ground FAC. Toward the end of my time there I would like hitch rides
back into Da Nang to see if I could pick up extra gear for our guys. I was, hey, I was—
you know. I was real good at what I did. I was better at that than I am at doing what I do
now. I was really good.

RV: That—what, hustling supplies and—?
TG: Well, just—you know. I was good. This figuring out nautical TACANs
(tactical air navigation) and bring this in and can we bomb these—I was nineteen. I was
nineteen years old and figuring out where I could light an arc light. What the fuck is
that?

RV: So, when did all this hit you? When did the war come back?
TG: I don’t think it was until after—I think it was the time—I think I owe
everything to Mexico.

RV: Tell me about that. I mean, wow—
TG: Well, in the way that I stepped out of my own society and went to another
society, and couldn’t really speak the language, didn’t spend time with anybody else
there who did speak English, and looked, really looked at stuff. Started becoming, started
becoming—maybe I always was a voyeur. I didn’t know, but I would look. I will look at stuff and see what’s going on and see patterns and stuff.

RV: When did you go? Was this your first trip?

TG: Ah, the first trip I went was when I was at UCLA and there was a girl by the name of Stephanie Bowle, who I met when I worked in Reno, at Tahoe, over the summer of like ’73, who we were just friends with but her mother was a member of the Republican State Central Committee who thought Willie Brown was an anathema. It was—I felt kind of uncomfortable because I think one day Stephanie sprung me on her mom. I mean and I don’t look—I don’t have this classic sort of black visage of coming out of—a lot of people don’t know what I am, but I mean they know I’m not from Sweden. I think her mother was a little upset, but the thing was probably more upsetting that I wasn’t upset. I was maybe a little perturbed but Stephanie and I still remained friends for a number of years. But we went to Mexico over Christmas and we went down to Guaymas, which was where they—this was back in ’74—Guaymas is where they, was the set where Mike Nichols made Catch-22. It is now an American colony because it’s a really beautiful beach with—it’s the closest inland port that you can get to, the closest port, ocean-going port, that you can get to from Tucson. So people keep their boats down there. So it’s an American colony and it’s really beautiful. It’s got a coral reef, just really nice.

RV: Was it this trip is when—?

TG: Well, this is the first time I went to Mexico. I remember because it was Easter season. I am at times just a natural clown, because we were—I remember we were, I was—I think I was drunk. I do know how to amuse people. I think that we were on the, if I remember correctly, we were on the public address system. I was on the public address system in my bad Spanish, at the bus station, announcing the arrival of certain buses.

RV: Which weren’t coming?

TG: Well, which were—I forget, but we were there for a couple days. We couldn’t get out because all the buses were full because they were all coming up—at that time, they were all starting at Mexico City and going all the way to Tijuana. Now they do that but there are places they start in between so that you—during those peak seasons
you can actually get on a bus all the way. I guess I was just—we had this saying down there that the catholic God was a good and gracious God. Just Mexico was just amazing and I saw federales. I had no problem going up and talking to anybody. I just, “Oh, I like this place.” I didn’t go back again until, maybe it was five years, six years later, but during this time I went to, started going to—had any number of probably ill situated relationships with different girls. Realized that I was different. I realized I was different and I was told I was different. You know what, there’s—the federal magistrate, the first female federal magistrate for the state of Washington, was a girl I had gone out with. She was a war baby from Germany. Black father, German whoever and had been adopted by a black officer and his black wife, and grew up in L.A. and then influence such, the part of L.A. We went out and we were at UCLA. Her parents were not happy. Her parents, I know, thought that she could have done much better. This was a girl that had—she was beautiful, had a great car, and had credit cards. I mean my God. What is not to like?

RV: Now how’s this tied back into Mexico and—?

TG: Well, years later she told someone—and I had not seen her for thirty years or twenty-five years after she—I saw her the day she was graduated from law school and she was going to go off to start this new career. She told somebody that she had learned more about life through me and about how I, that I gave her the freedom to approach things in ways that she had not thought about it. I was amazed to hear that from—I didn’t realize I had had that affect, but I realized that in a way that I do have that affect on people. But that if I complain about stuff that I will at first complain about myself now. I will—and then I realize that I am really hard on myself. I mean those pictures that I produce didn’t just sort of kind of look that way. They are either, they’re either really good or they’re not. You can do that with images or things but you start doing that with life and it becomes—it makes it really tricky.

RV: Did your experience in Vietnam play any role in your photography?

TG: I don’t think so, other than the fact that I know in a way I was changed by that experience but only—but I don’t know how.

RV: So maybe unconsciously it is there but you don’t know what that is.

TG: Yeah. I would’ve been—I think time and time again, and that was the first time, that I have taken myself away from the things, broken from a path that a lot of other
people would have gone. Vietnam was, you know, was that. Was the first time that I did that. I don’t—one of the problems is that it’s such a long time ago and there are so many other things that have happened, but I know—well, that’s one—I mean I don’t have a problem with crying, but that can make me cry really. I can think about things or—you know what? In Vietnam, I mean people—the thing about it, one of the problems was is that I got used to people being who they, not who they said they were but who they were because if you were there fighting for your life you didn’t really have any—it’s like I asked my wife when I met her. Are you nice because you’re nice or are you nice because you think people want you to be nice? I mean there wasn’t none of that. You were just—if you were a mother fucker you were a mother fucker because that was just it.

RV: In Vietnam? I mean you had to be—

TG: You ain’t such that you had to be. You weren’t taking the time to put on the britches to be anything else. This is in forward areas because in the back, I think in the back it was probably even worse than being stateside.

RV: But that maybe allowed you the freedom somehow, maybe you weren’t aware at that point, but later in life to see the reality situation and your everyday breathing life, not unconsciously but really out there?

TG: Well, again, I couldn’t—one of the things that was hard for me to do was I couldn’t understand—I should have never been in college. I should have not been there.

RV: Gone to UCLA?

TG: No, I shouldn’t. It was a waste of time.

RV: Should have gone right into what?

TG: No. I—

RV: Would you have found photography though without that?

TG: I don’t know. I mean photography is just one way of expressing oneself.

RV: Sure. It happens to be your life work though.

TG: Well, yeah because that’s the way I found but I would have found a way to express myself because I write even. I mean I write as well as I photograph.

RV: Let me ask you this then. Now, today, 2005, so many years after this war and that experience, however good or bad that was for you, however benign or not, how do you feel about your service and how do you feel about participating in that event?
TG: Well, I know what I did was wrong but I wouldn’t have changed it.
RV: Would you mean you know it was wrong?
TG: Well, because when I look at helicopters fly over, when I look at helicopters fly over Honduras at night with no lights on there I know they’re not delivering care packages. I know we should have been fighting with the North Vietnamese not against them.
RV: Okay. So politically you’re saying yeah, you were—you could see their side much easier or now you can see their side much easier, much more clearer than you could what we were saying.
TG: Yeah. I mean if they were anybody, I mean—if we were going to help anybody we should’ve been helping the North conquer the South.
RV: Why do you think we weren’t doing it then?
TG: Well, for the same reason we ain’t doing it now because it doesn’t serve somebody’s interest. I mean, nothing’s really changed. I mean, I don’t care if it’s the mayor of New Orleans or the governor or the president about this hurricane thing. I mean, government is supposed to be there to help people but no. I mean is there a reason why, is there a reason why I’m a professor at—when I was a professor at Tech and I had health insurance that was almost as bad as not having health insurance. I mean, why are we talking about Vietnam thirty years later, about Swift Boats and all that other shit, when it really didn’t make any difference because there were things now that needed to be dealt with. I mean just the—I mean—
RV: You’re talking about the presidential elections all last fall?
TG: The presidential elections, all that—I mean I assume that it is in people’s interests for things not to happen. I mean why—how can you have a secure nation without adding a good healthcare system for everybody? That should be the cornerstone of a homeland defense rather than some sort of—but we don’t think that way. We think only in terms of high-ticket items in which—I just—nothing’s changed.
RV: So Vietnam is just one example in a long line of examples of how U.S. government has what?
TG: Well, it’s like—I do stuff. I never—I swear to God. You know how my life has changed? My life has, I swear I wasted time at UCLA. I don’t remember a thing
about what happened there other than the few girls that I tried to sleep with. But now, I
realize that when I travel, when I travel to Canada, that by the time I get off the bus or the
train the first thing that I’m doing is I’m getting a library card to go look at their special
collection archives about the thing that I’m there researching. The most, the best thing
that ever happened, the most powerful tool in the world isn’t a university. It’s a public
library where—and there were some great teachers at UCLA. I just wasn’t ready to
receive what they had to disseminate. I don’t know when this happened or—I think it
happened over a period of time. In a way I think when this change came about in me, I
think in a way Vietnam was—war in a man’s life normally happens when, especially
when it happens when they’re nineteen, becomes a sort of a, a seminal sort of an event.
He may not understand the ramifications of it until much later. I think maybe that’s what
happened.

RV: Well, how—
TG: And the—I’m sorry.
RV: No. Today then, this is you you’re describing. You’ve come to terms with
this later in life. You’re understanding it more later in life. How has it impacted you?
TG: Well, it’s in two sides because when the Marines were going to Iraq I
wanted to go.
RV: Why?
TG: Because I was them.
RV: You’re talking about—
TG: This time.
RV: These past two years.
TG: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I know better, and I know it was—even though I knew it
was the wrong thing to do. Even though I knew that it was problematic, that we
shouldn’t have gone in there without—we shouldn’t have gone in. We went in
unilaterally. I mean—
RV: So Vietnam, was the Marine Corps experience or the Marine Corps
experience in Vietnam for you that made you two years ago to—?
TG: Well, I don’t know if I can separate it because I was a Marine. Now, and I
still do stuff in camp, not in Camp Pendleton, but in Oceanside because Oceanside Public
Library sent me to Somalia to do a series of photographs. So, I don’t know—I know there are these connections. My wife always needs to know the linear pattern of what’s going on. I normally am just willing to accept that one plus one does not always equal two.

**RV:** You’re not a linear kind of guy.

**TG:** And I just, I don’t—

**RV:** Does she worry about Vietnam when she did? Has she asked you about it?

**TG:** No. See, her dad was in Air Force. He was—

**RV:** In Vietnam?

**TG:** Oh yeah, yeah. She went to live in Canada with her in-laws, with her mother’s family. Her mother’s Canadian. Her mother’s white and Canadian.

**RV:** That makes it interesting.

**TG:** Oh yeah, yeah. Matter of fact, she’s going to be here this weekend. She’ll be here Monday and part of Tuesday so I help the Navy for half an hour, you guys can just talk to her because she has an insight into me that most people don’t see. I mean—

**RV:** Can she see that war experience in you?

**TG:** I don’t know if she sees the war. I don’t know if the war experience can be seen. She sees—

**RV:** Do you think it’s in you? Let me ask you that.

**TG:** Yeah, but just—you see, I didn’t have a bad experience there. I had—I didn’t have the kind of thing where—I’ll tell you what the war experience is. The war experience does not allow me, I cannot stand to see cruelty and miasma—when people see—when people started just slaughtering people on the screen for some plot device I just can’t stand it. That has no resonance that, you know—I can’t watch it. I just can’t. I don’t remember what those faces look like. I don’t think—no, I don’t think anybody ever died in my arms. I don’t know if they didn’t but I saw people—I don’t even think I saw people die but I saw, the morning after, I saw those dead bodies. I just, I don’t think that—I think now I could die for somebody, but I don’t think I could kill somebody. I just don’t think I could do that. I don’t think I just—

**RV:** In the course of all your photography then, based on that, how many times do you remember roughly did you think about Vietnam and you?
TG: Well, I don’t know if that’s—I would say this. I don’t think—see, Vietnam isn’t really a place hovering over my life, but what you have to realize is that because of a lot of different experiences, as you can see within the pictures that I produce, I produce pictures that are elegiac, that are beatific, that portray people at their best as opposed to their least. That there is a softness and an openness and an aspect of femininity in them of whether they are man, woman, or child. I think—now, can I tie that directly back to Vietnam? No, per se, but what I tie that to is the fact that I think because of that experience, as I just was saying, that not that I can’t get mad and cruel or really upset but I can’t—blood and mayhem does nothing to me, other than sort of maybe upset me or—I just can’t—if somebody’s going to die on TV or something I’ll just change the channel.

RV: Let me ask you this then. Think about you as a photographer over the past twenty years, twenty-five, thirty years, and that Tony Gleaton with a camera in Vietnam in 1968, not Gleaton in ’68, but Tony Gleaton the photographer who was doing that work in Mexico and around the world, what would the post-Vietnam Tony, what would he have shot with the camera in Vietnam in ’68?

TG: Yeah. Well, I was at a—I did a lecture in New York with this guy at Stanley. Stanley had just gotten an award. I think it was the Eugene Smith Award for the work that he did in Chechnya. His pictures are really, they were beautiful. I mean a picture of a dead Russian soldier in the snow that was beautiful. It’s kind of hard to fathom in a way. I don’t think I could have produced—well, first of all I don’t think I would have been there because I don’t think that I can do what I need to do. The kind of pictures I produce can’t be produced under those circumstances that I can lobby against the war. I mean this is what—this is where the dichotomy comes in. I can lobby against war, but still was willing to go with the 1st Marine Division where I remember they put that ad in the New York Times about they were going to go over there and they had no idea that what they were going to run into in Fallujah. They were dying like flies. So there’s this dichotomy in me that wants to be with them, not necessarily to put down an enemy, because the thing that’s going to happen is that in thirty years from now there’s going to be an outreach from these guys to those fighters about them both reconciling their differences or bringing their humanity together and that’s what seems so cruel about this all the time. That there will come a time when, you know, that these two people will
come together, not country to country, but individual to individual. So I am torn between that.

RV: It seems like the relationships that you were, conscious and unconscious, in Vietnam that you had with the guys you were around those months, that those relationships that you established in that atmosphere affected your outlook or gave you a lens through which you saw other relationships in your life. Would that be accurate?

Based, because you said you want to go over there with these guys two years ago and you’re not over there to shoot and kill the enemy, you’re over there to be with the guys and to support their efforts maybe as a group, as a team, as the Marine Corps. There’s a camaraderie. There’s a relationship.

TG: Yeah. I don’t think—I think that in a way that I have always sought sort of, I sought family. But not as head of family, but being as a part of someone else’s family, whether that’s year after year going to certain classmates’ house for Thanksgiving from that I knew in my twenties, even up into my early fifties. So, I think there’s—and then when I was growing up because my family was so divisive I think there were times—I mean, it’s still—it was just a continuation of me going over to other kids’ houses where I’d spend all day. There wouldn’t be like a terrible scene.

RV: You craved that. You needed that.

TG: Yeah. Even now as a husband I need that—this is really strange because what I give to her is, I think I give her someone that looks like her who she’s never really been with before but who has a world knowledge and understanding that can talk about, that can make obscure references to Baudelaire but still make cracks about a momma. I hold her and I ask her, I tell her, I said, “Promise me you’ll take care of me.” I need it in every way. She says yes. I think the hardest time that I have with her now is that there are times when we are so close within that bedroom and that she doesn’t need to know an overarching plan or that she doesn’t need to know, that she forgets about everything and lives completely in the moment. Then when she leaves that bedroom and she can’t do anything unless she plans it and I can’t do anything if I plan it. I think that’s what we struggle with. So, I don’t think Vietnam—Vietnam isn’t—I think Vietnam is an intricate part of my life, but I don’t know how much comes out of it. I don’t know if it is the trigger for something else or something else was the trigger for it, but I know it is
something that has been with me in a really positive sense for I don’t know how long. I mean I didn’t have—I thank God I didn’t have those kind of situations where people wake up with nightmares.

RV: So, no PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) that you remember?

TG: No, not that I remember, but I also realize that later on in life I was living like those guys that did though. I think a lot of things—I am real—there are some things that I’m just not good at, I mean that I, or this sort of classic ADD (attention deficit disorder) stuff. I can do something. I can’t prepare for it. I can’t plan for it, but I can do it. Of course if I prepare for it and plan for it, it takes me like three weeks and I just—

RV: And it won’t be as good as if you walked in cold.

TG: Yeah. But I’m at the point now where I still have to try to do it that way because you just can’t do everything just by doing it.

RV: Right. Let me ask you this about this process you and I’ve been through during this interview. Why did you want to, or besides maybe being nice to us, why did you want to talk about Vietnam and why did you want to do this oral history interview?

TG: It’s because when I ask—no, but I know when I ask people all the time to talk about who they are and what they do. Because I realize the collective value in that, especially if you can get somebody to talk in an open and honest way and get out of the way of your own selves in doing it. I don’t really—I don’t have an agenda to doing it. It’s just that you guys do it. You guys asked me to do it. Yeah, it’s not a problem.

RV: What’s it been like for you to talk about it?

TG: I mean I just want to do it all the time anyway. I’m not saying anything that I don’t normally say anyway. I mean, you know—

RV: Regarding the war? Regarding Vietnam?

TG: Well, about anything. I mean I may not—I don’t sit around and say let me do—you know what, I’m going to go from A to Z about my life, but I mean what I do is I go and I talk to people and I kind of try to tell them who I am in an open and honest way and ask them to share who they are. In a way it becomes really seductive because I don’t think other people are used to hearing someone talk about themselves in a way that’s thoughtful, introspective, and honest in the way that it talks about the real true flaws as well as the things that might be sort of beneficial. Like right now in my life—I mean I
didn’t know if I wanted to come now to do this because I was feeling so bad. I’ve had
the hardest time lately. I have really been struggling with my work. Just struggling to
figure out what it is that I’m doing, how is—I mean this working at the university for
three years, in a way, has opened some new doors but has really thrown me off my game
because I was, in a way, a lord unto myself before. It’s a bad habit for someone like me
to depend upon or expect a paycheck at the end of the month. I need to be pushed. Even
now with my marriage, to live in relative comfort, what the fuck is that about? Come on.
Get real.

RV: Didn’t you just describe your whole, well a big piece of your photographic
professional life? What you said about exchanging who you are with an individual in a
real way, having an exchange that with you in a real way and maybe what you
communicate, they might not spend hours talking to you. Some of your subjects might
have, others might not have said a word to you.

TG: But that’s it. They don’t have to say anything. I have to make them feel it’s
okay. Then they can—they’re taking pictures for me.

RV: Right. Then when they allow that, or when that happens, they forever now
in this picture are communicating themselves back to whoever’s looking at it. Is that not
what this kind of, does that touch on what your professional life has been partly about?

TG: Yeah. But see, I don’t—once the picture leaves me, once it goes on the wall,
then it’s not about me anymore. That picture is the relationship with the world. It has
nothing to do with me.

RV: Right. Right. That’s what I’m talking about. It’s that subject now is with
me or someone else who sees it.

TG: But that picture only winds up being a mirror to whoever stands in front of it
because it’s nothing about the person in the picture. It’s only about who’s looking at it
because the person that’ll look at it will use who they are to figure out, to give meaning to
what may or may not be in there. There may not be anything in there. It may be our
need to put something in there.

RV: So you’re kind of this agent of this communication.

TG: Well, you know, I just—I don’t even get on the other side of that. What I
started doing was I had these interests. Then I realized well if I did this—I don’t know
why I—sometimes I go and I don’t take pictures because it just doesn’t work. That’s the hard thing about doing it if you’re doing a project with somebody, “Oh, it didn’t work.” What the fuck do you mean it didn’t work? “Wasn’t feeling it.” The state of Texas does not believe in you not feeling it because you got money. Well, no—you don’t understand. No. No. No. You’re not—we’re talking about jail time here. That’s fraud.

RV: Well, let me ask you this. Someone’s that listening to this a hundred years from now, two hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about you? What do you want them to hear and I guess this in the context of the Vietnam Project and your Vietnam War experience, but you as an individual, as a war veteran, what do you want them to know? Big question, I know, but—

TG: I don’t know if I want them to know—I’m not thinking about that. I mean my question to them might be why are you listening to this? I mean I don’t—this doesn’t really go outside of me. I mean this is me thinking out loud. What they want to know, that’s on them.

RV: You just, you almost describe this as what you just said, as one of your photographs.

TG: No. You don’t understand this. It’s not me describing my photographs. I’m describing my life and my photographs are a part of that. I’m just saying what is. I’m like a small cipher from maybe my time but from one aspect of it. I mean, I don’t know. Is somebody going to—nobody’s going to guard or sort of berate over overarching meaning out of this but it’s just another one of the stories that people will tell. See, people always make much more of this than I ever did. This is just—I was going to take a picture of a guy yesterday. He said, “I’ve seen you on TV.” I thought, yeah, well, whatever. It’s like I—maybe somebody could—maybe I think the thing about it is, maybe somebody could realize that the things that they struggle with the most are the things that they are afraid of the most but they’re not the only person that has that issue and that maybe it’s okay. I mean we hide so much. We hide so much of who we are and what we are afraid of. You can walk through a day and never really see what’s real. You never really see what’s real. You can see everybody’s presentation and that has nothing to do with life and everything to do with the predicament we’re in. What’s worse now? I didn’t vote for the president but my God, he’s the president. He has the right to pick
whoever he wants for the Supreme Court. Advising consent. Hey, if you want to win, win. But on the other hand I got to think back to what Newt Gingrich and them were doing, and they were fucking over people left and right. They were making it so that you couldn’t govern. So, at what point do you say, “listen, let’s have some degree of collegiality here.” I think I know—the thing I know more of now is that I know less of anything that I thought before. I just knew I knew, and now I know I don’t know. And I just, I don’t—I mean, I don’t know why any of this—why does any of this surprise anybody? I mean we’re of the same political arguments now that Hamilton and Jefferson had. We were talking about this, the same issues. The way that we went about forming this country is not too far different than the way we form our, our sort of national policies now. I don’t know. I just don’t know. I mean I don’t want to talk about Africa because like I said Mexico even more, that’s somewhat—you know what, my job was I brought the subject up, people talk about it, and I give them these really beautiful photographs in which they can have a place, they have a possibility of having a place to start a conversation about things that they did or did not believe about a particular place. I think now what I’m really interested in now is the black Wild West, but in a way I mean it’s just—not just the black Wild West, but that’s one of the many stories because there’s this whole thing about Asians and Native Americans, but that’s just too huge of a story. I’ve only got so much time and so much money, but the American West was only the American West for I guess for—well, the West, the frontier, actually closed in 1890 so it was from 1820 to 1890. For three hundred years before that it was the north of New Spain. So, I think the thing that I’m really interested in is what happens—I mean, nineteen years before the first black slaves ever came to the eastern sea board there was a woman by the name of Isabel de Guevera, who was a free woman of color whose father was black and whose mother was Indian, who wrote a letter to the Alcalde about her upcoming trip north from central Mexico to the northern most outpost of New Spain in Santa Fe. She wrote him that letter. This was in 1540 that she was a free woman of color bound by neither slavery nor marriage to anybody and needed a certificate to that affect so that her journey would be safe and somewhat secure. So, how we—or the fact that Estevanico was, and Cabeza de Vaca were some of the first explorers in the American Southwest and the northwest of Mexico and that to this day, four hundred, four, five
hundred years later, that Estevanico’s entry into Hawikuh, which was the Zuni Pueblo, where he was killed, is still celebrated with the black Katsina. I mean when someone leaves European history and enters into Zuni myth, I mean, it’s like amazing.

RV: So that’s where you’re headed now?

TG: Yeah. When I talk to a guy, when I talk to Wayne Holden, Curray’s brother, and he tells me that he remembers in 1927 sitting there with his brother talking to buffalo hunters who were born in 1840 about what it was like to be on the plains. It seemed to me that we should—the only people here that are to me the pioneers of this country would recognize if they came back today were those illegal aliens who walked through the desert of Sonora up into the U.S. because they’re the only people that are paying that kind of price that those other people pay. So, my job is to see stuff and to make connections in a way. To see beyond what it is they might want to see or what it is the party line is or what it is quote unquote “blackness” is or “Latinoness” or “whiteness” or what it is to be an American and realize that the sin in this country really, the unforgivable sin, is to be poor or to be on drugs. You can do anything as long as you’re just not either one of those.

RV: Well, this might be a good place where we can kind of leave it off. I want to thank you for taking the time to talk about all this stuff honestly, openly, and from the heart. So, thank you for participating in the Vietnam Project Oral History endeavor.

TG: No problem.