Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. William Shelton. I am in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University. Mr. Shelton is in Las Vegas, Nevada. It is the 5th of June, year 2000, at 3:30 in the afternoon central standard time. Alright, Mr. Shelton, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

William Shelton: Oh, yes, I was born December 3, 1937 in Evansville, Indiana. I went to a Lutheran Parochial school through the 1st to 8th grade and in 1951 I moved to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada. In Las Vegas, Nevada, I attended Las Vegas High School graduating in 1955. I worked for a couple of years after that and enlisted in the Army reserve on my 17th birthday. After about two years I decided to go on active duty with the US Army and I entered active duty in April of 1957 and went through basic training and then through infantry officer candidate school and had various assignments throughout the next 20 years.

SM: Now when you enlisted in 1957, did you know that you were going to be going to OCS?

WS: No, I did not.

SM: Okay. How did that come about, that decision?

WS: Well, it was kind of goofy, initially – and I explain this only because it was pertinent – I hated the idea of being in the infantry but it soon became apparent that I had some talent working as an infantryman and so I settled down and accepted my fate. At
the end of...oh, I’m thinking somewhere around October or November of 19...well, let’s see, somewhere probably around June of 1957 I decided that I’d better find out where I was going and I was told by my 1st sergeant that it looked like I was going to go to Korea and I don’t think I was ready for that so I said, “What are my other options?” and he said, “Have you thought about OCS?” “No,” and he said, “Well try it,” and he sent me over for the testing – both the written and oral testing – and I passed both, ended up going to a non-commissioned officers academy and then to infantry officer candidate school at Fort Benning, Georgia in October I believe...yeah, October of 1957.

SM: Okay, well let’s take a step back and talk about your basic training real quick.

WS: Sure.

SM: Now when you enlisted it was kind of up in the air what branch you would actually get?

WS: Right.

SM: So you went to basic training at Fort Ord, California?

WS: Right.

SM: What was that training like?

WS: I thought it was pretty good. Not having had a whole lot of experience – I’d gone to high school ROTC – but not having had a lot of experience I found that the weapons and tactical training were excellent. And most of the cadre - I would give them probably an 85% rating – were extremely professional. Most were veterans of World War II and/or Korea and they provided good leadership and good training. They provided me well for future years, actually.

SM: In the training itself, did the trainers, the DIs that had combat experience in World War II and Korea, did they invoke their experience very much?

WS: Yes, most of them did.

SM: Do you remember in what contexts or any particular examples? Did they use, perhaps, an anecdote of their experience in combat and how it pertained to the training you were receiving?

WS: I can't now. That’s all been cobwebbed.
SM: Oh yeah, that’s a long time ago. Okay. Now the weapons training you received, what weapons did they focus on at basic training while you were there?

WS: Of course being a light weapons infantryman, I focused on an M-1 rifle, an A6 machine gun, a 60 millimeter mortar even then in those days, and I believe we had some familiarizations with rocket launchers, 3.5 inch rocket launchers, 57 millimeter recoilless rifles, and again familiarization with 81 and 4.2 inch mortars, of course the .45 pistol. I believe we even did a little training on an M-1 carbine. [coughs, says excuse me] Hand grenades, rifle grenades, we had chemical, biological, and radiological training, we had to go through the gas mask drills and the tear gas chamber, that sort of thing.

SM: Now with the weapons training itself, did you have a lot of range time and live fire time?

WS: In comparison to today’s training, yes, you did. Everything was on a known distance course in those days; 100 yards, 200, 500, 300, and so extensive time out on those ranges.

SM: In that training you felt it did help prepare you and helped you later when you went to Vietnam?

WS: Oh yeah, yeah.

SM: Now you never received training on the M-14?

WS: No, I missed on that one. Interim weapon, I dealt with it a couple of times in an assignment at Fort Ord. I think I missed that earlier, too; I did go to CDEC after I came home from Korea.

SM: How long were you in Korea?

WS: One year; ´60 to ´61.

SM: Alright, so you finished your basic training and after that you went on to… well, let me see here; where did you go after your basic training at Fort Ord?

WS: Well, I don’t know if you can remember back, I think I had mentioned that I was in that RFA 55 program and I took both basic and advanced individual training there and then that last few months was also spent at Fort Ord. But anyway, when I went back in the Army then in ´57, they sent me back for basic training again but it was a refresher. I didn’t leave Fort Ord until I went to Fort Benning, Georgia.
SM: Okay, and that was your first duty assignment?

WS: Yeah, after basic training.

SM: So what did you do at Benning? What unit were you assigned to?

WS: Well no, I went to Officer Candidate School. It was 51st Officer Candidate Company, 1st Student Brigade.

SM: Okay, I’m sorry, okay. I see now. Okay, Fort Benning from October ’57 to April of ’58?

WS: Yes.

SM: Your 1st sergeant gave you that advice?

WS: Yes.

SM: To go ahead and try for OCS?

WS: Right.

SM: That was your 1st sergeant in basic training?

WS: Yes.

SM: Okay.

WS: I can almost…I can remember his last name, Ranelli.

SM: And your decision to go to OCS, what prompted that?

WS: Pardon me?

SM: What prompted your decision to apply for OCS?

WS: Well, I think mostly because I had had a couple of officers talk to me over the years and they convinced me that, “You’ve got potential to be a leader. Why don’t you go ahead and try it?” and a couple of my NCOs also did that. I said, “Well, if they see something let me go try it and maybe I won't disappoint them.” And so I tried it and this isn't actually…I learned years later from Ralph Shelton, the guy that nailed Che Guevara in Bolivia, he was one of my OCS classmates and he told me, “You don't know what you can't do until you’ve tried it.” So that kind of became the reason I went ahead and thought, “Well, I’ll go to OCS.” I hadn't tried it; might as well.

SM: Okay, what was OCS like?

WS: Oh boy, what a shock! The minute you step into the place its worse than West Point ever could have been; people start shouting and screaming at you, you think you're a low life, you have absolutely no identity, and you have to make way for anything
that walks that isn't the same as you, and then when the training gets going, boy what an
education that becomes. You learn everything there is to learn about the Army,
particularly the infantry from the ground up, including going back and redoing all
weapons training. You learn infantry tactics, you learn leadership, map reading, skills
that the average person just wouldn’t think about learning, and over the six months you
definitely learn teamwork. I almost got kicked out because of a temper tantrum, but
because of some of the older candidates like this guy Pappy Shelton and a couple of the
others, you can't do this; you have to do it the right way, and they slowed me down, got
my temper under control, and I did manage to graduate on time.

SM: Now that’s Shelton, the same as your name?
WS:    His name is Ralph W.
SM:    Okay.
WS:    He was a…I think he was a master sergeant when he went to Officer
Candidate School. I’ll tell you an interesting sidelight with him later on.
SM:    Okay. The nickname for him was Pappy?
WS:    He got that from me because I was the young one. I think I was either the
second or third youngest to graduate the class.
SM:    The weapons training and the other training that was kind of a repetition of
basic training, how did that compare to basic?
WS:    Oh, much more thorough. We got into the mechanics of everything in
weapons training, and of course instead of learning how to just sit and drop a round down
the tube of a mortar, we also learned fire direction techniques, forward observation
techniques, that sort of in-depth type thing.
SM:    Did you learn maintenance techniques for the weapons and things like that
as well?
WS:    Oh yes.
SM:    And how about improvisation?
WS:    Improvisation?
SM:    Yeah, for instance later in the questionnaire that you filled out you
mentioned that sometimes that you and your units would alter the weapons in certain
ways to make them function better.
WS: Oh yeah.
SM: Was that kind of stuff covered in OCS?
WS: No, uh-uh. We learned immediate drills and how to basically get weapon system back in operation if it malfunctioned or broke down.
SM: In more detail than in basic?
WS: Yes.
SM: The other training that you received in OCS, in particular the training you received for patrolling. How much time did you spend in the field for that type of activity?
WS: I’d have to give you a break out; I’d would say that no less than 35% of our time was in the field. We spent an awful lot of time - the field was our classroom - and we spent a lot of time on patrolling and ambushes and that sort of thing.
SM: After that, would you rotate through the various leadership positions?
WS: Yes, they did rotate us through leadership positions.
SM: Anything else memorable from OCS training, important?
WS: Oh gosh…
SM: Things that were important later on, especially, say, for Vietnam, for Thailand?
WS: No, I think it prepared me for every possible eventuality.
SM: What about tactically?
WS: Basically.
SM: What about tactically? For instance, you mentioned that you received, eventually, some counter insurgency training and you worked in one of your first tours in Vietnam, ’62 to ’63, as an advisor. Now this is primarily advising to help the Vietnamese cope with…
WS: Counter insurgency?
SM: Well, you…what you say is counter insurgency. Did you think that American tactics, as they were being taught in OCS and in other military training venues, do you think that was appropriate training for that type of warfare?
WS: No. Basically the training that we were involved in during those years was strictly conventional thinking. We’d just changed from…I think it was the old TRIAD to
the ROAD, R-O-A-D Division, the pentatonic system if you will, and everything was
centered around the Fulda Gap scenario. Korea was used historically, but the Fulda Gap
was almost always the vehicle under which we based tactical exercises and planning and
execution of missions. Russia was the main enemy in those days, so it didn’t really take
into consideration the possibility of counter insurgency operations as we know them
today. Jungle operations were considered a special type of warfare as was desert warfare
and cold weather warfare. Everything was a temperate climate in a Germany type of a
terrain.

SM: Okay.

WS: I’m not so sure I remember ever hearing anything about counter insurgent
operations during those six months.

SM: When was the first time you did hear that phrase, counter insurgency?

WS: Oh, it would have had to been somewhere in the 19…well, yeah, 1960-’61
time frame.

SM: So do you think it was after JFK became president, after he was elected?

WS: Yes, yes it was.

SM: Okay. And of course special forces became kind of his pet military project?

WS: Absolutely.

SM: So when you finished OCS you received your commission, 2nd lieutenant,
United States Army?

WS: Right.

SM: Now at that point, were you commissioned regular, a regular commission,
regular Army commission?

WS: No, I was a reserve officer and I started off with an indefinite…well no, I
had a two year commitment and at the end of 18 months I was promoted to 1st lieutenant
and I also had to make a decision whether I wanted to terminate my commission at the
end of two years or did I want to stay for an indefinite period of time. So, I accepted an
indefinite because I had not yet been overseas. There’s some irony in that.

SM: What’s that?
WS: My first assignment overseas as an infantry officer was to the place I wanted to avoid when I was enlisted, Korea.
SM: Korea?
WS: The good old Army will do it every time.
SM: Okay, so you leave OCS April ’58. Did you leave Fort Benning and go to Korea?
WS: No, I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.
SM: Okay, first to Fort Jackson.
WS: Yeah, two years.
SM: Okay, what did you do at Jackson?
WS: I started off as a training officer in a basic training battalion and I became a company commander for a training company.
SM: Anything interesting from that experience?
WS: No, not really.
SM: As a training officer and eventually as company commander, how much could you influence the training of your basic training company?
WS: Oh, not a whole lot because we had a training schedule, a POI, and a what do you call it…I lost the word off the top of my head. We had a given set of things we had to keep. You could alter them a little bit in your method of presentation or training aids that you used, but you still had to follow the…I’m losing it here this afternoon.
SM: A training schedule?
WS: It was like a…the thing was all written out and you had to follow what was in that pretty much. You couldn't vary too awful much. I’ll think of the word sometime during the thing and I’ll remember it then.
SM: Okay, now the basic training that you oversaw, was this during a period of transition where the military was trying to alter…there’s this story that basic training used to be so hard, the DIs used to be so much more abusive, things like that. When you were in charge of basic training, were there ever incidents of physical contact between the trainers and the trainees and that kind of stuff or had that already changed?
WS: I think that had pretty much changed because basic training, at the time I went through, nobody ever laid their hands on me, although they certainly were capable
of it and it may have been my own demeanor that kept them from doing it. But I know there were cases of it that probably happened; I just never saw it. It never occurred in my unit. The basic training certainly did degenerate over the years. I think that it might have been a couple of years after I left basic training.

SM: And it was after your tour at Fort Jackson that you went to Korea?

WS: Yes.

SM: Now when did you learn you were going to Korea and what did you think?

WS: Oh, let me think about the time. Let’s see, it was right towards…it would have had to have been somewhere around July or August of 1960 that I learned I was going, and I think that I kind of took a little bit of a horrific look at it and said, “Oh my God, I didn’t want to go there and I’m going there!” I wanted to go to Germany.

SM: Why did you want to avoid Korea?

WS: I don’t know; I just heard a lot of bad stories about it and it was all in my head. People would tell me how bad the conditions were there and that stuff. I thought, “Well, maybe they know something I don’t know because I haven't been there,” and I think it was mostly in my head because once I got there things…my point of view certainly changed although I wouldn’t want to go back as an infantryman again.

SM: What was your first assignment in Korea?

WS: I ended up going to Korea to the 2nd battle group, 12th Cavalry, which was an Infantry Division, 1st Cav Division, and I went to…I was an infantry platoon leader initially and I can't remember how many months, it was a very short time that I was an infantry platoon leader and then I became the executive officer for the company.

SM: Were your operations and activities primarily in the DMZ?

WS: We were on the south side of the DMZ. We defended the line that was parallel to…I believe it was called Highway 1 X-ray which paralleled the Imjin river, but we were south of the DMZ per se between Liberty and Freedom Bridges.

SM: Were there ever any incidents, contact and fire between…

WS: Not between my unit and the north Koreans, but there were always cases of the north Koreans having penetrated through the DMZ and being in contact with the elements of the south Korean military. We could hear the fire fights in the hills every now and then.
SM: But they never quite reached your area?

WS: No, huh-uh.

SM: Wow, would the south Koreans that had been engaged by north Koreans, the injured, would they be brought by or through your area at all?

WS: No, we never had any brought into our compound to my knowledge; I never saw any or heard of any.

SM: So you never even heard of any injured people or casualties?

WS: No. The south Koreans pretty well kept things to themselves in that respect.

SM: How about in the newspapers and in the general information?

WS: We used to see all of the things about how the north Koreans would try to penetrate the DMZ. Now there were incidents up at Panmunjom, which involved fisticuffs between Americans and north Koreans. But, when we would send people up on quote “visits” as observers and visitors to the DMZ, we’d always pick the biggest football players we could find. It worked out well.

SM: In case a fight broke out?

WS: Yes, and they did occasionally.

SM: Did your unit coordinate operations, patrolling or anything like that, very often with south Korean units?

WS: No, not to my limited knowledge. As an infantry company platoon leader and XO, I would have had no knowledge of it; the battle group commander may have.

SM: I didn’t know if there were, like, joint operations or joint training exercises.

WS: No, we didn’t do any with the Koreans. Now, we had what we called KATUSAs assigned to the company. Have you ever heard of that term?

SM: Yes.

WS: Korean Augmentees to the U.S. Army?

SM: Yes. What were they like?

WS: I thought they were pretty tough little soldiers; very good.

SM: How many were assigned to your platoon and then to your company when you were XO?
WS: Oh, that’s a good question. I couldn't give you an accurate answer. There weren't too many; I think within the whole company, maybe 15 or 20.

SM: And they could speak English well?

WS: Some did. They usually had a senior one, usually a junior NCO, who spoke enough English that we could get through to them. Then, of course through simulation, they learned a little more English than we learned Korean.

SM: Now did being in Korea effect your training. By your training, I mean as an infantry platoon leader you were taught how to train your unit – in particular tactics and particular ways. Of course one of the reputations that the ROK soldiers have is they practice a lot of hand to hand combat, a lot of Tai Quan Do, stuff like that.

WS: Yes.

SM: Did that bleed over into your unit while you were in Korea?

WS: No; we didn’t do that kind of stuff. Ours was strictly stand off and kill them at as far away as you can.

SM: Okay, if you’re in hand to hand, then you’re in trouble?

WS: Yeah.

SM: Well, any other…any particular events that stand out from your time in Korea?

WS: The only one that I can recall, and this had to have been close to my rotation out of there because I was the XO of the company, but we were doing Army training test preparation and I was assigned as the referee for the sister company, and we were working up in an area called Dagmar that’s still just a bit south of the DMZ itself.

SM: Could you spell that for me?

WS: Dagmar?

SM: Uh-huh.


SM: Okay.

WS: It looked like a pair of breasts. That was the way the Imjin River was flowing, and one afternoon we had just assaulted a hill, and the recon platoon from the battle group was acting as aggressors out forward of us, and as soon as the company had
assaulted the objective and taken it they did their normal infantry thing; they were going
to reorganize, redistribute ammunition, check casualties, etcetera, and as I looked one of
the soldiers was bringing up some ammo and I looked at it and as he opened it, it was ball
ammunition; live round ammunition. They loaded it in the machine gun and I said,
“Whoa, whoa! Cease-fire! Stop right here,” I said, “There are friendly troops out there!”
and I questioned this young man, I said, “Where did you get that?” He said, “The 1st
sergeant gave it to me, sir!” “Well, do not load it in the machine gun,” and I talked to the
platoon leaders and everything and said, “Just hold off. Let’s not do anything else.” I
went back down to the CP and we were on a DEFCON. The north Koreans were moving
troops around and it looked like we were moving some armored divisions down into the
DMZ and of course everybody was very paranoid about the idea of a north Korean
invasion, and so what I finally ended up doing was I ended up staying assigned to that
company over night. The next morning we did a stand down on it; it was just the fact that
they were moving fresh units down to the DMZ and replacing old units, but everybody
saw the tanks moving and said, “Oh, here it comes,” and that kind of frightened me
because I had not yet experienced live combat. But, that was a memorable moment in
Korea.

SM: Were there any other experiences in Korea that were profound and effected
how you perceived life in the military and were they important for Vietnam?

WS: The only thing I could say is it was…the whole year actually was
important for Vietnam in that here I was in proximity to a real live enemy and I had to be
prepared at any moment to go on that alert, be prepared for combat, and do the best we
could. But, other than that, I did gain very, very valuable infantry experience in small
unit tactics and operating as part of a larger overall tactical unit, e.g. the battle group. So
it did, yeah, it prepared me for infantry work if you will as a young officer, and with all
my fears of going to Korea I found they were not based on any facts. I wanted to go to
Germany, that was the dream assignment, but Korea was the best training ground for a
young infantry officer that I could have been sent to.

SM: What about interaction with Korean civilians?

WS: In my day, it was pretty well prohibited. They didn’t want us to have
anything to do with the local people; don’t eat the local food, don’t drink any of the
water, it will kill you. We were pretty well limited to staying right with our own troops.

Of course, you know, as a young infantryman I had to sample the local flavor.

SM: Of course.

WS: And I did that on occasion, but other than that contact with civilians, I had none.

SM: And soldiers were restricted to most of their activities on base [?]

WS: The enlisted troops could go down to the local village and have a few beers and stuff like that at night, but other than that we were pretty well restricted to the compound.

SM: Was that last incident that you described, was that the only time when there was a heightened tension in terms of the potential of a north Korean attack? There were no other times like when the base was closed down that you received threat of…

WS: There was something of the nature, kind of reversed sense; we were on the way to take the Army training test up at Nightmare Range and the convoy was halted and the reason it was halted, apparently the south Koreans had taken it upon themselves that they were getting ready to go north from what it was explained to us, and so that put us somewhat on a heightened state of alert because if they went without us, we were still going to have to stay there and bail them out. But, that was nipped in the bud by the end of the evening.

SM: So where did you go when you came back from Korea?

WS: Okay, I came back from Korea and went to Fort Ord, California again to - I’m trying to remember - the 3rd Battalion, 41st Infantry, mechanized infantry unit, which was the experimental infantry unit for combat development and experimentation.

SM: What kind of mechanized…when you say mechanized, you mean the 113?

WS: Well, I actually ended up having two sets of carriers. When I first got there we were still using the old M-59 and I was, at the time, I was assigned as the battalion support platoon leader, a logistics slot, working for the S-4, and all at once the Berlin crisis came up and we had to send all of our 59s off to Wisconsin National Guard up at Fort Lewis, Washington; I think it was the 81st Division. In the meantime, we got back in a brand new set of 113s. So, I had the opportunity to work with both of those,
and at that point in time was when I had my first opportunity to work with the M-14 and M-60.

SM: What did you think of those new weapons systems, the 113, then the M-14, and then the M-60?

WS: Well, I fell in love with the 113. I thought that was a very, very superior infantry carrier as compared to the older ones. Now in Korea I worked with an M-75, I don’t know if you’d ever heard of that. Can we take just a second break? Let me find out what my granddaughter wants.

SM: Oh, absolutely. [pause here]

WS: The M-75 was an old…I think that was even World War II vintage carrier. We had the M-59s come in…no, not into Korea. They bypassed the M-59 in Korea and went to the 113 but I didn’t have any opportunity to work with it. By the time I got to work with it at Fort Ord, I found it to be superior to anything I’d seen before, so I was very much in favor of it. The M-14 I wasn’t so enthralled with. The M-14, actually, even though it had the fully automatic capability, you had to get it fixed by your armor and this and that in order to have fully automatic capability; plus by the time that you got the extra ammo and everything with it, it became heavier than the M-1, and it looked a lot like the M-1. Now the M-60, on the other hand, that was a great improvement over the machine guns that you had before, the old A-6s, .30 caliber. Hang on.

SM: Okay. [interruption here].

WS: The M-60 was a great weapon, and I don’t think I ever saw or heard of the M-16 until sometime after I left CDEC. But that was pretty much in a nutshell about the different weapons systems and the different equipment.

SM: Now in your work at Fort Ord, you’d been working in an experimental unit, and you basically were taking these pieces of equipment out and testing them and training with them to see what problems might arise and things like that?

WS: Exactly.

SM: Were there any things, any particular problems of note or issues of note that you recall?
WS: It came up. They were using wax on the end of the 7.62 rounds for the M-60 in fire distribution studies and it caused the weapons to jam. But, wax will cause a gas-operated weapon to jam, so they discontinued that and it was a fine weapon.

SM: Now in what context do you mean the distribution tests?

WS: Distribution of fire as opposed to the fire from an M-14…what they would do, they would set up silhouette targets at a known distance and then they would fire like a final protective line and they were trying to determine how many of the rounds from an M-3 squad of M-14s were distributed among the enemy as opposed to how many rounds from the M-60. So, to distinguish from between the M-60 and the M-14, they dipped a color of wax on the ends of the rounds of the M-60. I don't know that it was ever successful.

SM: And that would supposedly leave a particular colored mark on the target?

WS: Yes, right, and then the guys with all of the brains would figure out, “Okay, we need this many rounds for an M-60 and a basic load we need this many M-60s in a company,” and that kind of thing; they did the scientific statistics on it.

SM: Anything else?

WS: Well, we, you know, CDEC still has their whole operation located at what’s now Fort Hunter Liggett but we used to go down there for experiments, whatever the experiment was that we were going to run. We’d go down for three months at a time and run the experiment and then we’d come back and do our maintenance and prepare to go again. They had some very elaborate electronics up there for those days, and they could pinpoint locations of units, they could tell all kinds of things and they had this big, huge electronic data board up in one of their headquarters and I was really impressed by the quote “technology” of that day. I just wondered, “Could they use any of that in combat situation?” and the answer, obviously, became, “Yes, that and much more.” But, it didn’t hit me in those days as to how much quicker…they just amazingly had it that soon.

SM: It was basically like intelligence gathering information or components?

WS: Yes, intelligence gathering operations.

SM: And with the vehicles and the units, were they transmitting some kind of a radio signal that would give that information?
WS: Yeah, and that was supplemented by information gathered visually by
grunts and transmitted by radio back to headquarters.
SM: Could you describe one of these experiments as you called it? I mean, when
you say you would go down there for an experiment, would that be like a particular type
of training scenario or mission?
WS: Well, tactics, you know. They might try certain types of tactics. Again,
we were still under the R-O-A-D, Reorganization of the Army Division and so they
would try certain types of tactics, tailoring a unit for a specific mission. They would
assign them to a larger headquarters. They may assign them certain different types of
equipment for a particular mission. Being the support platoon leader, my main mission at
that point in time was getting the logistics out to them.
SM: Now in terms of different scenarios, did they ever apply the atomic
h battlefield scenario, where this is…
WS: Oh yeah. They were constantly blowing up the foo gas devices that
simulated an atomic cloud, and of course you always had to go through your drill of
finding out if anybody received a dose of radiation. You’d go through the battle area and
then everybody had to check their dosimeters and everything. There was no radiation
present, of course, but everything was simulated.
SM: What did you think of that particular kind of training?
WS: As a platoon leader?
SM: That and also as an infantryman, the atomic battlefield and the supposed
survivability of units in that environment?
WS: I think I was somewhat jaded because having grown up here in Las Vegas,
of course the nuclear test sight’s just up the road and I used to watch the devices go off.
I’d go up in the mountains and sit there and look down into Frenchman’s Flat and I was
awed by the power of the things but I don’t think I understood the dangers of radiation
until I became a nuclear weapons employment officer.
SM: When was that?
WS: When I finished the career course in ’64.
SM: Okay, so it was much later?
WS: Yeah, but the survivability, I trusted my leadership, I trusted the people that told me, “Yes, we can survive this; we just have to do this better and that better,” and as a naïve young officer, I don't know what else I would have thought. If I didn’t believe in my leadership, I shouldn’t have been there.

SM: Right. What about the chemical and biological warfare? Did they include those types of scenarios as well?

WS: Oh yeah, yeah. I can't recall, but I'm pretty sure that there were a couple of the experiments where we tested new protective clothing and protective masks. The ones we started off with in basic training were just, you know, they were vintage. They were World War II and very uncomfortable and difficult to work with, and I don't believe we really had too much protective clothing; I can't even recall having chemical or biological protective clothing other than that protective mask in Korea.

SM: Was there much talk while you were in Korea about the possibilities of chemical, biological, or nuclear war?

WS: Well, nuclear war was always a possibility. I have to do this from scratch memory here again; I believe we had nuclear capable artillery units in the republic of Korea in those days.

SM: These would have been 155?

WS: Yeah, primarily the 155 and eight incher. I don’t recall…I know for a fact that the original atomic cannon never made it too much into the inventory, certainly not into Korea because of the type of terrain.

SM: Did you and your fellow officers or you and other soldiers talk much about these types of things; the potential of atomic warfare or nuclear warfare, survivability, and issues like that?

WS: Only in jest.

SM: Only in jest?

WS: Yeah, “Nuke ‘em!” I don’t think any of us really considered that as a real probability; a remote possibility, yes.

SM: Okay, so your time at Fort Ord in the experimental company, that lasted for a year?

WS: Yeah, roughly.
SM: Roughly a year? Then…
WS: I was really rather bored to be honest with you. It was a bachelor’s paradise, but the duty was not my cup of tea, and I’m trying to get the time frame…somewhere in early 1962 we got a classified message asking for volunteers to participate in counter insurgency operations. We all guessed at Vietnam but we were not told. So I jumped, and said, “I’ll take it!” just to get out of Fort Ord and out of that particular assignment.
SM: Now up to this point, what did you know about counter insurgency? Had you been trained?
WS: No, not too much. I only knew about special forces, and that was their bag.
SM: I’m sorry, what time period did you say this was?
WS: Early 1962.
SM: Early ’62? So Kennedy’s just come into office…
WS: And developed his love affair with the special forces and decided that counter insurgency was going to be the wave of the future.
SM: Now what did you think of President Kennedy?
WS: Well, my evaluation of him was this; I thought it was great to have a young, vibrant, young man running the country for a change and he was a veteran, and this all has to blend in sort of. I admired him and respected him as a man. He had feet of clay just like all of us. His personal life may not have been any better than Bill Clinton’s, but in the long run I thought he was given bad advice by many of his military and civilian advisors; Bay of Pigs was one. The decisions he made to get us further involved in Vietnam probably were bad, too, based on bad advice, but I liked him as a man.
SM: Now the Bay of Pigs, that happened before you came back?
WS: Well, that happened…oh gosh, I can't tell you when the Bay of Pigs actually occurred.
SM: It was early ’61…yeah, early ’61.
WS: Might have been.
SM: Wait, it was right after he took office.
WS: Yeah, yeah he was given some really terrible advice to change the
operation from a guerilla or insurgent operation to a cross-beach operation.

SM: What did you hear about that when it happened and what did you and your
fellow officers and soldiers think about that fiasco?

WS: Well, the only thing we got was the sterilized version that came out in the
Stars and Stripes, and we thought, “Jeez, how terrible! God, Castro can't be that good,”
and then come to find out he really wasn’t; it was just an error in the way we did the thing
and the failure then was to follow up with the promise of air support.

SM: What about the Cuban Missile Crisis?

WS: Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October of ’62. We were herded into…I
had just gotten into country, and before we got our up country assignments we were
herded into the dining room of the seven Oceans Hotel dining room in Saigon and
Kennedy’s announcement was made there. And this is an interesting side story from one
of my contemporaries; his name was Andrew P. O’Mera III. His father was the
commanding general of the Army south in Panama and he was a West Point graduate and
he’s hollering, “Jesus, my old man told me not to volunteer for this side show!” referring
to Vietnam of course because we all thought we were going to go to war with the Soviet
Union over that Bay of Pigs, I mean, the Missile Crisis, and here we are stuck in
Vietnam. But, most of us assured him, “This isn't a side show, Andy.” That’s just an
interesting side story.

SM: That is! So in ’62 you still at least had the impression that what you were
doing in Vietnam was not a side show, was not short term, was not…

WS: I never thought it would be short term. I never had the opinion it was
going to be short term.

SM: Well what kind of training and guidance did you receive before leaving for
Vietnam in ’62?

WS: You’ve undoubtedly learned of the MATA course; the Military Assistance
and Training Advisory course conducted at Fort Bragg by special forces troops for the
people who were going to Vietnam to be advisors? I thought it was pretty good. It gave
us a lot of the tactics that were being used by the Viet Cong in those days – punji traps,
the booby traps, their infiltration methods, their tactics, weapons systems, how they
infiltrated into the villages and subordinated the infrastructure and how they would murder their political opponents, how they used the countryside as their friend, their knowledge of the terrain, their knowledge of the people, and what we could do to offset that.

SM: How about the counter insurgency aspect and the political aspect in particular?

WS: We were so politically naïve that they told us about the commissars and the political indoctrinations that they conducted in the villages and how we might use our knowledge to go in and maybe try to get the Vietnamese Army to offset that by going in and giving them their own indoctrinations and providing them with certain amounts of protection and trying to win their hearts and minds which was the common catch phrase in those days.

SM: As early as ’62 they were using that?

WS: Yes.

SM: Now up to that point, prior to receiving the message that they were looking for people to go on the covert assignment and whatnot, how much had you heard about Vietnam up to that point?

WS: Very, very little. We knew that there was a problem going on but it wasn’t really headline news at that time.

SM: And how much had you heard about President Diem, president of South Vietnam at the time?

WS: Until I went to the MATA course, I don’t even think I knew who President Diem was.

SM: But you had heard of Ho Chi Minh?

WS: Just vaguely; I knew a little bit about the history of World War II and the Viet Minh uprising against the French and that Ho Chi Minh was the leader of the communist forces at that time. I didn’t know much about him as an individual.
SM: Now at the MATA course, did they cover what was happening in Vietnam in terms of...well, how did they discuss the components of this conflict; who was fighting whom and why?

WS: In the ’62 time frame of course it was an insurgency being conducted by local guerillas against the government of South Vietnam which was quote the “legal installed government after partitioning in 1954”. Nothing was ever really said about how Diem came to power. There was supposed to have been an election and as I found out later the election was more phony than it was real. But the whole crux of the thing was that the guerillas were puppets of the North Vietnamese government and they were trying to overthrow the legally constituted government of the South Vietnamese.

SM: Now there was no sense that the guerillas in the south that were fighting this insurgency – because they’re indigenous, as you just said? These are southerners fighting against the southern government?

WS: That was the general consensus, and that’s what [?] was.

SM: Was there any discussion besides this puppet idea that they were just acting as puppets of North Vietnam? Was there any notion that there were actual reasons for that armed aggression and political discontent?

WS: No, it was part of the communist conspiracy to take over all of Asia.

SM: So MATA was the communist conspiracy?

WS: As I recall. I can't say that was the exact term that they used. But, Eisenhower’s theory of dominoes, that was mentioned several times and the North Vietnamese wanted to take back all of Vietnam and [?] to the communist philosophy.

SM: So there was no discussion of issues like the election of ’56?

WS: No, other than the fact that oh yes, he was really elected. They proved that to be rather false.

SM: How about issues like Diem being Catholic and the majority of southerners being Buddhist?

WS: That was also raised. The various ethnic groupings of Vietnam, the ethnic
and religious groupings of Vietnam were discussed, plus the three different regions of Vietnam; North Vietnam, central, and South Vietnam. Those were all discussed. One of the interesting things is – I think I mentioned in the questionnaire – that we also had some very, very basic Vietnamese language training there at Bragg along with the MATA course, but it wasn’t until I got to Monterrey, California that I was studying with the Vietnamese teacher. I found out that those three regions all have a very distinct way of pronouncing in that language. Northerners and southerners, I can understand, but nobody – even the Vietnamese I worked with sometimes had to get interpreters for that central region.

SM: Did they highlight those distinctions as being important?
WS: No.
SM: In terms of political distinction?
WS: Not so much, and this I have to sort of just bring this out of my own recollections here, most countries like Korea and Vietnam were divided by north and the south. The northern region is based on the terrain and the amount of water and everything that they had available for hydroelectricity became industrial regions and the southern regions almost always became agricultural; Vietnam followed that pattern very much so. The thing that I did see once I got there, if I may go ahead on this, most of the villagers that I came into contact with were pretty docile folks; they really didn’t care which government ran their country. Let them grow their food, raise their kids, and do the best they could. City people were a little bit different. They were more politically attuned to who ran the country. I don't know if that’s helpful enough.

SM: Oh, absolutely.
WS: That was the general impression I got from ’62 to ’63.
SM: But just out of curiosity, was that actually discussed in training at, like, say MATA…
WS: No, I don’t believe it was.
SM: …or was it just something that you just recall from being in country?
WS: No, that’s what I recall from being in country. It wasn’t done at MATA.
SM: Now, but based on that particular insight, and the other things that you came
to understand about Vietnam, if the government did start to alter or to affect the life of the
villagers out there on the countryside, do you think that would have been part of the
motivation to fight against the government?

WS: Well, I believe that the Viet Cong guerillas understood that villager much
more than we or even the city Vietnamese did, and they had to have almost complete
cooperation from those villagers to be able to move without detection to do the various
things they wanted to do and they gained that cooperation many times through force;
assassinations of village chiefs, village elders. Anybody who was a pro government type
of person would see his family murdered and this would be displayed to the rest of the
villagers to get their attention and win their hearts and minds. I ran across that a few
times in that ‘62–’63 time.

SM: Were there other examples of the use of terror to cower the villagers into
submission that you’re aware of?

WS: Well, yeah, let me give you one example. This was with the 1st Battalion
of the 6th regiment, and we had been out on an operation and this is when they called it
search and clear in those early days, not search and destroy. We started into this one
village and the executive officer, captain…no, Lieutenant Lon had been a former Viet
Minh fighting against the French; he had a super nose for what the Viet Cong would do
and he stopped us on the approach into this village and said, “I think there’s an ambush.”
“Okay.” We were preparing for any kind of eventuality. They sent scouts into the
village and they came back and they had this information: There were no young men in
the village, period – no men of fighting age – but there were women, children, and old
men. We went on into the village and sure enough that’s exactly what we found but the
villagers were extremely happy to see us and they even brought us in, they brought the
battalion command group and me in. They trembled when they saw me and through the
interpreter – and I understood what he was saying, basically – the village elder that was
doing the talking said, “We’ve been told by the Viet Cong that white men eat
Vietnamese, they barbecue us,” and I spoke to him in Viet, and I called him uncle, I said,
“Uncle, that’s not true. I am your friend,” and I extended my hand, shook his hand, and
he broke into a big smile. We had to sit down and have lunch with him and everything.

They begged us – the old man actually begged us – to leave some protective forces with them. They had told us that the Viet Cong had been there, they had threatened them, and when they knew that we were coming they had evacuated the area and gone back into the jungle. At the time, we couldn't detach anything and leave it because we knew we were in a hostile area. We weren't – on a foot march out of the village – we weren't 30 minutes out of the village and we heard gunfire. We knew what had happened; the Viet Cong had gone back in and probably killed the old man, but we were successful in getting the province chief to send what we refer to now as the CIDG, they sent a platoon in. I don't know how successful they were. We never went back to that same village area, but they would do something like that.

SM: Well when you first arrived in Vietnam, after you went through the MATA course, the language portion; did you go to DLI before or after your first tour?

WS: I went before my first tour.

SM: And you mention in the questionnaire that that was very helpful?

WS: Oh yes, extremely.

SM: And how long was that short course that you went through?

WS: six weeks.

SM: What particular information did you find most helpful for when you got to country?

WS: Just the fact that they teach us to speak the language with a basic proficiency in that short time frame.

SM: This was eight hours a day?

WS: Yeah, yeah, eight hour days, five days a week, all native speakers, and through the course of the thing we had little get-togethers and we'd go to Vietnamese restaurants and Viets were very, very concerned that we did understand their culture. So, we'd have nice little discussions about, “Do this,” and, “Don’t do that. That’s a terrible mistake to say this,” or, “Do that.”

SM: Anything that you recall?
WS: Oh gosh, I’ve been in so many of the Oriental cultures that they almost all seem to bleed over. One was you don’t put your feet on anybody or point your feet at someone. You don't pat somebody on the head.

SM: Like children in particular.

WS: Yes.

SM: What about pointing and things like that in general?

WS: I can't recall the thing about pointing in Vietnam. I know it’s a custom in Thailand you don't point at somebody. My wife’s always on my case about that. I don't remember that that was a taboo in Vietnam. One of the things that does bleed through in both of those cultures, though, is that a hand signal to come here is like you’re waving at somebody and instead of waving goodbye you’re bidding them to come to you.

SM: When you got into country, what were your first impressions? What month and year was this?

WS: Let me think, I got in country in October of ’62 and Saigon, of course, is always your first impression; miserably hot and humid, and it deservedly had the title of being the Paris of the Orient. I thought Saigon was a neat city to mess around in. The traffic was terrible and smelly, just like all large cities, but it was alive and it was vibrant, and there was always the fear that the guerillas had people walking around who were going to throw a hand grenade at you or something so we were always a little bit on edge, but not to the point that we didn’t start getting into the culture right away and saying, “Yeah, I’m going to go over and have…” There was a favorite restaurant across the street called Cheap Charlie’s and you could go get good Vietnamese food for very little money and I thought the food was great; I really enjoyed it. I thought the Vietnamese women dressed in what they called the Ao Dai, the long flowing gown, I thought those were just beautiful and their long, black hair cut down to their waist…my goodness, what a beautiful people! And everybody had a smile on it seemed. I know there were some people that frowned, but that’s because they probably, you know, they had a bad day just like some of us did. But overall I had the general impression they were friendly. Most of the people you meet in the cities are educated pretty well, at least through high school. Most spoke French. They were from a fairly well to do family or middle class family. It seemed almost a second language for them.
SM: Did many speak English?

WS: Yeah, quite a few did by that time. I know my battalion commander and the XO both spoke English. I think a few of the other young officers in the battalion spoke English.

SM: What kind of reception did you receive? Apparently kind of neutral or friendly from the civilians, but what about from the Vietnamese military that you interacted with at first?

WS: Oh, they accepted me right off. I spoke to them initially in Vietnamese and they were very glad to see that, and it got me off on the right foot with all of them.

SM: When you say you spoke to them in Vietnamese do you mean in greetings, conversationally even?

WS: A little bit of both. Just a second, I got another request here.

SM: Okay. [interruption here]

WS: I could speak a little bit in conversational – enough to get by – and anything I couldn't get across I'd say it in English and the battalion commander understood it. He himself was a northerner, had been a math teacher in a high school in Hanoi at partition and decided to come south with his family.

SM: Was he Catholic?

WS: No, Be was not Catholic and neither was Lon; they were both Buddhists.

SM: And they decided to come south in ’55?

WS: Yeah.

SM: Did you ever talk to them about their decision to come south, why?

WS: I can't remember the gist of the conversations, but Lon, the XO, I think was given no choice. He either went with the French and came south or they were going to throw him in jail because he had been captured as a Viet Minh. So, his choice was fairly easy; he didn’t want to be in a prison the rest of his life so he came south and became a loyal South Vietnamese officer. Now Captain Be, on the other hand, a well educated man, had seen through the communist veil and decided he wanted no part of it even though it meant that he had to become an Army officer rather than a math teacher in high school.
again. I think he saw the benefits of the economics of our way of life versus the
economics of the communist way of life.

SM: Now the…when you learned you were going to Vietnam and you let your
family know about it, you mention that your mom wasn’t really thrilled…

WS: No, not at all.

SM: …because you’re an only son and only child?

WS: Right.

SM: One thing you didn’t mention was what your father’s perspective was.

WS: Well, my mom and dad had separated when I was seven years old and I
had very little contact with him but I think he understood that a man’s got to do what a
man has to do, and so he didn’t say too much, just, “Be careful.” He also understood that
I was my own man and that I had to make my own decisions.

SM: Now your first six months in Vietnam, October of ’62 to April of ’63, you’re
the battalion MAAG-V advisor to the 1st Battalion, 6th ARVN regiment, 2nd ARVN
Division?

WS: Right.

SM: What was your primary responsibility in that regard?

WS: Okay, the way it was put to us that we were to go along and observe to
provide them with assistance in training and accompany them on their operations, note
the shortcomings, note how they could do better to establish the rapport with the battalion
staff and the soldiers, and we were also told – I think I mentioned this also – we were not
to engaging any hostile fire unless we were fired at first, and that kind of got old after the
first couple of times. And just an anecdote to that, I would have Corporal Bing, the bat
boy, go over to the edge of the compound, fire a round over my head, and I could say,
“I’ve been shot at.” They didn’t say who had to shoot at me. That way, if I had to react,
I could. But, that was basically it, and I did engage in a lot of training with the unit when
we were not out on operational missions.

SM: And what kind of advice would you provide with regard to training?

WS: Weapons…

SM: They were getting American weapons and American equipment?
WS: Yes, a lot of it in that respect and then occasionally I would see some things that I considered in my own mind – not from anything other than from my basic background training as an infantry soldier and an infantry officer – that sometimes I could see things in their tactics that needed a little improvement and I would offer these as suggestions and if they accepted them, fine, and I could show them then how to implement. But, I couldn't force changes, and I never attempted to force changes with their Army.

SM: Were there ever any incidents where in the application of American equipment and tactics you would receive some hesitance or reluctance on the part of your Vietnamese counterparts to accept the tactics because they thought they were not relevant to the battlefield that they were going to be fighting on?

WS: Oh sure, quite often that would happen and Captain Day was gracious enough not to challenge me, but he would just go ahead and do it his own way.

SM: Is there anything in particular that stands out?

WS: No, not anything particular but instead of him turning around and issuing a particular order or something, and I could understand some of it basically in the basic language. He would give an order that I knew was not exactly the way that I thought it should be, but I had to hold my tongue and as far as anything that stuck out real…nothing was really ever violently in opposition to what I had suggested or anything. He would do it in the typical oriental fashion and say, “Yes, you are right, we will do that,” and then he would do it his own way, and that was rather typical in all of Vietnam in those days. They would tell you what you wanted to hear and do what they thought had to be done.

SM: Now what about the interaction between the Vietnamese Army, the ARVN, and the Vietnamese civilian population? You mentioned the one example of going into that village and they were afraid of you because they heard that Americans eat Vietnamese, but what about the view of the civilian population towards ARVN?

WS: The way I saw it, they were very much like the bamboo in the wind; while ARVN was there, “Oh yes, you’re our friends. We know that.” This is in a village that’s let’s say contested; in the daytime ARVN was there, nighttime Viet Cong was there. “Yeah, you’re good guys and we know that and we appreciate your help.” But in areas that were already under Viet Cong control, the people looked at the ARVN just like they
would me. They looked at us with disdain. You could see the hatred in some of their
eyes.

SM: What was it predicated upon, do you think?

WS: I'm sure it was predicated upon the fact that ARVN had a bad reputation
for going into villages and taking all the pigs and chickens and everything when they
went through without paying for them, and that's robbing that poor farmer of the
opportunity to sell his rice at market, sell his pig at market, or feed his family with it. So,
they just looked at them as being no better-no worse than the Viet Cong. “You’re all the
same. We don’t like any of you,” but that was the impression I got in some of those
villages.

SM: Did you ever witness incidents of that happening?

WS: No. Neither one of the battalions that I worked with were bent on pillaging
and plundering. If they took pigs and chickens, I quite frequently saw the ARVN soldiers
or officers giving piasters to the person who owned that pig or that chicken. I never did
see any of my guys steal the stuff. It may have happened, I just never saw it. But they
were pretty good about it.

SM: Were these the kind of issues that you would discuss with your Vietnamese
counterpart, the commander?

WS: We discussed more of the civic action types of things that could be done,
but I think I also mentioned that the only civic action I ever saw going on was the
medical civic action.

SM: Yes, and that was medical assistance provided by American personnel or
Vietnamese personnel?

WS: Both American and Viets. Occasionally I would get a medical NCO come
out with the battalion. We would go into certain villages and provide them with the
medical civic action program.

SM: And this involved just providing basic medical assistance?

WS: Check up on the kids, and then obviously ill people, people that had
suffered some sort of a trauma, a wound. The medics, of course they were not the special
forces medics, these were just regular Army medics, and they would do their best to clean
up the wound and disinfect it and bandage it and give them medication to take for several
days after. There might have been - and I would have to say I can't recall specifics on
this – there might have been one or two cases where somebody who had some really bad
problems, injuries or illnesses, might have gotten Medevaced back to a base camp area
for further treatment; not many.

SM: And you mentioned medics in particular. No physicians? No doctors?
WS: I never had a doctor out with me. Again, keep in mind this was ’62 and
’63. We didn’t have that many doctors over there at that point.

SM: Now to your knowledge, how many Americans were in country with you at
that point?
WS: I was discussing this with somebody the other day and I think by the time I
got there there were no more than 1200 people in the advisory capacity. There might
have been more in the embassy and other agencies that I wasn’t aware of. We were a
very elite group of people in those days and special forces was just beginning to come
into country on their rotations and I believe 5th group had not even established as a
headquarters at that early point in my career. They were there by the time I left.

SM: So by the time you left Vietnam in ’63, they were sending in teams, working
with indigenous people, setting up special forces elements?
WS: Yeah, there was one case – I’ll give you this one as a quick descriptive
thing – when I was with the 3rd of the 46th we had an outpost way out in the west part of
Quang Nai province and on our compound was a special forces A-team out of Okinawa,
they were TDY, and they lived on my compound but I lived in their hooch because it was
better living conditions, and better food, too. But unfortunately, and this is a long story I
won't go into, but I’d done a reconnaissance in force way out to the west of there and
when they decided to air lift my battalion down to Highway 13 I briefed the team
commander about the area and told him, “If you go, go in force. Don’t go just as a small
patrol or anything.” When I got off the airplane in Saigon and picked up an Army…not
the Army Times, but a Stars and Stripes, there’d been an advisor killed in Quang Nai
Province and it was the same captain had gone into the same area and was ambushed.
But the A-Teams were coming in…oh gosh, early, I guess, in ’63 they started bringing
them in. Here’s an interesting side story; there was a special forces captain by the name
of Floyd Thompson who was shot down in an L-19 and captured and became the longest
held US prisoner ever. He was my roommate in OCS.

SM: Now was he the first captured?
WS: No, he wasn’t the first but he was held longer than anyone. He was
captured there in ’63 and was not released until the ’75 time frame. The Air Force claims
they had one longer, but it wasn’t true. That’s an argument between the Army and the
Air Force.

SM: Have you seen him or talked to him since then?
WS: I talked to him a couple of times. I just had my OCS class reunion down in
Orlando. He was supposed to come, but he’d been hospitalized up in Walter Reed for
some stomach problem.

SM: That’s too bad.
WS: But I’ve talked to him at least twice since his release.
SM: During your first year, did you have much interaction with American
civilian people working in Vietnam?
WS: I didn’t.
SM: Did you know of any or see any?
WS: I saw a few but I had little or no contact with any of the civilian people.
Probably the only ones would have been in the PX when I had the rare opportunity to get
to the PX.
SM: What about American civilians doing field work; trail watching, provisional
reconnaissance units? Or actually, that was more later.
WS: Yeah, that was later and I didn’t have any contact with any of those kind of
people at all.
SM: The CIA was active in the early ‘60s as well.
WS: Yeah, particularly in the White Star project in Laos.
SM: And that was trail watching, or no? What was that?
WS: Well, there was a little more involved in the White Star project. I wasn’t
involved with SF at that time. I know people now that were involved heavily with that
program. But, I don't know the ins and outs of it. I think they were trying to do trail
watches and train Laotian Army and equip them all very covertly.

SM: Which eventually was what special forces were doing with the
Montagnards?

WS: Yes.

SM: In your first six months with the…let’s see, the second one you were with
the 3rd Battalion, 46th ARVN. When you were with the 6th ARVN, what was that first
patrol, first contact with the enemy like?

WS: Oh Jesus. You know, they claim there are no atheists in the foxhole and its
absolutely true. Even though I was not allowed to accompany the assault elements down
into the strategic hamlet that had been taken over by the Viet Cong, I was on the hillside
looking down into it and the gunfire that ensued – and of course we were taking rounds
across our bow too up on the hill – and at that time for some strange reason I had two or
three other Americans with me, a captain, a lieutenant…I think a captain and two 1st
lieutenants were with me. two of them were artillery types, and it just scared the hell out
of us because we thought we were all going to be overrun. We weren't aware of the
actual strength of the Viet Cong in the village and we were trying to figure out ways we
were going to escape and evade, but it was really frightening never having had a shot
fired across my head in anger before. We just knew we were going to die. I don’t know
if I…I think at that point in time we’d all been imbued with the idea at the MATA course
that the Viet Cong would torture us and do all kinds of terrible things, and some of us – I
think I mentioned – I carried my own hand guns into country and I believe I had the
thought that before I would accept capture, I would have committed suicide. That was an
early thought. But, that first contact, I wasn’t sure that we were going to come out of it
alive. Eventually ARVN prevailed and had several casualties; some KIAs and a lot of
wounded, but we were able to fight our way through that and then the next couple of days
we made our egress out of the area back to our base camp. [Uh-oh, my phone’s giving
me a beep. Let me go get on the other one. I’ve got two roam phones and I’ve always
got one charged up. Can you hear me on this one?] That thought of committing suicide,
that vanished after I think probably after that first mission. I realized that living was still
more important than being a prisoner.
SM: Was that something you talked about with other Americans?

WS: Yeah, quite a few of us had mentioned those possibilities.

SM: And was the consensus suicide was better, or that life was better?

WS: I think it depended on the age of the individual. It seemed like most of the young guys said, “No, I think I’ll blow my brains out before I’ll ever be captured,” and all the old guys said, “Oh, I don’t know. I think I’ll wait and see.”

SM: Was anybody captured that you knew, besides the…

WS: Thompson?

SM: Besides Thompson?

WS: In those days almost never did you recover an enemy body. There was one notable exception which I’ll tell you about, and most of our sweeps we would find maybe one or two bodies and lots of blood spots; almost never recovered a weapon. Occasionally we’d recover something like an old MAS 36, and old French semi automatic weapon, World War II vintage, maybe even World War I, I don’t know.

SM: Was there much of an emphasis on that type of activity? One of the things that the United States military did when they finally did pick up in ’65 and start putting a lot of American forces on the ground is Westmoreland emphasized the attrition strategy…

WS: Yeah, body counts?

SM: Body counts.

WS: We didn’t have that. Nobody…well, they always asked, “How many guys did you kill?” but it was never put in the term body count. I hadn't heard that until I got back. Well, I read it in the newspapers after ’65 but it wasn’t a term that we used. It was, “How many enemy casualties?”

SM: Well then how was ARVN measuring its victory or its success in terms of what was their goal, and how did they know they were achieving it while you were an advisor?

WS: Well of course that was always a measure, but the real measure was that we took the objective. We were able to go into the village and we took it; almost
conventional in that, “Hey, we got this piece of terrain. We accomplished that mission.
That was what was assigned to us to do, and we did it.”
SM: Would you hold it, though? Or did ARVN hold it?
WS: No, we almost never held it for very long. We would go back to the
outpost.
SM: And how long would it take for another Viet Cong unit to come in?
WS: Probably 20 minutes; no more than a day?
SM: Did this get discussed at all in terms of okay, you’re going in, you’re
temporarily accomplishing your limited objective, but then you’re just giving it up?
WS: No, not with us at the field advisory level.
SM: And of course that became a point of contention with the American effort
like Hamburger Hill.
WS: I’ve got some insight on that, too, sort of from that time frame. This jumps
up now to the 3rd of the 46th. When we made that air move from Quang Nai to Highway
13, we had made that one contact which I reported to Captain Broat, and we figured that
based on the weapons types that we were encountering, there were some crew serve
weapons, mostly machine gun. We figured we were up against at least a company and
that’s what I reported in my after action report. When I got to Saigon I was reading their
opsum and intsum boards – operations summary and intel summary boards – and they
had reduced that reported contact to a platoon or less which may have tainted some of the
decision processes at higher levels and back in Washington D.C., I don't know. I assume
it did. Well, its still on a lower level and then all at once it jumped up to a tremendously
high level. Somewhere in between they had changed how they were reporting. Another
incident that I recall very well, and this is probably of some importance in this term of
body count; in November of ’63 there was a battalion of the 6th ARVN, 2nd ARVN
Division. I can't remember if it was the 2nd or 3rd…I believe it was 2nd Battalion. It was
being advised by a young West Point captain by the name Graham Vernon, and Graham
had received intel through both ARVN and US channels that one of their company
outposts was going to be attacked that evening and so Graham walked in with a very,
very basic detachment of his Vietnamese counterparts. I don’t even think he even took
an American NCO in with him. As I recall, he didn’t. He got in there and one of the
people he’d taken in was an ARVN warrant officer aspirant, almost like an officer
candidate, who was an artillery fire observer, forward observer. He had him register the
artillery fires around the perimeter of this company sized outpost which was manned by I
think a platoon of ARVN and maybe a couple of platoons of CIDG. When the assault
came that night they did all they could with their small arms, called in their final
protective fires from the artillery, and come daylight, as I recall, there was something like
420 bodies stacked around that perimeter. They estimated it was a two-battalion attack,
and the man commanding the whole thing surrendered to the ARVN. I think it was one
of the highest that had ever surrendered to ARVN at that point in time. That was the first
high body count, for lack of a better term in those days, that was the first high body count
and first really large success I think ARVN had had against the Viet Cong. But, it was
also indicative that they were upping the ante at this point. They’re not doing company
sized attacks anymore. Here’s a two battalion level attack, and they were from numbered
guerilla units. I can't tell you what the numbers were now, I don’t remember the battalion
and regiments that they were from.

SM: Now what kind of weapons did they have?
WS: They were all small arms type of things. They were mixed; mas 36, mat
49, some M-1s and carbines.
SM: The Viet Cong had carbines, too?
WS: Oh yeah. We came across – I mentioned this in one paragraph – we had
captured one weapon that was an M-1 carbine. You remember the old books Argosy and
True and all those men’s magazines? They used to sell World War II types of weapons
that had been plugged. They would pour a steel plug in the first inch, inch and a half of
the barrel so it was non useable. But the Viet Cong would drill that out. They were
buying them, you know, somebody was buying them for them and sending them over
there. They’d drill them out and they became an operational weapon again. We captured
one of those I know; it was an M-1 carbine.
SM: And what about communist weapons, AK-47s?
WS: There were no AKs that I ever saw in the 1962-’63 period. I don’t recall
having seen anything, not even a burp gun from Korean War. I heard they were used, but
I never saw one. Everything was a captured type weapon.
SM: Now what did that make you think, or did it bring up any ideas or concerns concerning the idea that these are supported, controlled guerillas that are fighting in the south but are basically the agents of the north?

WS: Well, I think we almost understood that they were being supported externally. It never raised a question because I think it was just axiomatic that that was happening, that it was no longer...to us it didn’t seem like it was just a guerilla operation.

SM: Right, but they didn’t have any communist weapons?

WS: Uh-uh.

SM: They didn’t have any weapons from North Vietnam?

WS: Plausible denial. “No, we’re not being supported by the north. You see, we don’t have communist weapons.” Even in the grenades, the north Viets used a potato masher type grenade. I didn’t see one of those in the ’62-’63 time. I saw some mines that were probably Chinese made mines, land mines, you know, anti personnel land mines. They did a lot of improvising. They would take, say, a 4.2 inch mortar round or a 155 round that hadn't gone off, they would take the explosive out of it, and they would make a mine out of it. Those I saw several of. I saw the results of them, too, and they used a lot of command-detonated mines.

SM: When you say, and you used the expression, plausible deniability are you using that as an expression that was used at the time or do you think that that’s a legitimate way of looking at it?

WS: Of course that was a phrase that we used in SOG and it’s a phrase that’s used through insurgent operations or covert operations all around the world, and while I don’t think I’d heard that term in those days, I understood that they’re using all these weapons, how could anybody see that they’re getting supported from the north? So it became something that I deduced rather than had heard it called that.

SM: I’m just curious if there was even a need or desire for North Vietnam to deny assisting the south?

WS: I think politically, in the world political arena, in those days there certainly was. It was before we escalated, and so they could always say, “Oh no, these are the people’s liberation forces. These are the people themselves. They’ve got their own
sources of weapons; we’re not giving them anything.” And of course without the AK-47s
or the burp guns, no communist block weapons, how could we say, “Well, you’re getting
supported by your communist neighbors to the north,” because you could get these
weapons; they had plenty that were captured from the French, the north Viets did, so they
could give those to them without any fear of saying, “No, the villagers got those on their
own.” God knows the French left plenty of weapons laying around over there. Any
insurgent force worth its weight could go out into the weapons arena of the world and
buy stuff off the market and they could buy whatever they want. So, they were buying
through True magazine and Argosy magazine. They could get these weapons that were
supposedly disabled, recondition them, and its perfectly plausible denial. I don’t know if
that’s making any sense.

SM: It does. Now, with the patrolling you mentioned on the questionnaire, I
asked the kind of activities that the units engaged in. In ‘62-’63, did ARVN engage in
both day and night patrolling?

WS: Mostly day, but occasionally I could talk them into a night patrol or a night
ambush. Seldom were they ever successful in making any contact. I would even go out
on the ambushes with them and not much ever came through, maybe a pig or a chicken.

SM: So would you say that the rule that seemed to apply when American forces
were in Vietnam was that the American forces ruled the day and the Viet Cong and
PAVN ruled the night? Did that apply at the same time you were there in ‘62-’63?

WS: In ‘62-’63 that was the absolute rule that the Viet Cong, not PAVN, ruled
at night and we pretty much ruled the day because we had superior weapons; we had
artillery, we had some air support, and of course they didn’t have it.

SM: Now would you get any kind of additional classes or briefings or anything
on these types of issues as you gained experience and as other advisors…as MAAG
gained more understanding and knowledge of the situation in Vietnam? Would there be
any kind of a meeting about this type of stuff?

WS: No, we almost never had any kind of a commander’s call where
information was put out to the field advisors. Occasionally if there was something red
hot came up like an intel report, that would come across the radio.
SM: But that was basically intelligence that you would act upon advising the ARVN commander and you would engage in some kind of an operation?

WS: Yes.

SM: So its enemy movement?

WS: Most of the info that we got was through Vietnamese channels. They shared that with me.

SM: So they were sharing it?

WS: Yes. Occasionally the American advisors would put out something that they considered to be hot. They’d put it out across their channels also which were very limited. I didn’t have CW capability of my own, and all I could do was go on voice radio. But, I did have a single side band portable radio that I carried. It was jeep mounted, and if I wasn’t in base camp I didn’t get anything.

SM: This hold true with the 46th ARVN, the 3rd Battalion of the 46th regiment?

WS: Probably even worse because the whole 46th regiment was a separate regiment not under any divisional control and the first part of my tour with them they were even further split up away from the regimental control to three battalions separated by huge distances out along a river in the western part of Quang Nai province. I don’t know that they even had any…well, they probably did have contact with the regimental headquarters, which was back at Quang Nai, but we never really got a whole lot of poop from them, or at least it was not shared with me if it was. The only thing would be in operational order.

SM: How was morale in the first unit, in the 6th ARVN regiment?

WS: I’d say it was better than average. Captain Be, the commander, did believe in taking good care of his troops; not that it wasn’t hardship for all of them, but he took as good a care of them as he possibly could. Captain Thieu, on the other hand, in the 3rd of the 46th, he was a completely different personality. I don’t recall what his education was but apparently he had at least a high school education and he spoke pidgin English, but we got along. I could speak more Viet than he could speak English and I did have an interpreter assigned to me at that point. But, his care and concern for his men was far less than that of Captain Be for his men. It was, “Well, you’re soldiers. You can handle it.”
SM: So the morale was not as high in the 3rd of the 46th?

WS: I didn’t think it was, and they did take a tremendous loss. I’m trying to remember the name of the damn village. This was on Highway 13, its on a completely different one than down in Bien Hoa province called Bau Bang, and it was a little old French outpost looking over a sunrise strategic hamlet in a relatively flat area and every morning the aspirant commander of that company would send his troops on a patrol down through the hamlet, same time, same formation, everything, and they lost 90% of that company one morning; close range ambush, about two or three meters inside the hamlet.

SM: Inside the strategic hamlet?

WS: Yep.

SM: What did you think of those strategic hamlets, and the program?

WS: The concept was alright, but the execution was not worth a damn.

SM: In terms of execution, what was the problem from your perspective?

WS: They’d put up this little hamlet and they’d put a fence around it for protection from the Viet Cong but they wouldn’t really give them a hell of a lot in the way of defending themselves in case of an infiltration or an assault by a Viet Cong unit. They were pretty much stuck out there and told, “Look, we’re going to put this barbed wire or this bamboo fence around you and its going to protect you,” and they’d leave them with a radio. As long as it worked that was fine. They could notify a higher headquarters that there was an attack underway and by the time the relief forces got there the attack was over and the Viet Cong had already gotten out of the village or the hamlet. The idea was that they would put the CIDG forces in and have their own popular forces defend the village. Well, again, as I say, going back early on, the intimidation that the Viet Cong provided was enough to cause these people to just say, “Yeah, I’ll be part of you guys.” They probably would fade off into the night with the Viet Cong. The concept was a good one, but the execution just never was there. They could have at least put a regular ARVN platoon in there for six months, a year, something like that to build training and confidence among people but I don’t think they ever did it; at least the two occasions that I’m thinking of that certainly was not evident.

SM: Could you hold on a second sir?

WS: Sure, go right ahead.
SM: Alright, so let’s see, what were some of the other important differences between 1st of the 6th ARVN regiment and 3rd of the 46th?

WS: Well, I think the major difference is that the 1st of the 6th was in the hierarchy of the ARVN command from Division down through regiment to battalion. The 3rd of the 46th was completely devoid of that. We found ourselves working on Highway 13 with guidance from the province chief and of course he’s more of a politician than he is a military type. So, they were pretty much left to their own devices, and this had a great effect on what they did and didn’t do. Like with the 1st of the 6th, wives and children might accompany them to Tam Ky, which was the regimental headquarters area, but not forward of that. 3rd of the 46th, we had wives and kids right up on Highway 13 with us. So, they were a little more reluctant to get into hostilities because of that than was the 1st of the 6th.

SM: Now why was that? Why was 3rd of the 46th, why were their soldiers allowed to bring their wives and children that close to them into the hostile areas?

WS: Again, there was no hierarchical military chain of command that they had to answer to per se.

SM: So this was the commander’s choice?

WS: More than any single factor.

SM: And was this, from his perspective, something that would help boost morale?

WS: Yeah, supposed to.

SM: So as an advisor, could you talk with him or discuss with him the limitations that that created?

WS: He didn’t seem interested in talking about it. He himself was a southerner. I think he was from the central provinces originally. He was not a northerner like Be was, and so the customs were somewhat different also and I think Be understood that wives and children were not to be in a combat zone where Thieu kind of assumed, “Well, it will help morale,” and he didn’t really want to ever want to discuss it.
SM: Were there ever any incidents where wives and children were injured because of their location and their proximity to the combat?

WS: No.

SM: How did that happen?

WS: You mean how did they not get injured?

SM: Yeah.

WS: For example, the headquarters and headquarters company of the regiment was located in a French plantation, and we conducted operations out and away from that. Now the wives and children did not accompany on the tactical moves, but they were in the base camp location. We were only there for a short time because after that ambush in the strategic hamlet, and this was just south of the Parrot’s Beak of all things, after that happened I got the plea off through advisory channels to get that battalion retrained and they sent us...oh God, I can't even remember the name of the training center anymore. I’ll tell you what, age does terrible things to one’s memory. They sent us down to a training center that was just north of Vung Tau and we did, we went through some very extensive retraining and tactics and techniques, not so much in weaponry because weaponry never changed, but I think we stayed there something like two to three months and then they redeployed us back to Bien Hoa air base and of course the families were all there at the training center and back at the air base.

SM: You read my mind. I was just about to ask you that.

WS: Yeah, they always took their families along. They were like camp followers, of course. Once we got onto Bien Hoa air base the majority of our operations were all patrols outside of the base perimeter, and we did come across some Viet Cong, usually one, two, three, four guys, maybe a squad. I don’t recall if we ever hit anything platoon size or larger in that area.

SM: Now would you talk about these types of issues with other advisors, other American advisors in country? Did you get an opportunity to?

WS: Not really because like I say, I was out in the...now when I was at Bien Hoa, I was staying either out with the battalion and once in a while I’d go back in for dinner with the advisors of the 5th ARVN Division, and I don’t recall that there were ever
many field advisors that came in. I’ve discussed some of it with some of the staff types, the captains. Seldom did I ever get to talk to any of the field grade advisors. But, I would talk with the captains and we’d compare notes, “Yeah, that’s interesting, we had something similar happen to that,” but I don’t know that that information was ever disseminated up their chain, either. My chain was really non-existent. For that entire 12 months I almost did not get an officer efficiency report. I had to demand one from the MAAG personnel office before I checked out of country and they went back to the 6th regiment and got the advisor up there to write me an efficiency report for those 12 months.

SM: And how much interaction had you had with them?

WS: I knew the advisors up at the 6th regiment more than I did the people that I was working with down in the Highway 13 Bien Hoa area.

SM: Are you talking about the Vietnamese commander?

WS: No, no, the Americans.

SM: Okay, okay.

WS: As I recall, the guy who wrote my whole ER was a major by the name of Joe Deason. I remember him and I remember a couple of the other advisors up there, but I’m trying to recall now…there was an American captain who supposedly was my rater and I almost never saw the guy so he couldn’t honestly rate me. At least Deason and I would sit down and I would go over things with him and talk with him and so he knew more about me than this other guy.

SM: Now what about…was there any kind of debriefing that you went through to confer information, lessons learned, things like that, so that incoming advisors would benefit from your experience?

WS: Not when I left country. The only thing of that nature occurred back at Fort Benning in early ’64.

SM: And this was during…

WS: The way this occurred was that they convened an infantry board conference at Fort Benning and they called in a bunch of the Division and senior advisors from that time frame, the ‘62-’63 time frame, and they picked our brains pretty thoroughly. They asked us about all of these contacts and the weaponry and tactics and
everything else, civic action. They were pretty thorough because they had to go back into
that infantry conference and come up with a position themselves. I mentioned Graham
Vernon a while ago? Graham went on to become a foreign area specialist officer for the
Soviet Union. He was a Russian linguist. But anyway, to shorten the story, after I’d
been to Russia I had to go to another after the fact training type thing. I had to go to a
course on how to deal with our participation in the joint verification testing program in
Russia and one of the first instructors from the DIA to get up on the stage was Graham
Vernon, and here’s where it links back in; he went to lunch and he said, “Do you
remember them calling us in at that infantry conference, Colonel Ridell wanted to
interview you and me?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “What did you tell him about whether
we should deploy more American troops in, more ground troops?” and I said, “I told him
I thought not. I thought that we ought to keep it at advisory level.” He said, “That’s
exactly what I told him,” he said, “Everybody I talked to told him the same thing! How
in the hell did we get this thing going in ’64 like it did?” But we almost all at that time
thought we could keep it at advisory level. There would have been no escalation and the
South Vietnamese were perfectly capable of fighting a war if you gave them the right
training and weaponry. But, that wasn’t to be.

SM: That’s really interesting. Now the conference that you’re talking about, was
this a classified thing?

WS: No, I don’t believe it was. I think that every so often they called a
conference to discuss where we are, what are we going to do, how are we going to get
there, that kind of thing and then sort of lay out a five or ten year plan.

SM: I see. In this one in particular, did this conference just focus on the
American effort in Vietnam, or was it much else?

WS: Well, I couldn't really say because I wasn’t a real participant in it. These
were all the senior officers that participated in the thing and all I knew about was the
questions that they wanted us to answer. I assume it was based mostly on, “How are we
going to handle this thing in Vietnam?”

SM: In this conference at Fort Benning, this was an actual meeting there amongst
the senior military personnel?
WS: Yeah, the senior infantry officers. It was my understanding that the emphasis was on those who had been the senior advisors; Division level, regimental level, and above.

SM: And do you know what happened to the interviews that you did? Were these interviews recorded in some way, or were they just…

WS: Well, other than the handwritten notes that the colonel made, I don’t know that they were.

SM: What was the colonel’s name again?

WS: I believe it was Reidel, R-E-I-D-E-L.

SM: R-E-I-D-E-L?

WS: I believe that was his last name.

SM: Interesting.

WS: You got to keep in mind here…

SM: Of course, of course.

WS: …that’s been, what, 38 years?

SM: Right. Do you know if Graham Vernon is still alive?

WS: Pardon me?

SM: Do you know if Graham Vernon is still alive?

WS: Do I have contact with him now?

SM: Yes.

WS: No, I haven't seen him since that school.

SM: This is back in…

WS: ’88.

SM: ’88?

WS: Yeah. I don’t know that he’s still with the Defense Intelligence Agency. Graham’s a couple of years older than I am, so my assumption is he’s probably retired.

SM: Do you think he’d mind us, if we could find contact information for him, do you think he’d mind talking to us?

WS: Oh, I don’t think he would mind at all. Graham is one of the nicer people I ever met. He, by the way, won the first medal for valor that was ever presented for our
participation in Vietnam. He got a bronze star with V for that mission I told you about earlier. He was a very, very fine gentleman, and I don’t think he would mind.

SM: Okay.

WS: He’s probably in the DC area still. Graham D. Vernon, as I recall.

SM: Like Mt. Vernon, V-E-R-N-O-N?

WS: Yeah, and his middle initial is Delta.

SM: Delta? Okay, yeah, let me see if I can't contact him somehow. Now speaking of valor, bravery, one of the questions you left blank was I asked you to describe the bravest action, either friendly or enemy, that you witnessed while serving in Southeast Asia or Vietnam?

WS: To be honest with you, I could not rate one level of brave action over another, and they all would have had to have been with the SOG mission.

SM: Well, what was the bravest action you witnessed or one of the braver actions you witnessed with the 1st ARVN Division, with the 1st of the 6th? Do you have anything that sticks out?

WS: No. I’m just trying to think of something that would stick out. There was nothing that even...see, in those days I don’t believe I even considered it an act of bravery per se because it was our job and these young ARVN soldiers, they did all kinds of things, hauling their buddies back and staying out with them and protecting them until the fire fight was over, but I couldn't single out anything in particular that I would call more outstanding than the next guy did.

SM: How about with the second group, with the 3rd of the 46th?

WS: I didn’t see any acts of real bravery there.

SM: Okay. How much action did the 3rd of the 46th see while you were with them, besides almost getting a whole company wiped out in that strategic hamlet?

WS: Do you remember the tunnel systems?

SM: Yes.

WS: On one of our training reconnaissn in a battalion force we got into one of these things in its very, very early stages and we got into some helacious running firefights. I think this was a two or three day thing. Then, occasionally out of Bien Hoa we’d run into two or three guys, the snipers, but they were...those were not every day
occurrences, either. So, I would say that the combat activities of the 3rd of the 46th were far less than those of the 1st of the 6th.

SM: By choice?
WS: Mostly.

SM: And then in part because family was in tow?
WS: No, not so much because of that, just the difference in the personality of the commanders.

SM: And how about the influence of the province chief?
WS: I would have to say that there was an awful lot to be said about that. When we were at Bien Hoa Air Force Base, I was getting short on getting ready to leave so I don’t recall the exact command structure. I think he was taking direction from the 5th ARVN Division through their chain of command. So the patrols were conducted with regularity. They’d go out everyday and patrol the perimeter, and they would set up their night defensive positions properly every night but that’s because he was under the gun of this military commander at 5th ARVN. When we were under a province chief’s control, it was strictly, “Hey, don’t rock the boat.”

SM: What other major political obstacles did you witness during your first year in Vietnam as an advisor?
WS: Oh gosh, I’m trying to think. I really don’t have a good answer for that, Steve. I didn’t like the politics as I saw them, either from the Vietnamese or the American side. American politics was very heavy handed in that war, and particularly in those days.

SM: In what particular ways was American political influence heavy handed while you were in country?
WS: If the ARVN doesn’t want to do this, then we’re going to withhold a certain amount of funding and we’ll withhold a certain amount of equipment, and they almost forced these Vietnamese politicians, particularly Ngo Dinh Diem who was putty in the hands of the ambassador at the time…he would go with to what ever the ambassador wanted to be done. I think that’s pretty well documented, though, that Diem was just a real weak individual and any time the ambassador would come to him and say, “We want you to do this,” he would pretty much do to it. I always felt that – I guess this
is the naivety in being young – that military and politicians should stay away from each
other and let the military fight the war. Well, that’s the way it should be ideally but we
know that that never happens, and I just thought it should, and so I stayed away from the
political venues as much as I possibly could.

SM: Anything else that stands out from your first year in Vietnam?
WS: Oh gosh, other than the fact that I gained a lot of very, very good experience as an
infantry officer in jungle types of environments and somewhat in the guerilla-counter
guerilla environment, those would have been the highlights of my career is the
experiences that I had and what I learned from those experiences. I also learned that all
Vietnamese are not the same. Just like with Americans you had really good guys and you
had some that were just mediocre and then you had some that you wouldn’t walk across
the street to see. Fortunately I worked with some of the very best and Captain Be and
Lieutenant Lan and that 1st Battalion of the 6th regiment. Cpt. Thieu was not a bad man,
he just didn’t prosecute the war the way a war should have been prosecuted. Again, there
were cultural differences based on where the two were from. So, I learned a lot about the
culture of Vietnam then, and [?] been a highlight, too.
SM: Are there any particular lessons with regard to counterinsurgency or counter
guerilla warfare that stand out in terms of how should one prosecute that type of war?
WS: Well, I think based on my observations in those days that we should have
tried to have severed our long, long logistical lines and tried to be more like the guerilla
and live off of the land somewhat more rather than relying on constant resupply of food
stuffs and ammunition and that type of thing; to live off the land and beat the enemy at
his own game, deny him those areas that he can control at night by being there ourselves.
I think that’s pretty much a concept that we would try to do. As special forces, we’d try
to organize our insurgent forces to do that and I could see in those days – and I think I
even learned that from reading some French history, what was it… Street Without Joy.
Have you ever read that book?
SM: Yes, sir. Bernard Fall?
WS: Bernard Fall, yeah, and I believe the French even tried that with some of
their commando units, and they were rather successful, too. I thought that was the way
we should have been conducting some of our advisory missions in Vietnam in those early
days, to get the Vietnamese to stop relying on long, logistical lines. They had the people
that could do it, too; we just never tapped it as much as we should have.

SM: How about treatment of the civilian population?
WS: By the soldiers?
SM: By the soldiers, by the government of Vietnam, by Americans, eventually?
WS: Well, in those early days of course you know my experiences with the
civilians is that I always tried to go in and be as nice to them as I possibly could, try to
win their trust in me as somebody that was there to more help them than to hurt them, and
the Vietnamese soldiers with the 1st Battalion, as I say, Be was more attuned to this type
of thing. He was genuinely concerned about the people, and all of his soldiers seemed to;
well, of course they had to, he was the boss and that was the way you’re going to do it,
and most of his soldiers followed that pretty well. They’d take time to play with the kids
when they came around and this and that and his own medics occasionally did some on
the spot civic action types of things. Thieu, on the other hand, he was not quite that
attuned to that, and I really don’t know why unless it was the cultural difference or
maybe just the difference in the way he perceived his mission.

SM: How about in terms of lessons that you took away from that experience and
how you could apply them to a counter insurgency, counter guerilla theater?
WS: Well, I certainly learned that if you don’t have the people with you, you’re
going to have a hell of a hard time ever winning that kind of a war and that to get their
loyalty and their support, you have to be there with them. You can't just go in and say,
“Hi, I’m here, and here’s a few bucks. Here’s a little bit of civic action and everything,
and if you have any trouble call 911 and we’ll be back when we can.” You have to go in
and sit down and say, “Okay, look; we’re going to stay here with you. We’ll train you.
We’ll get you self sufficient to where you can stand here and fight against these guys that
come in and threaten you.” It was almost like gang warfare in some respects. The guys
that go in, they got all the guns and knives and they say, “Hey, you’re going to do it my
way or not at all.” Well, if my gang had been there, it would have been a little bit
different, and I think I learned that the only way you win an insurgent operation is to have
the complete trust and support of that civilian population. Without it, you’re doomed.
SM: Okay. Well, you came back to the United States in October of ’63 and when you arrived, Vietnam was still pretty much a back burner issue in the United States; not a whole lot of attention was being paid to it. Where did you go first when you arrived back in the US? You took a month leave?

WS: Yeah, I came here to Vegas and then I was assigned to Long Beach, California as an advisor to the California National Guard.

SM: Okay, so that would have been early…well, still late ’63 I guess?

WS: Yeah. I probably got there somewhere around 1st of December and then in January I took off and went down to Benning for my career course.

SM: And it was during that time period that you were interviewed at that conference?

WS: Yeah, during the career course.

SM: During the career course?

WS: Right.

SM: By career course, you talking about [cass] cubed? What is the career course?

WS: At that time it was called the Associate Infantry Officer Course. It was like you go through preparing to become a battalion, a regimental, or brigade staff officer, but you’re also preparing to be a battalion commander or a company commander.

SM: Okay, how long did that last?

WS: It was a six-month course. At the end of that I went to the nuclear weapons employment course.

SM: Now when you were taking the career course, or more specifically, when you were interviewed at that infantry conference, do you recall some of the other questions that you were asked regarding the American advisory effort in Vietnam and things like that?

WS: Oh, they did question the types of weapons that we ran up against and the tactics that the Viet Cong were using, and that was just about the gist of it.

SM: They didn’t ask any questions about politics or the interaction between the advisor and the Vietnamese counterpart or Vietnamese commander?
WS: They wanted to know how our relationships evolved with the counterparts, and of course everybody had a little bit different way that his relationship evolved.

SM: At the career course, how effective was that in your estimation?

WS: We were the first large group of returnees to attend that particular class, and believe it or not, it almost turned into a joke because they were using outdated maps, maps that guys knew were not accurate, and it was just almost ridiculous when they talked about counter insurgency operations. Now, it was a very excellent class when it came to conventional operations and equipment and tactics. But we did, we almost closed down the counter insurgency part of the instruction.

SM: What do you mean closed down?

WS: Well, you know, we’d get into these things and some young instructor that had not been to Vietnam gets up there and he starts his class on, “Okay, we’re working in such-and-such province. Here’s a map. We want to know how you would do this and do that.”

SM: Oh, you mean and they’d use Vietnam as the locus for this?

WS: Yeah, and they would give somebody the opportunity to stand up and give the solution and the guy would get up and give it and then the instructor would stand up and start shooting it down. Well, more than likely somebody in the class had been an advisor in that region and he’d stand up and say, “I don't know where you got these maps, but this trail doesn’t exist, there was a trail that ran from here to here, and this river isn't really there,” because the maps were highly inaccurate in those days, the ones at the infantry school, because they were all printed by the school press and all this and that based on old, old maps, and everybody’d start laughing and they'd fold up the maps and make them into paper airplanes and float them down to the stage and the instructor would say, “Hey, that’s it. Class is over,” and after about three of four times, I know they had to adjust the program of instruction on that. The syllabus was the word I was trying to think of at the beginning.

SM: Oh, syllabus, yeah.

WS: Yeah, how stupid of me to forget that word.

SM: Okay, you’re referring back to your days in the basic training unit at Fort Jackson, South Carolina?
SM: Let me go ahead and switch out my little cassette here before it runs out because I know we’re getting close to the time where it will.

WS: Not a problem.

SM: So let me end CD number one of the interview with William Shelton.

Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting oral history interview #2 with Mr. William Shelton. He is in Las Vegas, Nevada. I am in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University. It is the 15th of June, year 2000 at 3:30 Texas Tech time. Mr. Shelton, would you please begin by discussing some of your time in Korea and how that effected your perceptions in MATA and Vietnam?

William Shelton: Yes, based on my experiences in Korea which was that I was assigned to an American infantry unit on the DMZ, the in country rules stated that we should not do too much fraternization with the locals, don’t drink the water, don’t eat the food, that type of thing. I kind of expected that maybe it would be the same in Vietnam. However, that was not to be the case as was related to us in the MATA course. We were to fraternize with our counterparts, go places with them, do what they did, eat the food, make sure that you treated your water or try to drink from a potable source at all times, but other than that, you know, learn the country. Based on that, when I got off of the airplane in Saigon, I was rather surprised. It was somewhat different from Korea because the people had not seemed to have suffered the immediate effects of a large-scale war like I had seen in Korea. The people were friendly. Saigon, itself, was a very busy and bustling city full of traffic, people going about their everyday jobs. The Vietnamese seemed to be pretty friendly. I enjoyed my first few days there, going around eating the food, sampling the local fare and just starting to get my feet on the ground, trying out my newfound language ability that I gained through the MATA course and the Army language school. I was really pleasantly surprised and Saigon had lived up to its name of being the Paris of the Orient. There were dangers that we were warned of such as terrorist attacks, grenade attacks, that kind of thing. Security seemed to be everywhere in this city between the national police and the military police and Army units that were constantly on the move patrolling through the city. I don’t recall that there was ever any threat during my initial days in Saigon. We were billeted in the Brinks Annex, which
was across the street from the Brinks Hotel, and one of our immediate and favorite eating spots was a little restaurant just across the street from both called Cheap Charlie’s, and I suppose it was because the food was relatively inexpensive but good. I didn’t experience, in my initial days there, no illnesses from eating the food or drinking water from potable sources and I found that not only that, that there were American Army officers messes that were readily available to feed us. The weather was typically tropical which I hadn’t been accustomed to previously. The humidity was pretty heavy, but it didn’t seem to bother us; of course I was 20 years old, 21 years old. It wouldn’t bother me too much anyway. The briefings that we were given when we first got into country seemed to have been pretty adequate for the immediate task at hand and the conditions in which we found ourselves suddenly thrust. We were pretty much kept in a group as arrivees until a day or so before departure for our units up country. I found out that, during one of the briefings, one of the personnel officers provided me with my promotion orders from 1st lieutenant to captain, which did change my ultimate assignment when I got up country from being a regimental training officer to an infantry battalion advisor. Now those were my initial impressions in Vietnam. I could tell mostly that things were fairly unorganized within the MAG. They were not really prepared to accept a whole lot of brand new incoming personnel all at one time, but again that was relatively early on in the build-up. That was pretty much my impression of my first arrival into the country. It was a little bit different when I got to Danang.

SM: How different?

WS: Okay, Danang was the headquarters of several major Vietnamese Army units including the 2nd ARVN Division an infantry Division in which I found myself ultimately assigned in their 6th Infantry Regiment. The few days that I did get to spend in Danang, I again got the impression that it was a city of friendly people and again and again, a beautiful city; several small French type restaurant mostly owned by French previously and perhaps still owned by some French men. But, the foods were excellent and not very expensive. We lived in a small motel type thing that was leased by the Army, one room and a little bath, and an Army officer’s mess about a block or two away from that which provided very good food. There were some special forces detachments operating in country at that time. I think they were TDY from the first group out of Okinawa. I didn’t
really get to know any of the special forces types at that time. Most of us who had come
over together who went up in the same area still kind of kept together and I think the
debriefings that we got at the personnel place in the Danang area were kind of sketchy as
to what we could really expect. I don’t think they really knew, either.

SM: What month and year was this that you arrived in Danang?
WS: It would have been October 1962. All of the advisors that I met, none of
them had any real, real hairy or scary war stories at that point in time other than the fact
that several of them had been in some contact with some of the guerilla units and they felt
that the guerillas were pretty good fighters. My assignment to the 1st Battalion of the 6th
ARVN regiment resulted in me being taken by jeep from Danang to Tam Ky to the
regimental headquarters. My memory fails a little bit but I can remember a Major Joe
Deason was one of the people who initially greeted me. He was on the regimental
advisory staff and there was another major and gosh I hope he forgives me, I can’t
remember his name at this point, and we talked and they briefed us and gave us some
idea of what we could expect. My battalion at that time was not operating in the Tam Ky
area, so I didn’t get an immediate tour of the Tam Ky area to see what was there and what
the people were like. The battalion was operating in the Quang Nai province at a place
called Kong Wa bridge. That translates, roughly, to Republic Bridge. It was on a river
way out to the west side of the town and on out a little farther into the province. I don’t
remember my mode of transportation to Quang Nai but it probably was by jeep again
because helicopter support at that time was pretty sparse. The Army was using the [?] H-
21, the old banana type helicopter.

SM: Oh yeah.

WS: The Marines were in country but they were flying H-34s out of Danang
itself and that’s another story later on. But, I found myself in Quang Nai province
headquarters. The American 25th, or not the American, the ARVN 25th Division was
being trained at that point by American advisors for duty in the Quang Nai area but they
were not yet deployed into the other districts. One of the advisors, and he’d been a friend
of mine back in the states, I think he and I worked together at Fort Ord or someplace and
maybe even in Korea, I can’t recall now, was the advisor to the 1st Division, 6th ARVN.
He was notified and he came back in by jeep and picked me up and we were to go out to
the outpost at Kong Wa Bridge by jeep but in route we stopped for a meeting with the
district chief to let him know that I was going to be replacing the captain and it was sort
of a hello and farewell party; hello for me, farewell for him. We had a nice lunch, very
elaborate type thing for that particular time and in terms of the war that was going on, but
I ate the Vietnamese food, seemed to get along very well, and they brought the battalion
commander, Captain Pham Van Bay back in to meet me also and he and I seemed to hit it
off rather well right off the bat. Interesting side note; the captain I replaced then went
back to Quang Nai and then eventually back through the chain to go back home. Captain
Bay and I proceeded by jeep out to Kong Wa Bridge. The possibilities of ambush kind of
worried me, but we had a security force of about a platoon with us and they seemed to
know what they were doing and I was so brand new in country that I didn’t question what
their methods were. We got to the outpost and it was fairly large on a hilltop, which was
not the highest terrain in the valley or anything, but it did overlook the bridge. That first
night, there was gunfire all around and some activity and I had a hard time sleeping and
wanted to know what was going on and this and that, and the battalion commander didn’t
seem overly concerned. Interestingly enough, I did get a case of diarrhea that night and I
suppose it wasn’t so much from the food but from the gin that the district chief had
provided us with in copious amounts, straight in a water glass, and we did several toasts,
so I think that might have been what got me. Anyway, after having a little bout with that
the next morning I get up and I’m wandering around and there was a prisoner. It was a
female, and she had a couple of slight wounds, nothing very serious that would have
killed her. Anyway, they kept her in a confined area most of the day and the next night I
went to sleep, everything was fine, no more gunfire or anything for that evening. Next
morning I get up and I ask about the prisoner and they said she was dead. I questioned
Captain Bay, I said, “Captain Bay, how could that happen? She was not that seriously
wounded,” and he informed me, “Captain Shelton, this lady has been caught before. She
had led a sapper attack on one of our other outposts and we lost 20 men and when we
captured her we put her in…” what they call like a Chu Hoi program. I think it was
called that even in ’62. “She was supposed to have been rehabilitated, and here we
capture her trying to bring troops into our compound again, and it’s not worth the Chu
Hoi program. She will never be rehabilitated,” and I thought, “Oh my God, what kind of
a deal have I got here? Should I report this to the American channels or should I just let
the Vietnamese handle it since it is their war?” I took the second option. I figured,
“Well, they know their people better than I do,” and who am I to get this guy in trouble
for something he probably knew better than we did, anyway? So I let it go and I began to
understand that okay, this is one of these kinds of things where its almost like our own
Civil war to a certain degree where they have their ways of dealing with what they
consider to be incorrigibles within their own country, and I let the situation go. It
wasn’t…I can’t remember how long we stayed in the Kong Wa Bridge area but there was
not that much patrolling that went on at that particular time. It was pretty much of a
static outpost. The patrols didn’t range more than a kilometer out, I don’t think, and I of
course did not accompany them on those patrols. I would say within a month the
battalion was rotated back to the regimental headquarters in Tam Ky and we did the road
march and it was relatively uneventful. Once we got to Tam Ky, things changed. We
started going out on the search and clear type missions and there were many of them and
we always seemed to run into some sort of contact. In those days, they still had not
authorized the award of the combat infantry badge to US troops that were involved in
ground combat. That didn’t last long, either. I think within that month I probably had
been in enough contact with the enemy and under hostile fire sufficiently that my CIB
was almost an automatic. I think I related the story of the one contact where we were
going into a strategic hamlet, a sunrise strategic hamlet…

SM: Yes, you did.

WS: And that was one of the really initial firefights that I had gotten into. From
that point on, a…you know, contact with the enemy always creates a streak of sudden
fear and stark terror because you, and unlike in conventional warfare, you didn’t know
where the fire was coming from initially or how many people you were going to be up
against. So that kind of followed through that I would always get that initial fear and
then I could settle down and get back with it and give the battalion commander some
assistance and some advice whenever he needed it. This type of contact went on for most
of the rest of the six months that I was with the 6th regiment; and I had related to you the
story of Captain Graham Vernon and the first large body count that the ARVN’s seemed
to have up in that region?
SM: Yes.

WS: Okay. My impressions of the Vietnamese at that point in time, particularly of Captain Bay and his staff and his soldiers, were that they were perfectly capable of handling the guerilla warfare. They could deal with these guerilla-sized units, and they seemed to do it rather well. I didn’t see any reluctance on the part of the Vietnamese to get in and mix it up with the then Viet Cong. They knew what they were doing. Most of them were veterans for a long time fighting against the Viet Minh under the French. They were not called ARVN Army at that time, but they were still part of the French forces and they seemed to know what they were doing. Most of these soldiers within the battalion were very friendly to me, they accepted me as part of the unit, and I was able, of course, in my limited amount of Vietnamese to talk with them and they seemed to get a big kick out of that. They were always offering me part of their food, etcetera, etcetera. One of the things that I did find rather early on is that I used to try to carry enough C-rations with me to make sure that I had sufficient amounts of food to sustain me through the conduct of an operation. This was not very smart because it was all too heavy, it was not suited well for the climate, and I had to give up the idea of trying to carry that much food so I soon started giving the Vietnamese some money for my rations and I started eating completely Vietnamese rations while I was out in the bush with them, which did rather well. As I say, I never did get sick. Water supplies, we were always issued plenty of the iodine pills in which to purify our water and that’s largely what I did. If I was not at a good source of water, there’d be times where you’d have to take it out of a stream or even perhaps out of a rice paddy and fortunately, the Viets didn’t use night soil like the Koreans or the Japanese. They seemed to chemically fertilize their rice paddies or not fertilize at all. So that wasn’t a big threat. There were other organisms in the water, I’m sure.

SM: In Vietnam they didn’t use night soil where you were?

WS: No.

SM: Well that’s the first time I’ve heard that; interesting.

WS: What I’d do is I’d get my water from whatever source, put my iodine pills in it, shake it up, let it sit for a little bit. It almost got to where it tasted as good as scotch.
and water, believe it or not. No, I’m almost sure that none of the places I was ever in that
I never got into where they used night soil in Vietnam. It’s strange.

SM: That is; very interesting. Okay.

WS: Well, but of course, again, it’s tropical and you’ve got soil that’s been
fertilized by nature for so many years that you didn’t need the extra stuff for the most
part. Anyway, I was rather saddened when I had the opportunity to go back down as a
staff officer in 2\textsuperscript{nd} ARVN, I was rather saddened by the fact that I was going to be leaving
Captain Bay and all of his officers and troops because I’d grown rather attached to them.
Perhaps in its own way the Army knew what it was doing because that’s not too good for
anybody to get too attached to the troops in that respect.

SM: Let me ask you a question before you move on from this unit. To get back
to the interrogation of that captured Viet Cong woman that you discussed earlier that
eventually was killed; now she had engaged in sapper activity before, was supposed to be
rehabilitated or retrained or whatever to Chu Hoi, and then was captured again? Do you
know if it was a standard procedure that if they caught somebody for the second time,
that was it? It was kind of like a capital punishment, capital offense?

WS: I don’t know that for a fact. That was the only case I ever saw of it to be
honest, and it was kind of shocking but I don’t think I ever looked for it again, to be
honest with you.

SM: And I was curious about interrogation and information from someone like
that or for her in particular; who handled all that? Was that all handled by the
Vietnamese or were there also Americans involved in that?

WS: Oh, it was all Vietnamese; the intelligence types within the battalion and
probably from the district headquarters were the ones that were involved in interrogating
her. I was not even allowed in the interrogation area. I wasn’t invited, I’ll put it that
way, and I didn’t press the issue at that point after he had told me.

SM: How about later on with your experiences with captured Viet Cong or even
captured PAVN when you went back much later in ‘68-’69? In terms of captured
Vietnamese interrogations, intelligence gatherings, things like that; were you involved in
those activities then?

WS: At my level, no. That would be…
SM: But you were XO and eventually CO of MACV SOG.

WS: Well, yeah, and I was the CO of FOB one and then a staff officer and from there I went to a mobile launch team over in NKP and I was only responsible at that point of getting those prisoners from the extraction zone back to the base area where the interrogators could take charge. I was usually too far removed. I could never bring them into NKP.

SM: So that was...you basically were in charge of making sure that they got back in a timely enough fashion so that any intelligence gleaned would be of use to the forces in the field?

WS: That is correct.

SM: Alright, and just to make sure I didn’t misspeak; when you mentioned the major body count, the first major body count event earlier, you were talking about the one where they had basically killed upwards of several hundred...

WS: Yeah.

SM: ...Viet Cong who had tried to storm the compound?

WS: Right, the small company sized outpost, yeah.

SM: Okay, we did discuss that last time. So your impressions of the Vietnamese military from the time you arrived to the time of your first end of tour, not end of tour but end of working with the 1st Battalion of the 6th ARVN, yeah, that’s the first assignment you had?

WS: Yeah.

SM: Your opinion of the ARVN really didn’t change, or perhaps if it did change it got better?

WS: Yeah, I effected worse than what I got into. Captain Bay and Lieutenant Lann were...as I see it and hear it, I’m sure that they were two very special people. Both were well educated, both were dedicated soldiers, both were family men, and they both had the same ideas of they did not want to live under communist rule, and they took good care of their troops and their troops took good care of them; good leadership. That probably improved from the day that I got there until the day I left that battalion.

SM: And then what about with the next unit you were assigned to?
WS: I kind of expected the same kind of thing, and I'll give you his name, Minh Van Thieu was the captain’s name. I don’t recall any of the names of the other officers in the battalion at that time. I did have an interpreter, Vietnamese, assigned to me at that point. Anyway, when I first got to the 3rd of the 46th, I’m trying to remember where we were. I think we were in Quang [?] at the time. As I had brought out, they were part of a separate regiment, the 46th regiment, and it didn’t take long, and there was a reason that came about later on which I’ll bring up somewhere in this conversation, but they were split up and we ended up being assigned way, way out in the western regions of Quang [?] province along that long river valley and each battalion, one at the north end, one at the south end, and one at the center. Captain Thieu was a much less educated Vietnamese than was Captain Bay and he, I don’t know where the real difference came in, but he was not as willing to mix it up with the enemy as Captain Bay’s unit was. He was a jovial guy. I got along with him fine. I got along with his staff pretty well, but I didn’t have the relationship with his soldiers that I did with Captain Bay’s soldiers for some odd reason. I think I finally found the reason was the interpreter. The interpreter was one of these guys…I don’t think I even let on that I spoke Vietnamese for the first several days that I was with them, and I got him to interpret something for me and he didn’t tell Captain Thieu exactly what I had said and I jumped in in Vietnamese and told Captain Thieu exactly what I wanted him to hear. So this interpreter and I never really fully got along after that, and it may well have been he was telling the troops that, “Oh, this guy’s a real bad man.” But that’s the only thing that I could think of. But, in combat, they were okay but again, as I say, they didn’t have the tendency to mix it up like the 1st of the 6th did. When we finally air lifted out of there, they split the whole regiment up from that river valley. They moved the three battalions somewhere else and replaced them with Vietnamese Marines as I understood. My unit was moved down to Highway 13 and I think I mentioned I can’t remember the province but it was just south of the parrot’s beak and there was a small, company sized French outpost that the Vietnamese company, which was just slightly larger than a couple of platoons, occupied, and it was to overlook at sunrise strategic hamlet. This is the one where they kept doing their patrol. They were commanded by an ARVN [?] which is somewhat like an officer candidate. He would run his patrol down through the middle of the village every morning at seven
o’clock, and sooner or later it was bound to happen and sooner or later it did happen. They were ambushed at about three meters inside that compound from little spider holes and they lost all but a couple of people out of that particular patrol. I would say they probably lost around 25 people. So, we had to respond to that from our base location, which was in an old French plantation right on Highway 13. I think it was a river plantation, and we did a motor march up to the area and found out what had happened and we got all of the casualties evacuated and reinforced the company outpost for a few days. When I got back to our base headquarters I did send in a radio report, as I recall, to the district chief’s headquarters and I told the American advisors that, “Hey, something has to be done. I’ve got to get this battalion retrained. They don’t know what they’re doing when they’re out doing patrolling,” etcetera. At that point, my opinion of the Vietnamese Army got to be quite a bit less than it was up at the 1st of the 6th. I was looking at them like, “These guys really don’t have the slightest idea what they’re doing,” and I think I also mentioned that they did have families with some of their units. The wives and children of some of the soldiers stayed at the headquarters area and did not go up on the company-sized outpost like the one that got ambushed. I don’t know if that was a good or a bad idea. I can understand why they did it, but I don’t think it was a good idea. Anyway, somebody in the American chain of advisors heard my plea and they did reassign the battalion down to a training center just north of Vung Tau. The training center was called Phan Thiet, and it was an ARVN training center advised, of course, by US advisors. We moved by road down to that area and put them into a training program. I lived in the American compound, which was adjacent to Phan Thiet. There was a pretty large contingent of American advisors there. All of them were pretty good people. They seemed to be well qualified for the job at hand and we had infantry and signal advisors and I’m sure there were a few others that I can’t…I know there was at least an engineer advisor, so they seemed to be pretty well staffed and capable of training most ARVN units who would come through. The town was an old French city, and a lot of nice little small restaurants were there. Again, we would eat downtown as often as we ate in the American mess. I found sometimes that after being out in the bush for a long time that eating heavy American food would cause me more trouble with my stomach than any of the Vietnamese food did. But as we went through the training, and I
participated in the training programs with the 3rd of the 46th, depending on what issues I saw that needed more emphasis than what they got at the training center, I would get with the battalion commander and talk to him and say, “You know, I think we need a little more emphasis on patrolling and immediate action during an ambush,” and that type of thing and we’d go out and we’d conduct that type of training. It seemed to be well accepted and the troops seemed to understand it. We did river crossings, all kinds of things that I just didn’t think they were getting at the training center. One of our first shake down operations was into an area that was just full new tunnels being dug. I’m trying to scrape my memory and get the name of that for you because it was one of the first areas where US troops got into a tunnel situation and they lost a few Americans on it, and God I can’t remember the name of it now. Perhaps I’ll think of it between now and the end of all of this.

SM: Okay.

WS: But, on that first shakedown we got into that area and the soldiers did meet some I’d say moderate resistance in the tunnel area, but they acquitted themselves pretty well. I was almost convinced that these guys, at least they understand why we brought them off the line and put them in a retraining program. It may have well been that they just needed a good rest, too, because there was no such thing as an R&R for the whole unit. There was no stand down. They were in combat for 365 days a year. But anyway, they acquitted themselves rather well in that and from that point, once we departed the Phan Thiet training area, we were assigned, I think we were actually attached to the ARVN 5th Division, which was at Bien Hoa. We were given the task of providing the air base perimeter security and we did that for the remainder of my tour. I think that was probably…I only had maybe two to two ½ months of that duty, which wasn’t bad in that we lived on the air base. I lived out with the battalion. I didn’t have a BOQ room or anything like that. I had access to American meals if I needed them, American PX right here on the base, but I stayed out with my counterparts and for the most part ate with him and his staff. We did conduct patrols daily out around the perimeter of the air base. On occasion we would run into small, very small units, perhaps squad sized at the most, and that was sort of David and Goliath in that they’d throw rocks at us but they never were able to really slay the giant. We’d always run them off with our preponderance of
weaponry. We made our intelligence reports, as always, about the contact we made; where they were, time of day, and most of these were in broad daylight. I don’t recall that any of our night ambushes were ever successful around the base. So, at this point, I suppose, that my opinion of the Vietnamese soldier had changed. I’d lost at least 50% of the respect that I had for the people up in the 1st of the 6th ARVN.

SM: Now when you say preponderance of fire power, the unit would come up against the enemy force and…

WS: Yeah, per se, we might run into something like a squad but we’d be there with at least a platoon, maybe a company.

SM: Now is this all just small arms and medium sized weapons, or was there also heavier weapons support in the form of artillery support or close air support?

WS: Well we had the capability for ARVN to call for ARVN artillery, but it was never necessary because most of the things we ran into were squad size and there were no heavy weapons involved. I think these were still the Viet Cong units and not the PAVN units. I didn’t notice the major switch in the weaponry that they had from when I first got there.

SM: Which was the older, almost World War II and even some World War I weapons?

WS: Yes, absolutely, and weaponry that had been purchased on an open market.

SM: Yes sir, right. There was never any air support provided or necessary?

WS: Having left up at the 1st of the 6th, I never had any real necessity for it, and I don’t recall ever calling for any air support while I was with the 3rd of the 46th.

SM: But there was the use of air support in the 1st of the 6th?

WS: Yeah, on at least one occasion there was.

SM: And that was VNAF, the Vietnamese Air Force?

WS: Yeah, but the forward air controller happened to be a Marine O1 or an L-19 Birddog, and of course there was no way I could really talk to him directly because we didn’t have air-ground communications being advisors and they were FACs, and that was the first time I ran across the Skippy Peanut Butter bomb.

SM: I’m sorry, a Skippy Peanut Butter…

WS: Bomb.
SM: Bomb?
WS: Uh-huh.
SM: Would you explain what that is?
WS: Sure. What the FACs had, they had smoke rockets under the wings of the aircraft but they had no H-E, no machine guns or anything that they could use on any targets of opportunity. But, what they found is that they can take a hand grenade, put it down in a glass jar, and they only had Skippy Peanut Butter jar…
SM: Oh yeah, okay!
WS: …pull the pin on it when they needed to, put the lid back on it, and drop it out of the aircraft and when the glass broke, of course the grenade detonated. That was pretty ingenious on their part. But then, when this bac showed up on our problem area, it brought in a couple of A-1s, the old Skyraiders. Now, not being able to talk to any of these people at all or hear any air-to-air communications, I don’t know if the A-1s were flown by VNAF or Marines. I assume they were probably both, and they did a pretty good job for us. They came in, they assisted us in getting to our objective that day. It took us most of the day. I think that’s the one I told you about where we were hit early in the morning, taken by surprise, and the guys on each side of me were both hit; not hit, they were both killed. Then we had to fight our way up the hillside and we did find booby traps which were usually land mines, old ones, probably from the French-Indochina war, that were crudely rigged along our ascent route up to the objective. But, once we got to the objective, and we kept A-1s on target or on the scene all the time that it took us to get from the bottom of the hill to the top and take the objective, and that seemed to ward off any further assaults by the Viet Cong or any attempts to descend. So, they seem to have a healthy respect for air power.
SM: Were there many other Marine pilots or American pilots, that you were aware of, that were flying either as FAC or even perhaps flying the combat missions themselves when you were there for your first year?
WS: I couldn’t swear to it. The only aircraft that I know the Americans were flying were the helicopters and they had the Army aviation unit flying the H-21s and then there was a Marine unit out of Danang, it was HML362. It was under a thing called Operation Shoofly. I think they were called The Ugly Angels, and they flew H-34s.
Occasionally you could hitch a ride with them to go from point A to point B; Only the Americans, not for the Vietnamese units. The VNAF also had H-34s that they provided us support with. Hold on just a second.

SM: Alright, I’ll just pause it.

WS: Anyway, the VNAF, they were pretty good at supporting their own units if it was an absolute emergency. They were rather sparse in the amount of helicopters they had in those days, too, and so they didn’t fritter them away like we were able to do later on in the war. But if there was a matter of medical evacuations or something like that, yes, they would, and sometimes you had to twist their arms, but they twisted okay.

SM: Now the one thing we did not discuss…well is there anything else you want to add before we move onto your period back in the United States after your first year in Vietnam?

WS: I kind of left Vietnam with the opinion that I think that they’re pretty capable of handling this situation, you know, and I was almost assured in my own mind that the more advisors we got in, the better training back at MATA that they were, the more headway that the Vietnamese would be able to make against the Viet Cong. Sadly, I was mistaken on that. But, I just think that I left kind of feeling, “Hey, I think they’re going to be okay,” and then when I got back to the States, of course, I saw things start to change by watching the news and reading the newspaper. One thing, well, let me add these in: there were a couple of things that I’m almost sure were going on. I couldn’t prove this, but the 46th regiment, I think, had some political alignments with Diem.

SM: With Diem?

WS: Yeah.

SM: The President?

WS: Uh-huh, and the Vietnamese military and its pre-planning were getting…well, I know that the Marines, of course, were somewhat of an elite force for the president. So was the airborne. But, the 46th, even though it might have had a political alignment with the Diem’s, they were split up and made an ineffective unit. The Marines were sent up along that one river up in western Quang Ngai to break them up and get them out of Saigon by the general staff of the Vietnamese Army. I’m almost positive that was what was going on. They were trying to get the less elite type units hanging around
the area around Saigon so they couldn’t provide the coup force. It really surprised me
when I got home, and I hadn’t been home very long because I think that coup occurred in
what?

SM: November ’63, a month after you got back.

WS: Yeah, it occurred within a month and Kennedy was assassinated right after I
got home, too. Very strange events; all of them played on my mind for quite some time
after that.

SM: What did you think?

WS: Well, I was almost sure that the US was involved, and I think its been
documented that the US knew that the coup was coming and whether or not they
classified it or not, I don’t know. I believe they did.

SM: I think you’re right, that the CIA operations chief in the country actually
gave an approval almost that the coup plotters go ahead.

WS: Yeah, I think he did, too. But I was not surprised because Diem was not the
strongest of leaders. His sister in law seemed to be the real strength in the country, and
his brother of course. He was actually the man that would call the shots, I believe.
Everybody was saying that it was Ngo Dinh Diem that was leading the country and that
was a figurehead position for him, so I wasn’t surprised. That pretty well wrapped up
that first year.

SM: Well what did you think about he Kennedy assassination?

WS: God, what a shock. I was stationed in Long Beach, California, as I told you,
and I had a National Guard Battalion. I had two companies out in Anaheim, and the
morning of that assassination, this was just so unusual, I was on the way out to Anaheim
to visit two companies out there and I stopped at a car wash to have my sedan washed
and while it was being washed I went into this little bar/restaurant type thing and had a
coke and I was sitting there watching TV and this guy came on and made the
announcement and I asked the bartender, I said, “Is this some kind of a joke? What the
hell’s going on here?” And he looked and he says, “Oh my God, no, man! This is for
real!” and that bar got so quiet. The people started wailing and crying and I jumped up
and ran out and got the car and went on over to the Army. I was rather afraid of what the
hell was going on, you know? But it really shocked me, it really shocked me. I couldn’t imagine any American involvement in that type of thing, and I almost assumed that it was a Castro thing. I still don’t have any idea, and like all the rest of the Americans, we’ll never know. But, I was really appalled that that happened, and deeply saddened because as I say, I didn’t always agree with his foreign policy but he was a good man. It saddened me to see that somebody would go to that length to get rid of a person.

SM: Yes sir. Alright, well one thing that we didn’t really talk too much about was your time in Long Beach, and as you said, you were an advisor to a National Guard unit, a California National Guard unit there?

WS: Right.

SM: And eventually, I mean, you were there long enough to actually witness the Watts riots, is that correct?

WS: Yeah, I participated; from a federal level, though. I had to remind my battalion commander that it would be a violation of Project [?] to go into the riot zone, and he, “Oh yeah, I forgot about that.” But that was…

SM: Yeah, why don’t you explain a little bit about your experiences there in Long Beach and in particular during that heightened, very tense period.

WS: Yeah. I was rather lucky to get to work with the California National Guard because they were not too bad. They had been in the Korean war, the 40th Division, and they’d acquitted themselves as I understand pretty fairly, and there were a lot of guys in the 40th Division who were combat veterans from the Korean era and of course California, being the sized state that it is, had two Divisions; the 40th and 49th. The 49th was north, 40th was south. They seemed to have enough clout in congress to make sure that they had good equipment and sufficient equipment for all of their troops. For the most part, I found that the guys that were in the National Guard were in there for various reasons; some of them to avoid draft, but not a whole lot. Most of them were soldiers who’d had some prior service, they wanted to continue, and they had a commitment to fulfill their overall commitment, and they were pretty good people. Most of them came from the run of the mill jobs. There were a lot of police officers involved. I would give them an overall rating. I’d say they were, on a scale from one to ten, they were probably around an eight, maybe a nine in terms of their desire to go out and get good training, do
good training, and I was always made part of the activities. The battalion commander and I had a super relationship. He always called me in for every staff meeting. I was never kept out for any reason, and we would discuss problem areas and talk about fixes and he would ask my opinions. They were all very interested in my counter insurgency time over in Vietnam, and strangely enough, the brigade advisor was a lieutenant colonel by the name of Jerry Gowell, G-O-W-E-L-L; long since passed away. Gowell had been in Vietnam also, and from time to time he and I would give briefings on our experiences in Vietnam to members of the battalion, and that seemed to be very well received. There were a few people who had some knowledge of the partitioning and the elections, you know, and they were absolutely correct. The elections never took place as they were supposed to, so they were somewhat mistrustful of our position that, “Hey, the Vietnamese are not that bad a people and they’re making an effort,” and this and this and this. They had the idea that everything was corrupt over there. You couldn’t change their mind. They were part of that culture that wasn’t about to have its mind changed. So, you left it at that. The people wanted to accept what you said, did, those that wanted to reject, rejected. We made frequent training visits to Camp Pendleton for the long MUTA assemblies, Multiple Unit Training Assemblies; the whole Saturday and Sunday. Anyway, my involvement with Watts riots came about as a result of me and my senior enlisted advisor making a pre camp reconnaissance up at Camp Roberts. It was Camp Roberts in those days. On our way back we noticed the smoke and everything and we turned on the radio and found out there was a riot. We rushed right back to the armory, and our troops are already on vehicles ready to go to Camp Roberts that night, and as I got out of the car that’s when he said, “Come on, get your gear. We’re going to the combat zone!” “Nope, can’t do that.” My senior advisor and the brigade advisor said, “Hey, you and Sgt. Pagnella get out to Fort Macarthur, set up an emergency operations center and liaison between the active forces and the National Guard,” which we did, and we got an augmentation from one or two people from San Diego came up, another captain, and I think it was just another captain. There were just two captains and one master sergeant, and we maintained a 24-hour a day liaison and emergency ops center in Fort Macarthur operations office. We were able to adequately relay what was going on between the two
and we had access to immediate intel from the units that were in the riot zone and plus
what the Army was getting from the Los Angeles Police and sheriff’s office, and it was
rather interesting because there were some things that led you to believe that it was much
more organized than what was led to be put out on the news networks, and they were
moving units with CB radios which were fairly new in those days. That was one of the
things that struck my eye as soon as the National Guard would deploy into a hot area, the
reports were, and I didn’t hear these and I didn’t see them, I just read the reports, that CB
radio intercepts revealed that these people were told to move from this area to the next
area. We did get gunfire in the post headquarters a couple of times, and strangely enough
it was not by blacks, but by whites. LAPD captured them and it was really shocking. So
I don’t know. I’ve got mixed thoughts about that too.

SM: About how many people? How many whites?
WS: This one particular truck, I believe there were five people in it; a driver and
a passenger and then there were a couple of three guys in the back of the pickup doing the
shooting with rifles.

SM: And what were they shooting at?
WS: Just random shooting.
SM: How old were they, do you recall?
WS: How old were they?
SM: Uh-huh.
WS: I don’t know, I never did see them. It seems to me they were in their late
twenties or thirties from what I recall reading. It could have been they were just joy
riders trying to make more trouble. I don’t know. I never saw the final police reports on
it. But, we maintained that 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for the two weeks that it
ensued.

SM: And what other work did you do with the National Guard in terms of I
assume you helped perhaps coordinate certain training and things like that?
WS: Oh yeah, that’s what I say. I was always involved in the staff planning
processes and worked closely with their S3 in developing training for the battalion as a
whole and for individual companies as they saw a need for it.
SM: And would they be involved with training with active duty units, as well?
WS: No.

SM: It was just exclusively reserve or National Guard training?

WS: Yeah, this was exclusively National Guard training. They did, after the Watt’s riots, pick up on doing their riot training. That was something totally new to me.

SM: What did you think about the use of the National Guard in that respect?

WS: Well, it was the only thing they could do. It was far too large for local police departments to handle and it was getting into the destruction of property and death of people and had the governor not committed his National Guard, then the federal government could have come in and federalized the whole operation and brought in federal troops. That would have been, in my opinion, that would have been overkill because the National Guard was able to handle it. There were deaths, there certainly were, but that’s to be expected in a riot.

SM: Well that’s an interesting point. Do you remember, well, I guess the question would be how old were you, and do you remember when Eisenhower deployed the 101st Airborne to Little Rock, Arkansas, to deal with that crisis?

WS: I think I was just about ready to go into the Army at that point. So, I would have probably been around 17 or 18 when it happened. Honestly, of course my whole outlook on life changed over those years, but I had been born in Indiana, which is one of the most racially prejudiced areas that I’ve ever lived in, and I kept going, “How come these black people want to do this? Don’t they realize where they’re supposed to be,” etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, and through my early years in the Army and more reinforced by my later years, I realized, “Hey, that was so wrong,” and I was glad that President Eisenhower had taken the action he did and then President Johnson, later on, reinforced that. That’s the way it had to be because I soon found in the Army there was only one color and that was green, and you judged a man by his abilities, not by his skin color, and that served me well for the rest of my life.

SM: Yes sir.

WS: But yeah, I remember the Little Rock thing. As a matter of fact, a couple of friends of mine, I think, were involved in that. One was a student at Old Miss and the other was a young sergeant in the 101st, so they were both there at the time it happened, and they used to get together and BS about it and they’d tell war stories. But anyway,
yeah, the National Guard, the California National Guard, to me, seemed to be one of the
units that if I were ready to call anybody up for active duty at that point in time, it would
have certainly been them. I’m sure they’re glad that I wasn’t in charge of making that
decision. They were well trained, they were good troops.

SM: After your tour as an advisor to the National Guard in California, you went
to the School of the Americas, is that correct?

WS: Yeah, I went to the language school for six months up at Monterrey.

SM: To work on your Spanish?

WS: Yeah, I took Spanish. Then I went to the School of the Americas for about a
year and a half.

SM: Now how was the language training?

WS: Oh, that was super, that was super. All of the instructors at the language
school were all native speakers, and in the Spanish department, of course they had
Cubans, Mexicans, Spaniards, I think we even had some Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Puerto
Ricans, and each one of them has a little bit of a different idiom that they apply to the
language in their own region, and it was very well done because we would learn to say
things in a different way and if you said … let’s take for an example the Ecuadorian
way, if you said that in Mexico you might be wrong, and my sort of homeroom teacher
was from Chihuahua, Mexico. He really nailed me from afar. He gave me a way to say,
“This is my girlfriend,” as you would say it to your friends in Mexico. When I
introduced my Panamanian girlfriend to an Ecuadorian colonel at a reception ball, I
introduced her as my mistress.

SM: Oh no!

WS: So Jose Romero reached out and touched me from a long ways out.

SM: Well, you’ve got to wonder did that garner more respect, or did it...

WS: It generated only laughter and good humor because they understood it was
not my native language, and he just thought it was funny. My girlfriend didn’t think it
was so funny at the time. She hit me pretty hard.

SM: Did she? Okay.

WS: Oh yeah, but then she understood. She said, “Oh, I know, but this is what
you should say.”
SM: Well is it also like Vietnamese in that when you go to a different region, you have a different dialect?

WS: Yeah, same thing. It’s just like going from here to say South Carolina. Some of the things they say are a little different and you might not understand it quite the same.

SM: Well let me ask you, did you run into similar problems in Vietnam with working with…you were taught by predominantly northerners, is that correct?

WS: No, pretty much a mix between northerners and southerners. There’s no central. That did create somewhat of a problem with understanding the central dialect. I can understand pretty well both the northern and southern, and I can make a difference in my speech. But, let’s see, for an example, Ngo Dinh Diem would have been Ngo Dinh Diem in the south, and Diem in the north. The D is a hard Z sound in the north and it’s a soft Y sound in the south, and that’s easy to make the adjustments.

SM: Yes, okay, but no major miscommunication?

WS: No.

SM: How about problems in terms of speaking English with the Vietnamese people who are trying to speak English?

WS: Well, you know, they…it depended on their educational level.

SM: Oh, okay.

WS: Some of the Vietnamese who were very highly educated spoke it with a very high degree of fluency, particularly those who worked with us. Some of the people in the infantry units, for an example, some of the younger officers made every effort and their English was almost pidgin English but they were learning and they did well. I never volunteered to teach English classes, I’ll tell you that. I had enough to keep me busy.

SM: Yes, I would imagine. Alright, well I guess describe the School of the Americas, your position there, and what that entailed.

WS: Okay, initially I was assigned to the jungle operations committee, which was operating out of, what is it, I’ve forgotten the name of it…Fort Sherman, and it was kind of an interesting thing. I think my assignment there was determined by the fact that I had been to Vietnam and I was one of the relatively few other than the special forces troops on the committee who had been to Vietnam, although the, I mean, he went over to
Panama with me. He was an armored lieutenant colonel by the name of Roy Jones. Roy had been an armored advisor up in Quang Ngai about the same time I was up there although we didn’t know each other up there, and Roy made some really necessary adjustments to the syllabus and the program of instruction to accommodate some of the things he and I had learned in Vietnam, and we were training troops that were already designated to go to Vietnam. We ran them through, I forget that we had a CONUS and conarch company. CONUS companies, I think, were designated for immediate deployment. Conarch companies were coming back to the States and eventually anticipated deployment to Vietnam. POIs, in syllabus, were identical. It’s just the numbers of those units that we got through. I think we might have gotten something like two CONUS companies for every conarch company. The training was pretty intense and it really was a shocker and an eye opener to most of the kids that came to Panama without having experienced anything near a tropical climate before. Farm boys fared better than the city boys. The psychological fears and impacts of the jungle on the city kids is a lot worse than it was on the farm boys. The city boys considered there was a snake under every rock and every snake was going to kill you in ten steps and this kind of thing and this was part of what the training was to do was to alleviate their fears of the unknown in the jungle. It wasn’t like Tarzan and the ape-man. Then we had tactical training, which differentiated from their conventional training up in the states in that you were operating in foliage that just completely ate you up. The canopy there was nowhere near the triple canopy that we ran into in Vietnam, but you did have some double canopy and a lot of them were rather amazed that you could even move through this stuff. We taught them how to cut trail with a machete and how to do their security and their movements and how in spite of the roughness of moving through that type of foliage, that you had to get the flankers out to protect your flanks in the early morning if there were ambushes out there. Then we taught them how to move through swamps. We also took them over to what we called improvised ropes and bridges and water crossings. We taught them flag for life, how to make poncho rafts, how to swim across the Chagris River, and how to make rope bridges and how to cross the rope bridges, how to rappel; we taught them all of the basic necessities they would need in that jungle environment. We taught them survival skills and how to kill and prepare local foods for consumption in a survival type
of an atmosphere, and we ran them on probably one of the best escape and evasion
courses in the Army in those days. We would culminate the two-week training with that
escape and evasion program. We’d start them off at like four o’clock in the evening and
they would have to run from the…parallel the Chagris River from the Ga Toon Dam all
the way down to the mouth of the river, and they had to avoid capture by the aggressor
forces if and when possible. If they were captured, they were thrown into a POW camp,
interrogated, and torture was simulated, that type of thing.

SM: Were they supposed to attempt escape if they were captured?
WS: Oh yeah, yeah, but none of them ever did.
SM: Successfully?
WS: No. But it was a rather confined area and we knew that and so we were able
to prevent any escaping. But for the most part, I would say guys would run from I’d say
roughly four in the afternoon and the average guys would get in somewhere around
anywhere three to five a.m. the next morning.

SM: Did you have to go through this training yourself before becoming…
WS: An instructor?
SM: …an instructor, or how did that work?
WS: No, I didn’t have to. I’d experienced everything except that escape and
evasion thing. I did run that myself just to prove I could do it, and I was able to get down
through the thing in just a couple of hours because I knew all the tricks of the trails down
there. I knew where the aggressors were. I was kind of cheating, but I did it. But, you
cheat in war, too.

SM: Right.
WS: I didn’t feel bad.
SM: You had intelligence.
WS: Yes, and interestingly enough we did have SEAL teams come down, and
this was sort of just an extension of their training and for the most part I didn’t bother to
run them through all of the nitty gritty stuff. As a matter of fact, when the US troops
were making a tactical assault from [Mike] boats into another tactical area, I would take
the Marine or the SEAL team leader over and say, “Look, study you guys doing this; you
ain’t going to be doing assaults from a landing boat!” I said, “What I’d rather have you
do is take your team and you guys go conduct a beach reconnaissance for me down along
the Caribbean,” and he’d say, “Great, that’s what I want to do,” you know, so we’d turn
him loose and then he would rendezvous with us at a given location and then they would
participate in the rest of the tactical training. Also there was another group that we would
run through occasionally. We’d get in Fleet Marine Force Atlantic, we’d send a battalion
in, and we’d train the Marine Battalion in much the POI that we used with the Army
units.

SM: Okay, and what about other country forces?
WS: Occasionally we’d get in other troops. Mostly they were mixed troops from
down country. We’d get them in from Bolivia and Argentina and Peru and places like
that, and we’d run them through a course that was designed strictly for the Latinos and
the instruction was all given in Spanish. It was culminated by an exercise called the
Balboa crossing; big political thing. We’d truck them over to the Pacific side, put them
on Mike boats, take them out in the Pacific, and then we would come back to shore at a
location on an American installation, put them ashore, and then we’d do a tactical march
all the way back across the Isthmus of Panama, and shortly after they were disembarked
from the Mike boats, they moved through an American drop zone area and they began a
march up the Continental Divide, and you would cross the Continental Divide there and
then go ahead and make the complete Balboa crossing, culminating in escape and evasion
problems down the Chagris River. So, the training was pretty much like it was for the
Americans, but altered in that we made it more political in that we let them cross as
Balboa did. Most of them, of course they were from tropical areas and they had no
problem with the jungle, per se. A lot of Indians from the Bolivian and Colombian area.

SM: And they all, the Indians, had no problem understanding the Spanish
because a lot of them speak native dialects as well?
WS: Right.
SM: Now the foreign, the other country forces that would come through the
school, would you have a lot of interaction with them in Spanish?
WS: Well, yes and that was reinforced by the fact that the School of the
Americas had a program, which they called guest instructors. Part of the faculty was
from each country that was part of the OAS, Organization of American States. We had
instructors from Mexico, Guatemala, Panama. I don’t know if we had any from Panama, I
can’t recall any of those. We had them from Colombia and Chile, and these guys were all part of the faculty and we got along fine. If they saw any kind of a problem with our Spanish they’d say, “Here’s what you need to say,” and they’d tell us in English and give us the Spanish way to say it. Then we’d go ahead about it. So they reinforced us and if there was ever any questions as to what we were trying to tell the native speakers, one of the guest instructors would come in and sit down and he’d say, “Okay, here’s what we’re talking about.” He understood full well what we wanted to get across. Good system.

SM: Sounds like it. Any major problems arise while you were down there? Any major injuries or accidents?

WS: Oh yeah, yeah. We drowned one guy at least, and it was after…in the briefing for the escape and evasion course that was always standard; you do not ever get into the Chagris River, never, except for the SEALs. I let them do it because that was their environment anyway. Never lost a SEAL. They finished the escape and evasion in two hours. But, I remember the captain’s last name, it was Pack. He was just a recent graduate of the ranger’s school, and he took his detachment, they were going to cross the Chagris River high up, close to Ga Toon dam where there were a lot of rocks and everything and they were going to get on the other side and march untouched down the other side to the turning point, and not one of us saw them do this. I don’t know if he waited until after dark or when he did it, but a couple of guys survived and I think Pack and one other guy were lost. I know Pack was for sure. I can’t recall they ever recovered his body, I believe they did. But anyway, while trying to cross the thing he apparently lost his footing and still had all of his equipment on his back and drown. That was the one fatality that I am positive of, and we had a couple of snakebites. It could have been serious but they had an excellent herpetologist working down in that area. They knew how to treat them, they had the anti-venoms on hand, so I don’t believe we ever lost an individual to snake bite.

SM: These are mostly what, moccasins?

WS: Well we had bushmasters, we fer de lance, we had what we call an eyelash viper. There were a lot of semi-poisonous snakes. They were like a copperhead in that their venom was probably not fatal to a healthy human. We had one kid get hit by a
bushmaster, a small one, and they rushed him over to Kokusola Hospital and they gave
him the anti-venom and within a couple of three days he was okay again, but he had gone
into shock immediately. Of course a bushmaster is both humulin neuro-toxic. You don’t
know what dosage you got, but he didn’t die. But those were the ones [?] and then you
had some training accidents that were fairly common. A guy would scrape his arm or do
this kind of thing, sprain his ankle, whatever. Nothing very serious nor major
whatssoever.

SM: What about insects?
WS: Insects?
SM: Yeah.
WS: We had a bad problem with sand fleas, and strangely enough, you wouldn’t
suspect this, but they gave the same kind of disease that some of the troops got over in
Desert Storm. It’s an infection called Leschmaniasis.
SM: Yes, okay.
WS: And you had two types of it. One is not too serious. You’d get a little sore
for a while, and eventually it would go away. The other kind could cause some pretty
permanent disfigurations. It ate soft tissue, and if you got it in your ears or your nose or
around your eyes or mouth, you were in trouble. We had one incident with a…let me
think, what was he? I believe he was the Colombian military cadet. Somebody
diagnosed him as having tertiary syphilis and this was a major political problem.
Fortunately, MARU which was Mid America Research University, located over in
Panama City, had an excellent tropical disease clinic and we got him over there in the
medical personnel that took a look at him said, “No, no, no. This is not syphilis. This is
Leschmaniasis. We can halt it and then he’ll have to have plastic surgery to repair what
he has lost,” and he hadn’t lost that much, but enough that it would have disfigured him
had he not had the surgery. So yeah, that was the worst disease. Then of course there
was always the presence of malaria and we were always given prophylaxis, and we made
sure that we did so for the US units because at first we weren’t and we had a couple of
guys come down with malaria as they reported in to Vietnam and the only place they
could have gotten it was in Panama. So, we had no further recurrences that I know of.
Uh-oh, I’m going to change phones again; getting beeped.
SM: Okay.

WS: That’s the only limitation to these roam phones. But yeah, that was the only types of diseases that I’m really familiar with.

SM: And what about spiders or anything like that?

WS: Oh spiders everywhere.

SM: But I mean major poisonous spiders, spider bites, things that might have caused problems for people? Any incidences?

WS: There were some down there but I don’t know that anybody ever got hit by any of them. I don’t remember any being reported.

SM: And what about wildlife? I mean, we were encountering wild cats and other hefty animals.

WS: Well, there were a few left in the jungles around Fort Sherman, not many. I understand there were some pumas and what they call panthers. I never saw one. But wildlife was plentiful. Let me check something here a minute. “Pam, where’s the other telephone? Where’s the other telephone?” Yeah, I’m getting a beep here and I’ve got to find the other phone and I don’t know what she did with it.

SM: Okay.

WS: Stand by with me.

SM: I’ll just pause it so you can go ahead and find that phone, no problem.

WS: Apparently just in time. The red light was on. Okay.

SM: Anything else that you recall in working at the School of the Americas that was important in terms of...when did you leave there? You left there just before going back to Vietnam, is that correct?

WS: Yeah, I seem to remember I left there somewhere very early 1968, January I believe.

SM: And then seven months later or so you found yourself back in Vietnam?

WS: Yeah, that’s when I went to special forces and I went to the SF officers course up at Bragg right after I left Panama.

SM: Was there anything else that you remember from, before we talk about the SF school, anything else from the School of the Americas that you remember that was that important for when you went back to Vietnam, something you might have learned or
something that you thought they should have been integrating into the curriculum at the
School of the Americas that they hadn’t yet?

WS: I think that my thoughts might have not been correct. I still thought we
were not preparing our conventional troops for the political war. I guess, if you get right
down to it, the School of the Americas was a center for training tactics and survival and
at adaptation to jungle. The political element probably should have been left to their state
side units. So that was my thought, “Why aren’t we giving these guys some idea of the
political infrastructures over there so they’ll better understand it?” But then again…at
my level as a battalion advisor I needed that. At their level as a participant in an
American infantry battalion, probably not. That was for their leadership to understand
more so then them. But, it might have given them a better understanding as to why we
were there. I can second-guess it forever and ever and I will never know if I was right or
wrong. But, other than that, I thought that the idea of giving them some pre-training in
jungle environments was a very good idea. It would have probably helped me when I
first got over there because I had no idea what the jungle was like being a desert boy. But
other than that, I thought the School of the Americas did a pretty good thing in preparing
them.

SM: And how long was the average course? If someone would have done it, how
long would they usually stay?

WS: two weeks.

SM: Just two weeks?

WS: Yeah, and we ran constant. I don’t recall ever getting a cycle break. You
had to take a leave to get a cycle break. We’d start a company, like we’d get them in on
let’s say Saturday they’d start in and Sunday morning we’d process them in, Monday
morning we’d start the training and that would go all the way through to Saturday two
weeks from then you would graduate the outgoing company by noon and by two p.m.
you would be receiving the new company. So, we got a two-hour cycle break, maybe.

SM: That’s not very much time.

WS: No, it’s not.

SM: Okay, so anything else you want to add about the School of the Americas
before we move to special forces?
SM: Okay.
WS: That was pretty much the School of the Americas for me.
SM: Okay, now the special forces officers course up at Fort Bragg, that was how long? How long did that last?
WS: I’m trying to think…about six weeks? I’m pretty sure it was.
SM: And what was the primary goal of sending you through that course? What was the purpose of that?
WS: It’s a qualification course. Even though I’d been working in jungle operations and I had some combat experience behind me, I had very little of the real insurgent/counter insurgent things that special forces were supposedly expert in, and it required me to go back through a refresher course in parachute training because at the time I went there I was still just a five jump commando. As a major, and I received a little flack, but that was okay. Anyway, we got into the special forces training and of course you’d go back into learning all of the older weapons and learning demolition techniques, ambush techniques, how to train guerilla forces, how to equip them, learn the politics of the region, do your area background studies, things I would have never thought of as a conventional soldier. Everybody in the class was an officer, which was a little unrealistic, but I could see the reason why after I graduated. Being a major, I was the senior officer in my particular team, and one of the things that I immediately recognized by all of my previous experience is that if I did everything for them, they wouldn’t learn it. If I told them the answers to what I saw, they wouldn’t learn it. So when the leadership positions would rotate, and perhaps a young first lieutenant would take charge of the team, I played like the dumbest private in the team and let him make his own mistakes, you know. Now if I saw him getting into trouble or somebody might get hurt or something like that, “Time out here, let’s not do it this way.” I thought the training down at Fort Bragg was pretty damn good. It further reinforced the idea of teamwork. They had a lot of really, really super instructors down there; men that I would just go to hell with them. I don’t recall that I ever ran across a real question mark down there, and I had a faculty advisor who later, he and I were in the 46th company together. It was one of those places where you start meeting people that you’re going to be working with later in
your career. A couple of my team members ended up going to Vietnam after I did and
when they were assigned to SOG they found out I was up north and they volunteered and
came up and worked for me up north. I thought that the two week FTX that we went on
up in the Uarie National Forest was an excellent exercise; very realistic, well planned,
well thought out, well supported. Everybody got something good out of that.

SM: What was the premise of the exercise?
WS: Well its like one of the old World War II things where you’ve got a region
in the world where people are ready to over throw a government that’s unfriendly to us
and we’ve made some contacts and so we parachute a team in somewhat like the Jet birds
did. You parachute in, you meet the guerilla forces, and you establish your rapport with
them or you don’t, one of the two, and from there you develop your guerilla operations
against the enemy. You take them through successful operations or you might have an
unsuccessful one. Anyway, they just bring you through and throw all of these different
situations at you that really kind of screw with your mind, things you wouldn’t really
expect to run into in the real world. For an example, when I first met my guerilla chief
we were sitting around a campfire and he had an interpreter and he was throwing a bunch
of BS back and forth between him and the interpreter and the interpreter would talk
around and says, “Well the chief wants this and the chief wants that.” Well they didn’t
know this, but they were speaking Spanish, so I’m just sitting there taking everything in
that they’re talking about and of course the chief is going to throw some kind of
squirrelly thing into the whole formula to try to get me screwed up and off track and
everything but I heard what he was saying and knew what he was planning so I turned
around and tell my troops, “Here’s what we’re going to do and don’t argue with this guy
when he comes over gives you a ration of poop, just do what he says and then let me
know what is going on,” you know. This went on for about two days and about the 3rd
day we’re sitting around having lunch and he said something to the interpreter and I
answered him back in Spanish and he looks up at me and in English says, “You son of a
bitch, why didn’t you tell me you spoke Spanish?” It wouldn’t have been any fun. So we
established a good rapport that way. Of course once he knew that I understood
everything he was saying, everything was said in English from that point on. We ran
through the whole exercise, and everybody had his turn at leadership in there and I
thought it went rather well. The young officers really learned a lot. I would say they
learned a lot more than I did in terms of the survival parts of the course. I had to go down
and kill chickens for some of the city boys. They’d sit there and play with the chicken,
“Well I can’t kill this chicken, look at his eyes!” “Let me see.” Rip its head off, and say,
“Here, eat the damn thing.” They’re crying, but that kind of thing, that was the fun part
of it.

    SM: Did they use rabbit as well?

    WS: They only used a demo of biting the belly out of a rabbit. I don’t know if I
did it or somebody else did it.

    SM: Of biting the belly?

    WS: What?

    SM: I’m sorry, of doing what?

    WS: You bite the stomach out of it. You just start ripping the skin off.

    SM: Oh goodness.

    WS: That’s if you don’t have a knife.

    SM: Gotcha. Well, who did they use as support and as aggressors and as your
intermediary, the guerillas that you had to work with in training?

    WS: Quite a mixture. Mostly they were Fort Bragg support troops. They had
some infantry units up there that supported it, and some of the SF troops supported it and
the guerilla chief and his interpreters and some of those guys were all SF. Then their
support guerillas came out of two sources; one was the support troops from Fort Bragg,
and the others were civilians that they made deals with. Like to get us food re-supplies,
they weren’t going to fly in a bunch of stuff from Fort Bragg or truck it up the road.
They’d contract with one of the local civilians to bring it out in the back of his pickup.
Then you had contacts in town that they worked with. Like one time, we had a meeting
with somebody, I can’t remember who, but we had to slip into town in our civilian
clothes and go down to this one little café and sit and have coffee and wait until this
certain guy came in and gave us a certain sign and all this and that, and it was rather
realistic; as realistic as you could make it without having hostile security forces all over
the place. It gave you the idea how to do it.
SM: And the special forces trainers that you had, these were all Vietnam veterans predominantly?

WS: I don’t think all of them were, but a majority of them had been at least in Laos or Vietnam.

SM: If they were in Laos, would they talk openly about that?

WS: No, not then, but of course I know all the background and now we do, Project White Star. But in those days, nobody talked about any of it. They wouldn’t talk openly about their experiences in Vietnam or White Star or anything else unless it was somebody I knew closely from a previous acquaintance or something like that, and there were very few of them there at that time. I knew a couple of guys that were there from Panama more than I did guys that were in Vietnam.

SM: And what about other combat experience from other areas of the world which, I mean, even though we had Vietnam going on in the ‘60s and into the ‘70s, there were also other hot spots that were much, much less talked about.

WS: Oh yeah.

SM: Would the instructors incorporate lessons from all of these different theaters of operations that were overseas?

WS: Overall, yeah. You had some guys from World War II that had been part of the OSS teams that were there and I’m sure they were including their background experiences within what they were teaching; they had to be because it was all part of the curriculum.

SM: Right. What about operations that were going on concurrently with the Vietnam war, say in other Latin American countries?

WS: No, I don’t think we had any of that being incorporated. Just as an interesting side note, I don’t know if I told you there was a guy named Ralph Shelton that went down to Bolivia?

SM: Yes, yes, you did tell me.

WS: Did I tell you? Okay.

SM: Well, you mentioned him; you mentioned Ralph Shelton.

WS: Yeah, Ralph and I were OCS classmates. I just saw him last month, as a matter of fact. But, he was in Panama at the same time I was and we drove home
together. I know I related that story to you. There wasn’t that much talk of any of the
operations in Latin America. Everything, by this time, was geared towards Southeast
Asia. Everything else became that sideshow that General Ramira talked about.
SM: And what were the most important things you took away from the special
forces officers course that you were able to utilize, apply to your next tour of duty in
Vietnam?
WS: Well I think basically it was a different style of leadership and a different
way of employing tactics leadership in that as a small, small, tightly knit unit, you had to
select your people properly and learn their capabilities and limitations quickly, and then
learn to rely on them to do the job without you having to tell them specifically, “Do this,
this, this, this, and this.” Give the man the job and let him do it, and that served me well.
SM: What about, you mentioned you’re working in a very close, small knit unit.
How about that lesson you mentioned previously where…or maybe not lesson, but
something you mentioned earlier was that one of the things that you thought was good
about the rotation that you underwent it was probably good that you were rotated out
during Vietnam because you thought you were getting too close to the unit.
WS: Exactly, exactly. But that carried forward.
SM: That carried forward, but what about in this type of scenario where you’re a
small unit and you’re a team, you’re a handful of guys.
WS: Just so you could not get so close to your men, and there were a couple of
things that I saw where guys did. Senior officers got too close to their recon team
leaders, and it was detrimental.
SM: How so?
WS: Well, they would lose good judgment.
SM: You mean like become too concerned about the welfare of the team?
WS: Huh?
SM: Would they become too concerned about the physical welfare of the men?
WS: Yeah, and the loss of an individual would throw them into a nut roll and
they would be incapacitated for several hours. That’s the kind of thing, like for an
example, at NKP for me, I had 13 hand picked men from anybody I wanted out of the 5th
group, and I loved each one of them dearly. But, if one of them got shot down, and the
only one that I really lost in that I lost one of my forward air control pilots. A good man;
I’d flown lots of missions with him and everything, but you just don’t get attached to
them to where it debilitates you and makes you incapable of making further decisions.
So, that was part of the lesson learned from that. Its alright to be part of the unit and have
the faith and understanding of your troops and be close to them, but realizing that there
are several others that have to be looked after the same way was the guiding light in that
whole thing. I’m not going to lose ten men over the loss of one. I’m not going to be
saving Private Ryan.

SM: What did you think of that movie, speaking of?

WS: I just did get the DVD and put it on my computer, just did watch it. I
thought it was very well done. I don’t know that there was a lot of truth in it that they
would save one man like that, but the thought was good. The special effects, even on my
computer with the surround sound and system that I have, were excellent and the story
was, I thought it was well done. There’s only one thing, one experience that they cannot
impart in that and that is the terror that you feel when that first round cracks above your
head and the ensuing rounds. You feel the overpressure of it as well as hear it crack and
you say, “God, that was close!” and that’s the one thing they couldn’t impart. There’s
just something sitting in the theater or in my computer room watching the movie, I didn’t
have that feeling of terror that I did when the real rounds were going by. Other than that,
I thought it was very well done.

SM: Well, I guess the next thing to talk about is your…when did you find out
that you were going to be going back to Vietnam and what did you think when you found
out you were going back?

WS: Well I knew when I left Panama that I was going to Vietnam. That was, I
volunteered for it as a matter of fact. I volunteered to go SF and then to Vietnam because
as I think I mentioned early on, I was an infantry officer and that was my business and by
this time I’d already decided on a career and I was, well, I was already halfway through
so that’s where I needed to be. So when I finished my training at Bragg there was no
question. I came home on leave and I went right straight to Vietnam. The shocker was
when I report in to the adjutant in Nha Trang. He’s gone through SFOC with me also.
He said, “Well, where do you want to go? CCS or CCN?” I said, “What the hell is a
CCN or a CCS?” I never heard of it in special forces training. I think some of the instructors might have talked about SOG this, SOG that, but I never heard a CCN or a CCS and when the guy told me, “I know, but I can’t tell you, its classified,” I knew how deep I was up to my ankles in you-know-what. I had my choice to go to the guy that had been my MATA course chief instructor Earl Tribue, or I could go up to north where my infantry company commander from Korea, Roy Burrow, was at and I chose Roy, so I went north.

SM: Before you go on, what do those abbreviations mean?
WS: CCN is command and control detachment north, and command and control detachment south. Eventually they had a command and control detachment central.

SM: C cubed?
WS: Yep, which was at Kontum. South was at Ban Me Thuot, north at Danang, and Kontum was central. Those designated of CCN and CC south, CC central, didn’t become effective until January of ’69 I find. They were just 5th special forces group SOA augmentation, or something like that.

SM: And you said they mentioned SOG in special forces officers course.
WS: That’s all I ever heard was just SOG, but no details. They just said, “Oh man, their casualty rate is extremely high. You don’t have much of a chance,” and they were all kind of spooky stories. I never gave them any more thought because I didn’t know about it.

SM: And did they tell you what SOG meant or was that just an acronym they just threw around?
WS: Just an acronym as far as I knew at that point. I didn’t even know when I got that initial invitation to CCN that they were part of SOG. I didn’t find that out until I got there.

SM: Okay, so you went back in country and you decide to go north?
WS: Yeah.
SM: And what unit were you first assigned to and what were your primary responsibilities?
WS: When I got off of the airplane at Danang I was met by the deputy commander who’d been a lieutenant with me at Fort Jackson, a guy by the name of Iris
Snell. Iris said, “Well you going to go down and meet Colonel Marb but he and Colonel Warren are having a big argument as they always do down in the officers club,” so I went down and sure enough they were all but at fisticuffs. Roy said, “Time out, time out,” and he came over and greeted me and he says, “We’re leaving here in two hours,” and he said, “You’re my XO up at Phu Bai.” So that’s when I got my first assignment. Then, when I got to Phu Bai, of course, I was briefed in on everything.

SM: What do you mean by everything?

WS: Well, SOG had special briefings and special levels of access to everything of course that the FOBs and mobile launch teams, you were in on everything. You knew where every mission was and why it was going and how the targets were selected, the six kilometer no bomb line, recon team names, members, enemy strengths, what you were looking for, what kind of mission it was going to be, assets available to help you out. It was a thorough briefing. It took probably about three days for everybody to get me filled in on their particular aspects of the whole mission.

SM: How many men were assigned to the base at Phu Bai?

WS: Okay, in terms of Americans I’m trying to get a good handle on that. I’d say we probably had about 100 Americans at the outside, maybe a few less. We had three Americans assigned, mostly, for every recon team. Then we had a battalion of KKK, Khmer Cambodia.

SM: Cambodians?

WS: Yes.

SM: How were they?

WS: Rotten, I fired them when I took command. I did, I’m serious. I’ll tell you why in a little bit, but I forget how many recon teams we actually had assigned but they were all mixed. We had somewhat they called cowboys, were I think Vietnamese, you had some Chinese Nungs and a few Montagnards, and each team was kind of a specialty team. They excelled in road watch, they excelled in prisoner snatch, they excelled in implanting hand held seismic intrusion devices. Just based on what their specialty was we earmarked them, and that was, of course, they overlapped and they were all capable of doing each mission, but some were just better at some missions than others.

SM: In your area of operations, Phu Bai is just south of Hue?
SM: How far did your area of operations extend? Did it extend all the way inland to Laos?

WS: No, our area of operations was in Laos.

SM: It was in Laos? This was just a staging area?

WS: I didn’t run into the A Shau Valley or areas peripheral to that.

SM: Gotcha, okay.

WS: But for the most part, it was within that region just inside of Cambodia out across the trail and just short of Tchepone in most cases because that was such a hot area to try to get into. But, then it ran from...actually, I’m sure that if they wanted to that we could have gone in at Mu Gia Pass which was almost asking for certain destruction, all the way down to just...well, at that time we went down to the area around Kontum and then south picked up from there from the south down into the Cambodian area.

SM: Wow, so that was quite a range...

WS: Yeah.

SM: ...that you guys had.

WS: Oh yeah.

SM: Several hundred miles?

WS: Oh yeah. It could be, and that’s why we had so many different launch sites to support various areas, and NKP was in existence at that time.

SM: NKP?

WS: Yeah, NKP Royal Thai Air Force Base in Northeast Thailand. We had a mobile launch team over there that at the time was commanded by my old spic buddy from ’62 and Panama, Major Bill Husky, now dead, but Husky had been the XO and when they found out I was coming in Roy released him and let him go over and take over the mobile launch team at NKP. Over there they had the 7th Air Force frag of three H3 helicopters, four A-1s, and two O-2 FACs everyday, and they supported either launches into the area from the backdoor or recoveries if weather was too bad for us to get to them with our assets from Vietnam.

SM: Now how about American civilians working in that area or coordinating operations in your area? Was there much of that?
WS: None. I never saw an American civilian in my area. I take it back, I forget
his name, I think it was Ben Baker, was a civilian working out of Okinawa. He was
developing goodies for us and one of the most memorable was the indigenous LRRP
ration. But, they also came up with some dirty tricks things.
SM: Can you explain some of those?
WS: I think that they were little goodies like beanbag mines, coalmines, some of
those things I think came out of Ben’s operation.
SM: So I guess improvised munitions of sorts, things like that?
WS: Stuff that could be distributed into my hand or by air and you would never
know, just walking along, you wouldn’t even see the damn stuff. You’d step on it and it
was like a shoe mine.
SM: And your operations in Laos in particular, just into Laos from the A Shau
and around Tchepone, did you guys receive much support from Air America?
WS: Not that I am aware of. Our missions were almost entirely supported by our
daily frag missions augmented by Air Force assets through the Airborne Battlefield
Command and Control Center; Hillsboro, Moonbeam, Alley Cat, those were the C-130s
that had a complete air battle staff aboard, and if we ran into contact that we couldn’t
handle with our gunships and our A-1s, if we had the A-1s, they would vector in anything
else that was on a mission out there that could be diverted and they would bring their
bomb loads and rockets and napalm strikes in to support us. Our troops in contact
seemed to take top priority over anything but a downed American pilot, which was as it
should have been.
SM: Yes, and in the operations that were conducted in Laos, your unit, that
conducted operations, did they work on coordination with indigenous Lao forces; either
the Laotian or the H’mong Miat Mao or anybody?
WS: No, nobody was privy to our operations except SOG units, and those that
were directly supporting us. Hillsboro, the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control
Center was one of those who was completely briefed on what we were doing, where we
were doing it, and when because they had to make sure that no air strikes went into one
of the areas where our troops were unless our troops called for it. But other than that, no.
Now the Vietnamese that were involved there, STDs, strategic technical directorate, that
was their counterpart to SOG, they knew and we often had the feeling that they were the
guys that were fingering us through double agents because some of our missions were
compromised before they got on the ground.

SM: What evidence did you have of that?

WS: Well, really none, and come to find out...what was this Navy family’s
name, the guys that were found guilty of espionage, the whole family?

SM: The Walkers?

WS: Walkers. They were the guys fingering us. They were giving the info,
which went straight from our planning back to Pentagon, and from there it was supposed
to be approved and then sent back to us and of course these guys were getting all the
traffic and they were turning around and transmitting it to the Russians, and the Russians
in turn would transmit it to the NVA.

SM: Okay, and then down it would come all the way south?

WS: This is what we determined just through our own investigations. If I were to
be called into a court of law to say, “Did this happen?” I don’t know.

SM: You can’t prove it?

WS: I can’t prove that, but it seems that somebody has trafficked pretty well. I
don’t know how far. But that’s...I think that the idea that the Vietnamese soldiers in the
STD were involved in that kind of thing was highly unlikely and they were pretty much
on top of the thing. They were more into the espionage thing and counter espionage than
we are. They learned it from the French, and they’d be pretty careful about it.

SM: Sometimes we’d give them false information and we never had any indication that they
were passing that on either.

WS: No.

SM: One last question about interaction with other units; had you either during
your tour with SOG or previously when you were working with the ARVN units in ’62
and ’63, had you ever heard of units called Quang Ni special platoons?

WM: No.

SM: I did ask you before about the PRUs, the provincial reconnaissance units?

WS: Yeah, I knew of the PRUs. I never had any interaction with them

whatever.

SM: No interaction?
WS: No.
SM: Gotcha.
WS: Not Phoenix either. SOG was one of those very, very specialized things where God, you know, it was strictly conceived and executed through the US channels and it was a joint operation and it worked extremely well.
SM: Now by joint operation you mean joint US-Vietnamese?
WS: Joint US-Vietnamese including Army, Navy, Air Force of both governments.
SM: Okay, so joint in every respect?
WS: Yes. I was just talking to this guy…remember I asked you if I could have Jim Andrews get a hold of you? I was talking to him about that last night and he agrees with me 100% that that was one of the few times where if you reduce the operational control to the troop level, joint operations can work wonderfully well. Keep the service level politics and money grabbing out of it, and it works as it’s supposed to because we were just a team of American kids out there trying to get the job done.
SM: Well could you discuss some of the major operations and activities that your unit engaged in out of Phu Bai?
WS: Oh boy, every one was a major one to me.
SM: Well start with the beginning and we’ll go as long as you want today and we can pick up later.
WS: Well the daily fare was that we would have a team designated to go on a particular type of mission. The specifics would all be the same, just about. But, I can give you a couple of examples of other things. We’d get the team, we’d brief them…uh-oh. That’s my son trying to get on the other phone. He’s got his own cell phone, so he can use that. Anyway, we’d brief the team, we’d prepare them with whatever equipment that they requested for the type of mission. Usually it was going to be, and I would say the largest number of missions were road watch/trail watch/river watch, trying to determine a pattern of enemy movement in a given area, what size units, what type of equipment in units, etcetera, and you’d give them their initial mission briefing and I don’t think the team leaders were dumb enough to give the actual areas to their team members who, of course, were mercenaries. But, they would train and equip their people and get
them all ready and then finally whenever the day came for the launch all of our assets
assembled on site at the proper time, they’d launch the FAC, they’d go out and make a
pre-area recon, make sure that the enemy hasn’t really compromised, if possible, and then
they would launch the insert package which always had its share of either gunships or A-
1s for the insert, put the team on the ground, and after a certain given time the team
would come back with an okay that they were on the ground, had not been detected, and
they were beginning their movement. Some of these teams were successful in staying out
for the required time, but most of them were picked up by trail watchers rather early on
and would get picked up by an NVA tracking unit and then eventually get into fire fights
and we’d have to bring them out before a complete successful mission could be
accomplished. That’s not to say that they weren’t giving us good intel, they did. Just the
contact was good intel. But, on those occasions where we had troops that stayed in and
were able to hang in there for the required time, they gave us some excellent information.
Plus, they were able to pin point cache sights, rest areas, that type of thing to where we
could funnel the information back to appropriate agencies and say for an example the Air
Force could conduct night strikes against a rest area. That’s just one example.
Interdictions, we did a few of those and they almost always were met by severe resistance
from the NVA and you could get a few good shots in and then the teams were on the run
and you’d have to pull them out under fire as a rule.

SM: I’m sorry, what was the primary purpose of these missions?
WS: An interdiction.
SM: To interdict and stop the flow of…
WS: Yeah.
SM: …of men and materials?
WS: That almost always went hand and hand with the prisoner snatch if we could
get it done, and we did get a few out. I couldn’t give you an exact number. The
prisoners I think almost always gave some pretty good information to the interrogators.
SM: And this interrogation was conducted by Americans, Vietnamese, both?
WS: First by Americans and then I’m sure they were also interrogated by the
Vietnamese back up to a higher level.
SM: But again, as you said earlier, in this environment, these were…the people that were captured were…your primary mission was to expedite your movement to the rear where they would be interrogated?

WS: Right.

SM: Not to actually interrogate at your level?

WS: No, no, huh-uh.

SM: Okay. What about an immediate capture interrogation, someone on the team at least asking some questions to glean information about the size and the disposition of the units in the area that the team is operating in?

WS: I couldn’t give you an exact on that; I’ll tell you why. The technique was almost always to try and knock one of them down and we used the 22 caliber high standard silent pistol to knock them down, and then they would hit them with a shot of morphine so that they could quietly be taken out of the area.

SM: I mean for SOGs, studies and observations group, I mean this is, correct me if I’m wrong, but most of the operations that you conducted, the attempt was to remain covert?

WS: Yes.

SM: You did not want to be detected?

WS: That’s right.

SM: Or clandestine I guess would be a more appropriate way of saying it.

WS: Right, yeah, the longer you could go without detection, the more chance for success of the mission.

SM: Right, and so when you mentioned that not all the teams would stay out for the required length, the desired length, was there a certain amount of time, a set amount of time that you wanted teams to remain out, or did it depend upon the mission objectives?

WS: We’d like to have stayed in normally from five to ten days.

SM: Five to ten days?

WS: Few made it beyond the five days, few made it to the five days.

SM: And did they carry every they needed to sustain themselves for that long, or would they require resupply?
WS: If they were in longer than the five days, we almost always had to resupply.
SM: And that was conducted again indigenous, internally, as far as air assets…
WS: We did it by air.
SM: Right, but air assets that were probably either Air Force or Army?
WS: These were almost always Air Force types. What we would do is, and I could give you a better example out of NKP because I had all my assets right there, but we would get one of the old LAU-59 rocket pods, gut it where all we had was the empty canister, we’d find an O jive for it, tape that on…
SM: I’m sorry, a what?
WS: O jive.
SM: What’s that?
WS: Nose cone. Excuse me, get rid of my smoker’s cough here. Anyway, then we would pack both rations and ammunition, whatever supplies that they needed, into the gutted rocket pod. Then we’d put a piece of plywood on it and we’d have a little drogue chute in it and it was rigged with a cutter that as soon as it detached from the airplane it would cut a line and allow the drogue chute to pop out so that we could deliver it from a fairly steep angle and pin point it where we wanted it to go, and it would open very low so that it would not be as detectable. When they saw it falling they would assume maybe it was a bomb device or a sensor or something coming, but they couldn’t pinpoint it that easily. The team would get it and remove whatever the contents were and go on with their mission.
SM: And would they…were there ever any examples where in addition to that they received new instructions for other missions or was it just for resupply that wouldn’t ever…
WS: Well I don’t recall ever…I’m just trying to think if I ever had to reprioritize a mission out in the bush, and I don’t recall one. It was complicated enough for that primary mission, and they were already at risk anyway, so to reprioritize them out there would not have been practical. It would have been better to have prepared another team and then insert them for the different mission.
SM: Can you give me some examples of missions that went awry?
WS: Yeah, a couple of them probably. I had one team that was in Laos and they were doing fairly well but they were getting picked up by some trail watchers and they did get into contact and the team leader called for an extract and so we told him, “Okay, we’re going to prepare the aircraft to come out and get you and move to this particular location and hold high and dry,” which he did, but it was a little out growth of bush out in a fairly open area. Well, the NVA kind of got to where they were picking on them out there and so he decided that while the air strikes were going in, it would be an advantageous time for him to move up to a close tree line and get him and his team in to where they at least had some maneuver room if they had to. It just so happened that he moved his team just as an A-1 had laid down some rockets and was pulling up and was rolling to the right to get a better view of what his rockets had done and he saw these guys moving and thought they were NVA. He flipped back over and came in and dropped a canister of napalm and it did burn some of the team members, but fortunately his reaction was so quick that he didn’t get a good aim on the guys, so when we pulled them out we had some minor burn casualties, and that was one that went kind of awry. I don’t know if I told you about the Christmas Eve of ’68?

SM: I don’t believe so.

WS: I had just taken command of the site on the 1st of December and that’s when Colonel Bard moved most of his staff down to Kontum to establish CCC. Anyway, I’d been called by Chief SOG on the radio, said, “I want this team in, and I want them to move at night only, pick one of your best men for it,” and I did. I picked a young Chinese-American kid by the name of Bob Layong, Robert Layong, and he was one of the best captains I had out there. I can’t even remember if he was lieutenant or captain at the time. I know he ended up being a captain, but I picked Bob and I gave him the mission brief and I told him, “No movement except at night, your mission is road watch,” etcetera, etcetera, and he said, “I can do that,” and it was a ten day mission and I inserted him, I think it was on the…this I can’t be sure of, but I think it was around the 21st or 22nd of December and I was told, “I don’t care about the Christmas halt, you just keep them in there and keep them going. I want them in there for ten days.” I said, “Okay, that’s fine.” He said, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of you,” and Chief SAGs word was good as the Bible to me. So I briefed Layong on the whole thing and put him in.
Christmas Eve, somewhere in the mid-afternoon, let’s say two, three o’clock in the afternoon, I get a call on the single side band all over the world, in the clear, “What the hell are you doing with a team out there? You get those people out of there right now, do you understand me?” “Yes, sir.” So I put the FAC up and I sent them out to talk to Layong, I told him, “Move to this extraction LZ right now!” He comes back through the [?] and says, “Christ, do you know if you make me move now you’re going to compromise me and we’ll be in a fight?” I said, “I don’t care, move!” so he did and sure enough, they got into contact. Well it was dark by the time we got them pulled out and oh Jesus, you talk about a gaggle. I had VNAF H-34s were the extract ships; no avionics, super pilots with hundreds of hours of experience, and brave as the day is long. They were being led into the area by my forward air control aircraft, the O-2 with one of my observers aboard, and the gunships of Marine squadron HML347, flown by the squadron commander as the lead, Dick Robinson. They go out, they make the extraction, and on the way in I get a report that one of my Americans had been wounded. So, “Oh Christ,” you know? Well on the way back in apparently one of the H-34s got separated. Now remember, no avionics aboard. He’s flying by the seat of his pants. It’s already dark. The only people had avionics were the Marines, so I called Robbie on the phone, I said, “Hey, where’s the third…” he said, “I don’t know, I lost him. I went back to find him.” He did. When he brought him back in, the casualty on board was then lieutenant Layong, we’ll call him lieutenant, and Bob had received a flesh wound from an AK-47 in the area just above his pubic area. He came off…this is on our website, too, but he came off the helicopter and the first thing he said was, “Mary f___ing Christmas!” you know, and it really was because I had the kid back alive and with a fairly superficial wound, but that’s one of the real screw ups too that could have been fatal.

SM: And the whole reason why you were ordered to pull that team back was because this was supposed to be a truce period?

WS: Yeah, it was the Christmas bombing hold of ’68 and we got caught at it. Somebody, the NVA, notified somebody and it got back to political channels and some of the politicians said, “Get them out of there!”

SM: Yeah, but the thing is you weren’t bombing. This is a bombing pause or a truce period.
WS: It was a truce and a bombing hold.

SM: Yeah, but you’re not engaging in overt military activities. You’re just sitting around listening and watching.

WS: Yeah, but he potential was there, and it was. It was stretching the point.

SM: What did you think of that as commander of troops? I mean, they didn’t stop moving obviously. They didn’t pause their activities. Once that troop just moved, they were engaged by the enemy.

WS: Well here’s the thing; we knew that the NVA wasn’t going to stop doing what they were doing, and so therefore, you know, if it was okay for them, it was okay for us, and we believed that what we were doing was right. We were, in the long run, we were doing something that we thought would save American lives down the road, and so it was acceptable and it was special operations, it was black ops. So, it was okay by us. The Chief SOG eventually came up and he said, “Don’t worry about that,” he said, “I told you to do it, you did just what I wanted, and so everything’s cool.” And I understood that from the get go when he told me that. Then there were a lot of potential screw ups; had one guy, Steve Rutledge, a young black-American, he was one of my best recon leaders, he came to me for a last light insert in NKP and I warned him, “This is your last insert. You’ve been here too long. You’ve got to go home.” “Okay, alright.”

SM: How long had he been there?

WS: He’d been there two years already, and had gone on numerous recons. He was an excellent man. But, he went in on a last light insert and somewhere within an hour or two after being on the ground they made contact. To make the story short, only through the God given talent and bravery of a warrant officer out of the 101st Airborne who we just called in out of the air from Quang Tri, we went in and we were able to get him and one Vietnamese survivor out on stabo rigs. Steve had been shot seven times. Anyway, those were the only two we got out of that one alive.

SM: And he survived?

WS: He survived. I’ve never been able to get in touch with him since them. I think he’s got bad memories or something and I certainly don’t blame him. He was one of my favorite young captains. Then there was, yeah, there were all kinds of things like I
think I told you about the extractions of the all Vietnamese teams down in Cambodia just 
prior to the invasion in 1970?
SM: Uh-huh.
WS: That could have been potential screw up had I not just defied everything 
and said, “I’m going after them without any verbal permission.” I thought that silence 
was acquiescent and I went down and got these three Vietnamese teams out. I could have 
sacrificed all of them had I not done that.
SM: So like you said, a lot of potential?
WS: There was always the potential for humongous screw ups in SOG operations 
because everything depended upon the willingness of everybody involved to go in and do 
what they had to do, and fortunately I was blessed all though our assignments with air 
crews, ground troops, everybody that was willing to sacrifice to go out and get their 
buddies back. I had no complaints in that arena at all and everybody was professional.
SM: Now were there ever any missions that your unit conducted where they went 
in, conducted their intelligence gathering activities, and were extracted without ever 
engaging the enemy?
WS: Yeah, there were a few.
SM: But it seems like that was not the norm.
WS: That was not the norm. The norm was once they were in, I’ve had people 
on the ground as short as ten minutes that had to be extracted and I’ve had them on the 
ground as long as Layong was on the ground, you know, seven or eight days, four or five, 
I don’t know. I’ve had them in as long as seven to ten days. But yeah, there’ve been a 
few that did stay and a few that accomplished the mission very, very well. They always 
brought out really good useable intelligence.
SM: And how was that intelligence used mostly as far as [?]
WS: We didn’t know exactly. We knew they went to the command in Saigon 
and they could gen up operations to encounter any buildups in this specific area which 
Dewey Canyon was one of those that did that, and then the invasions into Laos and 
Cambodia relied heavily from the intelligence that the SOG teams had brought out and 
the intelligence was, let’s say cache site locations, hospital cites, rest areas. The 
locations were all very accurate, and what they contained seemed to be very accurate.
SM: Now how would you know where to insert? You’re inserting a team in a specific location; would you have already some form of idea that there were going to be certain units in that area and how would that intelligence be gathered?

WS: What they would do, the targeting people in Saigon, working with their intel, would say, “Okay, we need some information out of this particular area,” and they’d give us the coordinates. Then, either myself or one of my guys would go out and fly visual recon in the area weeks in advance, one, two, three weeks in advance of the actual insert. We’d take photographs, hand held 35-millimeter photographs, go back, and then the team selection would be made. We’d bring the team leader and his Americans in and we’d show them all the pictures and this and this and this. Then, after they’d had a chance to look at that and do a map analysis, then the team leader was given an opportunity to go out and fly visual recon. Based on that and the forward air control officer, the Air Force pilot would make a couple of selections for LZs in which to insert and then the center of the target area was the center for which that six kilometer no bomb line was drawn around that team’s insert area.

SM: And what about your Vietnamese counterparts? How much of the briefings would they receive with regard to this?

WS: Mine, absolutely none. At my level, I didn’t deal with them. They were there. I had very little contact with them in ’68.

SM: We’ve been going now for…let me go ahead and pause this. Alright, well this will end the second interview with Bill Shelton.

Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting interview number three with Mr. Bill Shelton. I am in Lubbock, Texas. He is in Las Vegas. The date is the 22nd of June, year 2000 at approximately 3:15 in the afternoon central standard time. Mr. Shelton, why don’t you begin by discussing, from your perspective, the biggest differences between the conventional mentality and fighting the war and the rules of engagement and restrictions that were placed on conventional soldiers on the ground in Vietnam and the flexibility that existed in SOG units?

William Shelton: Okay. Many of the conventional units, with which I was familiar, had conventional planning, conventional orders issued, and they were bound by certain rules of engagement which were applicable to a particular region that they
happened to work in. There were several tiers of command and control that these units
had to go through. For the majority of their operations, they worked usually, not always,
but usually at a company level or above, primarily battalion maneuver units were the
standard, as I recall. Their conventional thinking was that a commander at a battalion
level perhaps was on the ground with his troops maneuvering, but there was almost
always a command and control helicopter with someone, either a commander or a fairly
senior staff officer from a brigade level, flying above the operation and in many cases
intervening with his direction to the ground unit commander. This was a decentralization
of the command and control structure. In SOG, we used the smaller unit tactics. We
were primarily recon teams. There were some battalion-sized operations, some company
sized operations, but the ten to 13 man recon team was the norm. These people operated
in very denied areas and, for the most part, having a command and control helicopter
hovering above them would have done nothing more than to give their location away.
Second, it would rob the ground unit commander of his initiative to fire, maneuver,
escape, and evade, or conduct operations as his situation dictated. The men who led these
recon teams were very bright young men, NCOs and officers, who had the ability to see
the situation, apply their initiative, their good judgment, and the tactics and techniques
that they had learned and trained with their team. Based on this, when they did have a
requirement for support, either they would go to the ABCCC, the Airborne Battlefield
Command and Control Center, or they would talk to a FAC which was a mission FAC,
either a nail or covey FAC that had a SOG observer either in the right seat or the backseat
depending on which aircraft. Information was almost always relayed from the ground
team to the SOG observer who was normally not the decision maker, but he would
respond to whatever the problem was that the ground unit commander presented to him.
If it was a request for air support, he would go to the pilot or the forward air controller
through Hillsboro and request tactical air support as required. If it required an extraction
of the team due to a preponderance of enemy force being applied that they could not
escape and evade from it by breaking contact, then we would have them set up their
defensive perimeter only and we would call for the extraction assets and direct their fires
in to provide the necessary havoc to cause the enemy to break contact with the team or at
least drive them back to a position to where we could bring in the extraction and
As the commander of both an FOB and many different mobile launch teams, I was given almost an autonomy to use my own judgment as to how to best handle situations with my recon teams that were on the ground. The only requirement was that you use good judgment, you use enough of your own brainpower to provide the proper techniques to get that team out alive. I can give you an instance in where I did have one large unit insert. As I recall, it was a battalion-sized mission down in the southwestern part of the A Shau Valley area. The 101st Airborne had been tasked and fragged to provide us with the necessary lift helicopters to do this mission. Per our standard, we brought in the forward air control assets. Then we brought in the helicopter leads from the 101st and briefed them on where the mission was to go, where the LZ was, what actions were to be taken. The 101st was not really happy with the thought that we were going to use so many of their assets and use the forward air control airplane to control the insert of these assets, so they requested, and rightfully so, they wanted to have a command and control helicopter flying above, not to interfere unless absolutely necessary, and as I recall it was their…the aviation battalion’s operations officer flew in the right seat of the helicopter, I flew in the back with the console, and watched the insert. 

The flexibility in our mission came as follows: The FAC was controlling the insert and directed the lead ships into the LZ area. As they were going into the LZ we started taking some ground fire. The mission brief had been, “Okay, if you don’t like the LZ and you start taking hostility, you can break it off and return to base and it will be okay. We’ll just abort the mission and do it another day. The lead pilot had some prior experience with SOG operations from previous missions and if he went into that LZ and started taking ground fire, he pulled out but he must have gone about another kilometer or kilometer and a half and said, “I see another area where we can put this, multi-ship LZ, put these ships into a multi-ship LZ and do the mission as planned,” and I chimed in quickly and I said, “That’s okay with me.” They did, the mission went off with no problems whatsoever. His initiative on saying, “Hey, I’ve got another LZ I can use,” was just perfect, and he knew what he was doing. When we got back to base camp after the insert was all over and we had an up from the battalion, I talked with the S3 of the aviation battalion. He and I discussed the fact that this was almost the exact concept that had been developed for air mobile at Fort Benning with the 11th Air Assault, but they
didn’t use it so much because while they had Air Force FACs, they preferred to use their own command and control ship, but he was pleased that our operation was working as well as it was. He had no further questions and we never had to go through that routine with the 101st assets again. Again, it was initiative on the part of a good, fine, young helicopter pilot who was experienced with our mission, the ability to make adjustments, and carry out the mission as it would have been had the first LZ been non hostile. That’s a fairly good example. It worked much the same way with all of our Air Force and Marine air assets. We were giving them leeway to make those last minute changes and as long as it fit in with the overall plan of the supported ground recon team leader, we would execute.

SM: And did you ever encounter resistance on the part of the pilots?

WS: No, not really. The pilots that we had were almost always dedicated to our mission by their units. The large insert was not so, but it was fortunate the lead pilot had been on our mission before. We almost never used spur of the moment types of assets. I think we did on a couple of cases and I don’t recall we ever had any reluctance except in one case where we tried to send H-47s into Laos and the lead pilot was familiar with our tactics and he said, “We can’t do that,” and General Stillwell was standing right there and he said, “God, I forgot about that, yeah, you’re right,” and he just funneled in some H-46s from the Marines. Again, that was flexibility on his part.

SM: So the flexibility was from the top of the chain down?

WS: Well it worked both ways. We were flexible at the top. We could bend things to make it fit the team leaders requirements, or the team leader could come back up and say, “Well we don’t think that’s going to work. Can you do that this way?” and we’d try and make it work for him because in all of the joint operations, the supported ground unit commander had the final say, so we have to adhere to what he really wants or needs if at all possible.

SM: That seems almost the reverse of some of the stories I’ve heard from men who served in conventional units…

WS: Yeah, that’s true.

SM: …where the directives would come from the helicopter flying 5,000 feet above or 10,000 feet above.
WS: Yeah, that’s the unfortunate part of micro management and centralization of command and control.

SM: Well did you ever encounter those kinds of problems while serving in Vietnam?

WS: Not on my part. I never did. I guess I was hard headed and stubborn enough that I was ignored anyway, but one of the gentlemen that was such a fine man, and he pointed out to me on a couple of occasions, was the commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing out of Nakhon Phanom. He was an Air Force O6 and also a WestPoint graduate and there was a case where I had a downed aircraft and we lost the OV-10, we lost an H-53, and another H-53 was being sent out and he wanted to know if I wanted to employ tear gas and I said, “Yeah, but…” he said, “You’re the supported ground unit commander at this point. If you say yes, it’s a go.” And I did. I took the opportunity to do that to get the one guy that was still surviving out without having too much resistance from the NVA. He worked well with us and that was the kind of cooperation we had.

SM: Was it common for you to use tear gas?

WS: No, not common at all. In this case we’d already lost two aircraft in this particular area; we lost and OV-10 and an H-53 that went in to make the pick up of the downed air crewmen who was still…well, my back-seater, so there was a total of seven people lost already to get this one guy out, and I deemed it probably a good thing to go ahead and use the tear gas on that target. That was the only time I ever used tear gas on my operation.

SM: Did you hear of it being used in others?

WS: I understood that it had been on a few, but I don’t know the specifics of those since they were not in my area of operation. It wasn’t commonly used, I’ll put it that way, but it was the bad stuff. It was the CS. It would get the granules in your eyes and make you want to up chuck. There’s nothing anywhere near what like they talked about…well, it may have been the same stuff they used, but it wasn’t nerve gas, for sure.

SM: It was probably very similar to what they used in training American soldiers when they…
WS: Go through the gas chamber?

SM: Yeah, they go through the gas chamber and make them de-mask.

WS: It’s the same stuff.

SM: It was the same stuff?

WS: Yeah, it’ll…

SM: It’s debilitating.

WS: Yeah, make you wish you were not living.

SM: Right, but it wouldn’t kill you.

WS: No, it would not kill you.

SM: Now, okay, in terms of the activity that you engaged in your first tours, though, and as an advisor, you never ran into the micro management problem there?

WS: No, there weren’t that many of us and communications were very poor. I only recall maybe two occasions where senior division advisors came out to where I was.

SM: Okay, and then back to the SOG activity; how important was it that when an insertion team would go in, it would, as you already pointed out, I mean, they’re going in clandestinely, they’re trying to keep as low a profile as possible, they don’t want to engage any forces unless its absolutely essential to their survival, and so there’s not a whole lot of radio traffic, is there? I mean, there wasn’t a lot of contact from the team back to headquarters?

WS: No.

SM: Or to the higher command?

WS: The normal thing that we had set up with the team, prearranged, is that once insert was over we would wait around until he asked, you know, anywhere up to an hour perhaps, to get himself located and situated and make sure he was secure, and normally the okay was just a double click of the transmit button or squelch twice real quick, and we understood that to mean okay.

SM: Okay, so not even any real voice communication unless absolutely necessary?

WS: Not usually.
SM: Wow, and if there was voice communication, it was probably an emergency?

WS: Well yeah, that’s very true, and a lot of this was alleviated by the introduction of the secure fox mike radios later on. Then, they could give us a verbal up without any fear of being RDFed.

SM: Now during the period that you were with the forward operating base and working with the MACV SOG, the primary forces that your groups would encounter, where were they from? Were these primarily North Vietnamese or Viet Cong as well?

WS: No, the ones that we encountered were all NVA.

SM: All NVA?

WS: By ’68, and at that time, ’68, ’69, and into ’70, the Viet Cong were not even considered anymore. I don’t recall that we ever dealt with anything like a guerilla unit. They were all main force North Vietnamese Army. Out in Laos, you might once in a while run across PL, Pathet Lao, who were assisting the North Vietnamese with trail watching and LZ watching, but it was hard to tell the difference because once you got into contact and the main force units were called up, then it was the same old ball game.

SM: Anything else that you would like to discuss with regard to your time with MACV SOG?

WS: I suppose that it has to be said that MACV SOG operated under the command of some very, very fine officers, one of which was General John Sinklaw of World War II heritage in this special operations arena, and the others that followed him were all men that had a lot of good special operations experience. Most of them did not wish to squander their troops just for statistics, and none of the missions that I can really recall up to a certain point were ever done just for statistics. They were done to go in and gather information which could then be processed into good intelligence for the conventional forces, and based on the fact that we all at the worker bee level, and I think this is important to bring up at this point, at my level in dealing with my aviation assets and any other support assets, we did not consider the inner service rivalry to be an important thing. Marines, Air Force, Army, and in some cases Navy worked hand in hand as a team without regards to, “Well, my service this, my service that.” We said, “Okay, here’s the mission, this is what has to be done,” and we melded together into a
team that I thought, even though it was so hastily put together for each mission, operated
as a well oiled machine and there was no hint of any inner service jealousy whatsoever.
There was simply pride in the fact that we worked together and got the job done the right
way.

SM: You mentioned Sinklaw by name. Anybody else stand out?
WS: Steve Cavanaugh was another, Jack Disler, Danny Schungel. The first two
were chief SOG, the second two were both chief of op 35, and prior to Jack Disler there
was a guy by the name of William Johnson, also a fine gentleman and a very fine boss to
work for. I’ve got to switch hands here, my right arm’s going to sleep. But, they were all
good commanders who would give you the leeway to do your job. Another guy I have to
throw in because he’s no longer with us, he’s deceased now, God bless him, was the
commander of CCN Jack S. Warren, a lieutenant colonel later promoted to colonel. He
was a very dedicated man and he loved his troops and he made sure that everything that
went on from anybody in CCN did the right thing by giving them the ground units the
proper support. That seemed to be the key to good commanders in SOG is supporting
those teams that were on the ground.

SM: I can’t recall if we’ve talked about this previously; you mentioned again the
importance of the SOG operations in providing intelligence that was then conveyed for
conventional unit use?
WS: Right.
SM: How much were you involved in that process in terms of the intelligence
that was gathered and then eventually it was processed and sent up headquarters. Was
that something that you were…
WS: Actually I had little to do with that in that I knew what was coming in across
the radio from daily reports that we would get from the team. This was all handled by the
appropriate staff officers. Usually the intel people would take the information and they
would submit their reports back up through CCN back to MAC SOG. At MAC SOG I
understand it was sanitized and it might take 24 hours to get back out to those non-briefed
conventional unit commanders. I think I did mention that I did have a run in with
General Richard Stillwell because he wasn’t SOG briefed in providing me with all my
daily assets, and once I got him briefed the whole thing just changed its complexion. He
became one of our most solid supporters. But as far as me doing the processing of the
information, that was one of the staff officer’s jobs and I let them handle it. I would read
it after they got it all prepared and it went up.

SM: Now do you know if the intelligence was ever used for Psychological
Operations?

WS: Oh I’m sure it was.

SM: I didn’t know if you knew any particular…

WS: I think that was covered by John Plaster in his book.

SM: Yeah, SOG?

WS: Market time or one of those things they did. They found out there was
certain things. One of the things we also found out, the Vietnamese are very superstitious
people like most of the Orientals that I’ve known and worked with. The Ace of Spades
trick was one that we used.

SM: Now how did that play into superstition?

WS: Well, in their society, much the same as in our own, an Ace of Spades in
fortune telling and Tarot and all of that indicates death, so if you threw an Ace of Spades
into one of their cache sites, somebody would see it and they would get very superstitious
and it played a big role in how well they would fight or not fight. We even experienced it
in a reverse fashion one time, and this was when we had a unit in support of Dewey
Canyon and most of the troops that were involved in it I believe were, I’m going to say
they were Cambodian but they might have been Montagnards. It wouldn’t make too
much difference. But, they got bogged down because the North Vietnamese had
somewhat of a shaman out there screaming Buddhist phrases, phraseology which I never
did get a good translation on. But the field unit commander told me that the indigenous
troops absolutely refused to move because this guy was standing out there shouting this
stuff and I have no doubt that that’s probably true because of the fact that, you know, my
wife being a Thai, she has some terrible phobias about the supernatural, and I think its
just something that exists in that part of the world. So, psychological warfare was
applied in a lot of ways. That was just one of them. Of course there were the, oh, I guess
you’d call them the ammunition implants, did we discuss those?
SM: Uh-huh, well, you’re talking about the AK-47 ammunition rounds that were explosive?

WS: Yeah, that and the 82 millimeter mortar rounds. Those were part of the psychological warfare thing.

SM: And while you were there, did some of your teams actively engage in those types of activities?

WS: Yes. Yeah, they were given certain types of ammunition to put into the cache sites. It wasn’t a lot, it didn’t need to be a lot. Just one charger full of AK-47 ammo that had one round of that in it, and they recharged their magazines and the guys said, “Wow, man, we’ve got bad ammo!” Same with the mortar crew. They didn’t have a chance to say that, but that was…the effect was wide ranging on those people, I’m sure.

SM: How would it work with the mortar rounds? Were they just basically mortar rounds packed with C-4 or something?

WS: Yeah, and the…

SM: And the blasting cap?

WS: They actually detonated with the charge.

SM: Instead of going up the tube, the tube explodes?

WS: The tube opened like a banana.

SM: Yeah, and lots of shrapnel killing everybody around?

WS: Right.

SM: And what about snatch missions? I can’t remember if we talked about that.

WS: Yeah, we did do snatch missions.

SM: Now, were those part of the Fing Wong, the Phoenix program?

WS: No, these were directed from the targeting people and they would go into a region and say, “We need a man from this particular unit to tell us what all is there,” and there was one case that turned out to be disastrous because the guy that we got was one of the most dedicated soldiers you’ve ever seen at the facility. The team went in, they saw this young NVA sergeant coming down the trail, they knocked him down, and they hit him with the morphine to keep him still when they brought him out, and as they pulled him out on stabo rigs they got up into the cooler air and I suppose the time might have played a part in it, too; the guy gained enough consciousness to see that he was being
lifted out and he banged on the Vietnamese that was holding him, knocked him out, and dropped him. That was an accidental type thing, it wasn’t an intentional drop. If he hadn’t incapacitated the guy that was holding him it wouldn’t have happened. But we did have a few successes in getting people out. I don’t know that they were ever worth that much in terms of the intelligence gathered from him. In one case, one team brought out I think there was two; one of them was a male and one was a female and I don’t recall that they ever gave them anything that was of any value whatsoever. There were only a few really successful PW snatches in all the time that I can remember; not many.

SM: And to your knowledge, did you ever participate in any Phoenix or ICEX or any kind of projects?

WS: No, we were completely divorced from them.

SM: Completely divorced?

WS: In our area of operations. We never worked with them.

SM: How about neutralization missions? I mean, we’re talking about snatch missions; what about a mission designed to neutralize a specific individual who just has to be neutralized because of their influence and power?

WS: Don’t recall that we ever did that.

SM: How about other SOG units or other units besides Phoenix because of course that’s what they’re most notorious for.

WS: I don’t really have any knowledge of some of the southern operations. I don’t know if they engaged in that or not. I know John Plaster, the author of the book, was a sniper, and I don’t know if he engaged in that kind of thing or not along with SOG but I know we had the weaponry for it, but I don’t…none of the missions that I was involved with ever had sniping to take out a specific individual as the goal. With the units that moved up and down the trail, it was kind of hard to tell who was moving until you got in there and you could either capture documents or get close enough maybe for somebody to put the binoculars on and see if they could even see any markings or anything like that that would indicate. For the most part they were just other units coming down the trail. We were interested in numbers, types of equipment, uniforms, anything that would be of use in saying, “Okay, we think this is going to be the North Vietnamese 325th Division,” or something like that. But as far as order of battle on their commanders
and things like that, I don’t believe we ever went for that kind of thing. Not in the area
we were operating in.

SM: What about collecting information or intelligence on civilian activities,
political activities?
WS: No, none.
SM: Or the movement of certain political leaders?
WS: We never were given something like that. I suppose that if we would have
had the opportunity, we might have done that. I think I told you about the one about the
Caucasian male in the Song Be River.
SM: Yeah, taking a bath?
WS: Yeah, swimming with his Vietnamese girlfriend. We wanted to get him so
bad, but that flopped. So, I suppose that would have been a good target of opportunity
type of a snatch if we could have carried it off. It would have been most beneficial in the
world political arena and the world propaganda arena. But there were none of the others
that I recall, I don’t believe I recall ever having been giving a specific name of any
individual to be looking for.
SM: So anything else from SOG?
WS: No, that pretty much wraps it up because as I say, I ended up my tour with
SOG when I was at mobile launch team three up in the Nakhon Phanom Air Force base
in northeast Thailand. The politics there were such, and this has just been in passing; the
aircrews that we worked with all knew who we were and what we did. None of the other
people on the Air Force base were aware of that. All they knew was that we wore black
baseball hats. That was it. You may have heard of the TLC brotherhood?
SM: Yes, Thai Lao Cambodia?
WS: Yeah, I belong to that also and I’ve always seen messages in there about that
little SF detachment that wasn’t there and there was a good reason for that; I think it was
primarily because of the politics between us and the Thai government. There were to be
no ground combat units stationed in Thailand. Well obviously we were part of a ground
combat unit, but the only person that I knew of that really probably knew that may have
been a very high level Thai government. I don’t know who he was. I know that we were
never allowed to say anything to anybody about our existence as a SOG unit in Thailand.
Now the 46th special forces company knew it and the commander there knew who we
were because again, he was probably...he wasn’t a ground combat unit per se, he was an
advisor and a trainer to the Thai special forces. So the politics of operating from
Thailand was a very touchy thing and we had to deny that we were there.

SM: Were there any other major differences; let’s say, for instance, the way you
worked with other American branches and units in, for instance, turf battles or things like
that?

WS: Well, there was one between me and US Army support Thailand. I had a
young kid get caught downtown. He actually didn’t get caught. He took a 45 with him
downtown and apparently he pulled in self-defense, but that’s still a no-no. He ended up
in a Thai jail. The Thai police chief didn’t want him in his jail overnight, so I took him
back and confined him to our camp. But, I had to explain to both MAC Thai and Sub
Thai, eventually, what the hell had gone on. I got permission to brief the staff judge
advocate and Air Force colonel at MAC Thai on our SOG mission and as soon as I
finished it a Jag lieutenant colonel from Sub Thai came in and he started raising hell,
“Well, the Embassy wants this man court martialed!” and I said, “Sir, he doesn’t belong
to Sub Thai.” “You’re in an Army uniform, aren’t you?” I said, “Well, looks like it to
me.” He said, “Well then you work for Sub Thai.” I said, “No, I don’t,” and about this
time the Air Force colonel did me proud. He said, “Colonel, sit down, you don’t know
what you’re talking about. I didn’t come here to court martial people, I came here to
keep them out of jail.” He said, “You go back up and you take care of this situation.”
Excuse me, got to clear my lungs. But anyway, that was a turf battle between Sub Thai
and MAC Thai more than anything I believe because MAC Thai understood who we
were and what we did, at least the Jag officer did, and he let the Sub Thai people know
quickly that we did not work for Sub Thai. So he cleared up the turf battle for me. I
don’t think Sub Thai even knew we were up there to be honest.

SM: You want to take a break, get something to drink?

WS: No, no, I’m okay now. I got it cleared. I took a little immediate action. But
anyway, other than that, no. I never had any problem with turf battles.

SM: And how about morale? Was morale always pretty high in the unit?
WS: Oh, with my people?

SM: With your people, both before and after you went to Thailand.

WS: Oh yeah, yeah. SOG probably had some of the highest morale even though they had some of the most dangerous missions. I suppose that’s what made their morale that high. They were doing the impossible and were good at it, and so they carried their heads high every place they went. Never ran into much of a morale problem that I can think of. Maybe a guy’s Thai girlfriend left him and he was down in the dumps for a day or two, and then the next day he had a new girlfriend. So, it was that kind of a situation. The majority of us were bachelors; one or two married guys in the whole unit.

SM: Well I’ve got an odd question for you. How would you handle casualty notification, in particular you’ve got teams that go out and based on your description and the description I’ve heard from some other people, you sometimes you might not hear from a team…their extraction date and point and everything else might pass and you might never hear from them and then eventually they may wander in two weeks, three weeks later making it back on their own because they couldn’t reach the extraction point for tactical reasons or whatever. How would that be handled in terms of when do you know, “Well, we’ve got to cut our losses and we’ve got to send a report saying these guys are missing, presumed dead.” How would your unit handle those types of scenarios given that men would be taken into, as you put it, very hot areas?

WS: Let me give you an example of one. I don’t recall the names as well and who the participants were, but this happened while I was still the XO over at FOB one early in my tour in ’68; probably around September. We put a team out, it was a little bit west of the A Shau Valley, and the team leader was a huge guy, big guy, and his two American assistants were not very big guys and none of the team members. They were all small people. They got into it real quickly after they were (phone cuts off).

SM: Would you start that story from the top for me?

WS: Yeah.

SM: You know what, hold on one second. Let me make sure I’m getting sound here. Something just screwed up. One of the hazards of high technology. Let me see. Can you hear me?

WS: Yeah.
SM: Alright, we’ve got sound. So I’m sorry, please begin again.

WS: Just a sec. Okay. One of the missions that occurred early on in my career with SOG was around September of ’68. I was still the XO at the FOB one site. We had put a team in to the west of the A Shau Valley. The team leader was a big American guy and his two assistants, the 1-1 and the 1-0 were relatively small in comparison to him and of course all of the indigenous troops were relatively small people. Shortly after insert they got into a pretty good fire fight. The team leader was killed, or at least he was hit, we’ll put it that way, and to get the people out somehow we got an H-3. It was one of the H-3s from NKP as I recall, and he came in to extract the team and they were doing everything they could to get this guy’s body back to the helicopter for extraction. They started coming under fire. The helicopter was taking hits, and the two…the 1-1 and the 1-0 made a quick judgment call that they had to leave the body of that big man and get the heck out of there or they would all perish including the helicopter. So they did, and when they came back in everybody was crying about having to leave this guy’s body out there because much like the SEALs, we didn’t like to do that, and in the debriefings and everything that followed it was determined that he had taken a shot through the head. They did see that he’d lost a huge portion of his skull in the back of his head, which was good enough to determine, in my opinion, he was a dead man. But, they do, after everything like that, they do a KIA/MIA board and based on what the members have determined from the course of interviews, reviewing documents, reviewing after action reports, team reports, they come to a conclusion as to whether to recommend the man be carried as an MIA or as a KIA. If the evidence was overwhelming that he was KIA, then that’s the way it would report it.

SM: So what about teams that just didn’t show up, teams that disappeared?

WS: Well…

SM: And did that happen while you were there?

WS: I never lost a whole team, never lost a whole team. There’ve been individual members that we couldn't vouch that they were dead and so they were presumed to be taken POW.

SM: And is that how you would count them in terms of your casualty reporting?
WS: The last, well, we would report it this way; at last known, he was seen being surrounded by three or four or ten NVA soldiers and its therefore presumed he is POW. You couldn’t presume that they killed him right off the bat. You could assume that, especially with SOG troops. I’ll give you one other example; the OV-10 that I lost to the west of the DMZ, the blast had hit in the left side of the crew area right next to the pilot, and my back seater tried to gain control of the aircraft, couldn’t, ejected, and was under canopy for less than ten seconds. The aircraft did crash. Fast-forward, we got the back seater out. The next morning, I flew electronic search with stabilized image binoculars and monitored the guard frequency of 243.00 which that’s where everybody could come up on the rescue net and get everybody in Southeast Asia’s attention, and as long as I flew around that area that day, I never got one beep from that radio. I never saw any movement in or around or even near the crash site. When I went back, I made my report and I was also asked to sit on the MIA/KIA board. Based on my inability to say, “Yes, I saw his body in the crash site,” and I had a pretty good view with those stabilized image binoculars, I couldn’t say whether he was in that aircraft, whether it looked like he might have escaped it, or anything else and so I had to go along with saying, “Well, I think you might have to carry him as MIA because I can’t conclusively tell you he’s dead, but I can’t tell you he’s alive either.”

SM: Were there standard operational procedures in place that you would have followed if a team had not returned a complete team, or was that just something that you had to handle on a…

WS: Yeah, you flew that area for as long as it was humanly possible, day after day, to see if you would get any sort of a radio transmission from that team or any members of that team. Each member, each American carried a survival radio that could come up on this guard frequency and beep the whole air war.

SM: Was there a time limit, time period?

WS: No, there was no time limit. You just sort of knew that after a certain amount of time, let’s say ten days, that you probably weren’t going to hear from them again.

SM: Then what would you have done?
WS: We might put a team in once the area had quieted down. We might put
another team in or even a larger force unit to go in and try to scour the area for any
evidence that the team had been killed or captured or anything else. There were some
cases where you just knew not to do that. This was not a ground insert, but it was in ’68
also in the September or October time frame. We lost an H-34 up around the DMZ and it
was taken down by ground fire of some sort. I don’t recall the caliber now, but there
were a couple of Americans. One was a field grade officer on board and this helicopter
grew down in a ball of fire, and the question was…I wasn’t commanding at the time, but
my commander made, I thought, the proper decision. They knew immediately that if that
ting had been taken down by AAA which in all probability it was, that the NVA would
be waiting there in an ambush the minute we tried to go in with a rescue team and we
couldn’t do it. We were jeopardizing three to five to eight more aircraft and how many
more men to walk into what would have probably have ended up as at least a battalion
and possibly even a regimental ambush. The aircraft had gone in in a ball of fire. We
never did get any beeper radios out of the area, so it was assumed that those people were
all KIA and due to the area that it was in, I don’t believe anybody ever went back in there
to look. I have a newspaper clipping. I think it was from 1990, I believe it was in 1990,
that all those bodies were recovered by the NVA and turned over to the Americans, and it
was the same crew.
SM: And the remains were identified at the lab in Hawaii?
WS: Yes they were.
SM: And they were these people?
WS: Yeah, they were. It was the same nine people that we had lost. That lab did
a fine job on that working with DNA in its infancy like that, they were able to identify the
remains of all of them as I recall.
SM: That’s remarkable. The Vietnamese had held onto those remains all these
years?
WS: I don’t think they ever moved them.
SM: Okay.
WS: They were leaving them there just in case we wanted to go try and get them.
I think they did lead one of our JCRC teams back in and they did the recovery together as
I recall and again, I’d have to read the newspaper article now to determine that. I’ve got it stashed away somewhere in all my scrapbooks.

SM: Any other instances where SOG or support personnel that were working with SOG that were killed have recovered from your knowledge?

WS: Oh, there were a couple of cases that I know of where guys weren’t recovered and where some were recovered, but that’s kind of hazy in my mind. I know we lost an O-2 that had just the FAC pilot aboard and we did get a team in and they identified the body and the fact that he was KIA. He was trapped under that rear engine, had slammed forward and was on top of him and you couldn’t…we didn’t have the tools nor the helicopters or anything at that point to pull that engine up and get him out from under it. I don’t recall what happened on it. That was so early in my assignment that its blurred by all the things that happened later.

SM: Anything else that you want to discuss about your Vietnam war experience in country and in Thailand?

WS: The only thing I can say about the Vietnam lash-up was that as I mentioned earlier, there was far too much micro management of the entire war effort from Washington D.C. and not enough left to the commanders such as General Westmoreland and his division commanders, his field force commanders. Everything he did was bound by quote ‘rules of engagement’. So, if you actually did see somebody and they were in an area that was covered by a no fire zone, you couldn’t do anything to them unless you wanted to break the law. I think it was unfortunate because I do believe that we could have had a much different outcome had the field commanders been given the leeway to prosecute the military war and let the politicians fight it in the political arena, understanding of course that there was a lot of dissent at home, but I think that dissent built on the fact that we were sort of hamstrung and our efforts were not as good as they could have been because of political restrictions. It was unfortunate because we did lose a lot of good men and I personally have the conviction that we did it because we knew it was right; that doesn't bring them back, and I would never say they died in vain. They died as American fighting men doing the job they were trained to do in which they volunteered for and which they believed in, and had they not believed in it, they wouldn’t have been there.
SM: You just raised an interesting question for me. Were there many draftees that worked in SOG?

WS: No, everybody was volunteer. If you had to...well, I ended up not volunteering really to go to SOG, but in essence you had to have volunteered to go to parachute school, volunteered to go to special forces, and once you were in country they allowed you to reject the idea of going to SOG. You had to volunteer for it. Everyone I worked with was a triple or quadruple volunteer, and many of them volunteered to stay for longer tours. In my case, I say I didn’t volunteer to go to SOG; when the man asked me if I wanted to go to CCN or CC south I could have said no, so in essence I did volunteer.

SM: As far as how those men first were inducted, were any of them drafted and then one they got in they decided that that’s what they wanted to do?

WS: Oh, I’m sure there were. I couldn’t give you an example of it.

SM: Oh, okay, I didn’t know.

WS: Some of the older NCOs probably had been drafted initially and then had volunteered to go regular Army. But see, a draftee would not have been in special forces to begin with. He wouldn’t have had enough time in the service to get there to start with or stay once he got there. So I can’t really say.

SM: Now to get back to some of the bigger issues, the bigger questions about your service and the Vietnam war itself, and you mentioned the conflict between the politicians and the military leaders, but what did you think about the strategy that was employed, and in particular for the first three years of fighting the strategy of attrition; emphasizing the body count, and based on what you understood then and also based on what you understand now, do you think that was an appropriate strategy?

WS: I believe the initial idea might have been an appropriate strategy because we had the mobility that was given to us with the helicopter and had the military been given the leeway to assess the area of operations, act on the intelligence that they had, they could have probably gone in and devastated those base areas from which the NVA was working. Then we were given the political restriction of the Lao and Cambodian borders, and we knew that the NVA did not adhere to any of this. They took the land they wanted to use and used it knowing full well their political machinery that we were not going to
cross into Laos or Cambodia and come after them. Same thing happened with the Korean
war and the Manchurian bases. So, I think we got locked into that at that particular point
in time.

SM: And what about some of the criticisms that had been levied by military
analysts, historians, you know for instance even if you had expanded the area of
operations to include North Vietnam or neighboring countries, we weren’t even really
occupying South Vietnam well and we weren't even holding ground. You get incidents
like Hamburger Hill…

WS: Yeah, exactly.

SM: …and so would expanding the theater necessarily have made that much of a
difference militarily?

WS: No, I don’t think so. I think I discussed this sometime early on.

SM: Yeah, we did discuss this a little bit.

WS: Yeah, my ’62 and ’63 experience. The French had a good idea of
employing guerilla units, sorry, commando units and they would cut their logistical
chains as far as they could, and I believe if we would have expanded on that and
taken…battalion size units could have done it well. You go back into the World War II
history and you find Merrill’s Marauders, the Marine raider battalions, the Ranger
battalions. These are the types of operations that could have been highly successful and
disruptive to the North Vietnamese military machine because by the ‘66-’67 time frame,
I’m almost sure it was that early, they were beginning to function more as a conventional
unit and the guerilla or commando types of operations would have been most upsetting to
their overall plan. I just don’t think we employed enough of that kind of an operation in
his rear area.

SM: What about the pacification efforts?

WS: From early on, just the way they were set up, I think they were doomed to
failure because we would go into an area, we would establish these sunrise hamlets, and
we would declare an area pacified and then move on and leave them to the NVA or the
local guerilla infrastructures would come in and tear the heart right out of it. There were
a few areas that were successful and as I recall, and I don’t know this for a fact and I
can’t swear to it, but I believe some of the Montagnard areas were easily...they were
pacified easilier…that’s not a good word, is it?

SM: Uh-uh.

WS: Much easier to pacify because of the racial distrust and hatred between most
of the Montagnards and the Vietnamese. The Montagnards didn’t seem to care whether
they were north or South Vietnamese. They kept their ranks pretty well weeded of
anything that even smacked of the NVA, so I think that there was one area where it did
work. In the strictly ethnic Vietnamese areas, it was much harder to make it work
because we didn’t secure them after we had gone in and pacified the area.

SM: And what about the Phoenix program?

WS: Don’t really know a lot about it other than it was designed to take out the
Viet Cong infrastructure, and I guess from the sketchy knowledge I have of it, I think it
did do a pretty good job of that because as an entity, it seemed that the Viet Cong was
relegated back to a political and perhaps and intelligence type of an operation. No longer
were they the raiders and the saboteurs and the indirect action types that they were in the
early ‘60s. I think maybe the Phoenix programs did work up to a certain point, and it
worked well.

SM: What other lessons did you take away from the Vietnam war; you’re
experiences while serving?

WS: Well, I guess that there are two basic ones that I came away with. If you’re
going to go into it, go into it to win. Never go into it to maintain a status quo. That’s the
first and foremost lesson that I learned. Second is that, as I just recently mentioned, joint
operations at the worker bee level can work very, very well as long as it remains
decentralized as humanly possible and operationally possible. I have to throw that in
because there’s some joint operations that must be controlled at a higher level, but for our
type of a mission it was relegated down to the very lowest level and worked extremely
well.

SM: Well in the context of looking at…

WS: Hold on a just a minute, the street sweeper just went by. I’m sitting out on
my patio. Its somewhat cooler weather today. Okay, go ahead.
SM: In terms of joint operations and post Vietnam joint operations, what did you think about Desert 1 when that happened?

WS: Oh God, that was a foul up.

SM: And how much direct knowledge did you have?

WS: Well I didn’t have a lot of direct. I knew Charlie Beckwith and I have talked to him about the use of helicopters, especially the big H-53s and I also knew another guy that was on the thing and I also knew Dick Meadows very, very well. So in talking to these three people, I…well, I didn’t talk to Charlie after that happened, but I remember talking to him prior to it. My first question when that thing went sour was why they were using Marine H-53s. We have Air Force H-53s, which are special operations squadrons that are tuned to this which have in air flight refueling. It wasn’t until much later, and I was talking to one of the participants, apparently it was a political decision made at a very, very high level to use the Marine helicopters and it was also a time expediency thing. The claim was they didn’t have time to maintain deception by painting the Air Force helicopters to look like Marine helicopters or the Navy aircraft carrier and to make it a true joint operation inland, they wanted participation from the Air Force C-130s, Army ground units, and the Marine helicopters to give the Naval presence. So just from the get go, I thought that the joint lash up was flawed, and this is armchair quarterbacking here. But, I still think it might have worked a lot easier and better had they had the Air Force H-53 squadrons supporting that insert rather than the Marines. I never understood why we had to land to refuel. I don’t know that the Marine helicopters didn’t have in flight refueling capability. I’m not sure of that, but I don’t think so or they wouldn’t have had to land to take fuel on from bladders out of the C-130.

SM: Back to Vietnam real quick; what did you think of the ’73 peace agreement and then what did you think in ’74, early ’74 and early ’75 when South Vietnam started to fall to the North Vietnamese and they captured it in April ’75?

WS: Well I look at the ’73 peace agreement as a political expediency in that there was so much unrest among the young people, the hippie culture if you will, to get the troops out of Vietnam. Then we had that incident at Kent State, which gave us a further
black eye. By that time, the government said, “We’re going to quit this thing,” and that’s
effectively what they did. They just quit, and I don’t know all of the intricacies of what Mr.
Kissinger agreed to, but it certainly seems like, at that point in time, it was just, “Okay
guys, North Vietnamese; go tell them that we’re just going to quit honorably and you let
us get our troops out of there okay and then you can do what you want to.” The South
Vietnamese are not dumb people. They’re very smart people, and this word got around
rather quickly and so in ’75 they knew that their main support was gone. They looked at
it, “Look, we’ve been abandoned. We better get the hell out while the getting is good,
too!” All of them have the same, as I mentioned way, way back, they all have the same
thoughts in their minds as we do; “Look, I want to have my family safe and secure and
feed them and give my kids what they need, and education if possible,” and these soldiers
up on the lines, they were already aware that we’d pulled out, we’d left, and they said,
“Hey, if they’re going, we’re going too.” And they did. I don’t condone it, but I don’t
look down my nose at them either. I think they gave it their best up to that point, and at
that point they said, “All is lost.” The Russians certainly didn’t quit supporting the North
Vietnamese, and neither did the Chinese so it was one side had the frontal open coming
in and the other side saw the front end get turned upside down. So again, I don’t blame
them, I don’t condone it. It was shameful when that’s all I could say and I guess the
shame has to be laid at our doorstep as much as to theirs

SM: How did the war most effect you personally as a human being?

WS: Well, it changed a lot of the values I had about life and death. Of course, I
grew up as a fairly young, immortal young infantry officer. Hold it, hold it, who’s
beeping? [Ruth, I’m on the phone, I’ll be off.] I can tell her to use the other one. But
anyway, it changed my values on life and death. I realized I was mortal. I realized how
precious all life was after that point. No matter if the guy was an enemy or a friend, we
lost a life, and in the analysis, the final analysis, were any of them worth it? Because
we’re right back to where we would have been in 1945 if we’d taken the right political
path. [You can use that one if you have to, okay?] But anyway, I think that the loss of
life was one of those things that occurs in war. War is hell, people die, and now I’m all
for the kind of war that we fought in Desert Storm, Persian Gulf. We go in there no
nonsense, the object is to go in and win the war with the minimum loss of life,
equipment, money, time, get it all over with, and then we’ll talk about what has to be
done after that. We didn’t do that in Vietnam. We dilly-dallied, we changed our
direction every so many months, and to me, as I say, having seen good men die, enemy
die, the loss of life’s not a pretty thing. All life is precious or none of it is. I prefer to do
things with negotiation, but if you have to fight a war let’s do it quickly and do it with the
least expenditure of everything; most importantly, the least expenditure of human life.
    SM: Well it’s interesting of course when you look at what’s happened since the
Vietnam war and I think it’s fairly easy to argue that the Persian Gulf War is the
anomaly.
    WS: Yes, it was.
    SM: So what do you think about other uses of American force projection,
whether it be some of the most recent stuff with Serbia, Yugoslavia, or Kosovo, or
Bosnia, or Haiti, or Somalia, or take your pick of hot spots where we have sent American
forces?
    WS: Well, sometimes I think we stick our nose in places where we need not be.
The hatreds that have existed in the Baltic regions for years between the Serbs and the
Croats and the Kosovars, those things go back centuries and centuries and just our
presence there is not going to change the underlying hatred that have existed for that
long. Its fine while we were there to hold the big hammer over their heads, but the
minute we pull out its going to go back to the old days, so we’ve done nothing but waste
our force projection. We have reduced our ability to react to something that requires our
actual physical involvement in the actual fighting. Right now that’s one of the problems
we have with maintaining our strength levels in Army and Air Force units in particular;
Army, Air Force, I guess even the Navy and Marines are having some problems. But,
you send these people over for these deployments, they’re away from their families, and
for what? Because the minute we pull them all out, its going to go back. I just think we
need to be more judicious in our application of troops for quote ‘peace keeping’. We
didn’t solve a think down in Haiti. We did solve something in Panama, though. But
again, that was under the leadership of a man who had a direction who knew what we had
to do, “Let’s go do it, get it over with.” We took Noriega out of the equation and Panama
seems to be doing okay. They never have been a real stable country, but they’re doing as
well now as they ever have done and they’re pretty much on their own, and time will tell what happens there, but we took the one bad part out of the equation and then we got the hell out of there, and that’s as it should be. We didn’t go after what’s his name up in Serbia…

SM: Milosovich?
WS: Milosovich, we didn’t go after him so things are not going to change. Not until he’s out of power and his cronies no longer wield the big hammer.

SM: What did you think about what happened with Somalia and in particular what happened…
WS: Somalia, what a terrible, terrible plan and execution of the plan. I don’t know that the military was completely in charge of the whole thing. I think there were so many political restrictions on that that they got into some bad things, and again somebody didn’t heed the advice of the former ambassador to Somalia. What was the gentleman’s name? I cannot recall that now, but he told them, he said, “I think you’re making a mistake because the Somalis are natural guerilla fighters,” and we wanted to go in as a conventional force against the conventional forces that…you had war lords running around all over the country. We made the assumption that, “Oh, these guys are rag-tag. We’ll go in and step all over them.” Not to be. They should have heeded the advice of that ambassador who knew that country better than anybody else. You remember a concept that came about in the early ‘60s called the in country team? The ambassador was the head of the in country team. I wasn’t always in favor of that in the ‘60s and early ‘70s, but it did lend some credence to it in Somalia. So, I think every situation has to be taken as a separate situation. You decide whether, “We’re going to listen to the guy who knows the most about it and go from there,” or, “We know that Saddam Hussein is not going to be overcome by propaganda. We’re going to go in, we’re going to kick his butt, and we’re going to do it with military might with very little political intervention,” and you do it and its almost as if they try to apply the same equation to every situation and it can’t be done.

SM: Any other lessons we should take away from the Vietnam war?
WS: No, just don’t get involved unless we’re going to go to win. That’s the only lesson I ever came out of it with that meant something in the finality I suppose.
SM: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?
WS: No, Steve, I think I’ve pretty well hit it all.
SM: Okay, well thank you.
WS: You’re quite welcome.
SM: Why don’t we go ahead and officially end this? This is the end of interview number three with Bill Shelton.