Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Theodore Acheson. Today is the 29th of April. It’s approximately 9:35 AM Central Standard Time, I’m again in Lubbock, and Mr. Acheson is in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Sir, before we continue with your narrative with the story, you said that you had something that you wanted to add to your very first Vietnam tour back in ’68.

Theodore Acheson: That’s correct. I wanted to express, there was another officer that did go out, who really was looking for combat and this name was, he was a Captain and his name was Rick Griffith and he was really gung ho about getting combat and his idea was that the group would go out and find this, find the combat that was going on, this was during the second Tet Offensive of 1968, where they had tried to overrun Saigon once again. He had never, I don’t think he had ever gone out in the field before and we weren’t far, I mean this was all happening in and around Saigon where he was and he was going to go out and give the photographic team fire coverage if they got into trouble. Well he thought this was fun and games in my opinion and I think also Bryan Grigsby will express it as well and maybe even Harry Breedlove and Alfred Butumbucal who had gone out with him, instead of giving covering fire if they needed it, he actually was firing on the NVA and the VC, drawing fire to the camera teams, doing just the opposite of what his original so-called intent was. And instead of keeping the team out of harm’s
way, it actually was putting the team in harm’s way. And Captain Griffith found out that it really wasn't fun and games, Harry Breedlove had gotten shot in the leg, I can’t remember if he was hit by a bullet or if it was shrapnel, I think he was hit by a round the day before and the next day no one got hit and then the day after that, Captain Griffith got part of his arm shot off. But again I had mentioned that there weren’t officers, some of the officers didn’t, most of the officers never went into the field, he was one that did, which we wished that he hadn't and we had some like John Gilroy and Carl Williams, both officers who would go out with the men and try to make our jobs better and enhance the assignments.

RV: Right, okay. All right well, do you want to jump back to.

TA: Yes, let’s go back.

RV: You returned to Hawaii after your second Vietnam tour.

TA: Yes, I went back to Hawaii and gosh, I remember sitting in my apartment and watching Neil Armstrong live put his foot on the moon, I had a nice ’53 MG that I always was working on, I think all of my buddies would attest to that, they had to push that car, come and pick me up or do something, it was always breaking down but it was a cool car, it was a neat little car. Anyway I had a stripped down at the base garage, painting it and restoring it and I had plenty of time because I had orders to go back to Thailand once gain, boy I was really excited about going back to Thailand because I loved Thailand. And one of the guys, as I mentioned before, this one fellow that used to jump off the third floor, Cray Steve Baquette, he had recently gotten married and his wife had come down with spinal meningitis. Well, Steve got sent back to Hawaii and I was the next one to rotate out, instead of going back to Thailand, I got sent back to Vietnam on August 13th to replace him.

RV: How did you feel about not getting Thailand and going back to Nam?

TA: I really, I mean I was so disappointed and again that was one of the last places in the world I wanted to go back to. I figured every day I spent there the odds were getting stacked against me and I just, even though the last time I mean I went out on a few combat operations it was still, you know anything could happen at any time but fortunately nothing did. But anyway after I got back to Vietnam, the first assignment I had was covering President Nixon’s withdrawal of troops and this was his first group to
go back to the U.S. and we were shooting them up in Cam Ranh Bay, I do not recall the
unit that, the first unit to be sent out under his agreement to bring, to Vietnamese
Vietnam. But when I was up there we kept getting those false reports, you know go here,
go there, they’re going to leave, they’re not going to leave and I was always cleaning my
camera gate and getting ready to shoot and really was working very hard at making sure
everything was all in order and when we finally got the call we headed out to Cam Ranh
and the shots were like guys walking up and the stewardesses giving them kisses and
waving at them, they even had a little band playing there and gosh I just did all kinds of
shots of the band and the stewardesses throwing kisses and then I shot it until the plane
pulled away and Geez, I thought to myself I’ve been shooting this for a long time, I
haven’t had to change magazines, I’m wondering what in the heck was going on. Well
my film come in, I was shooting this with what’s called an Aeri BL and it was a sync
sound job, I looked at my film counter and I’d shot eight hundred feet, well that was
pretty, that’s almost impossible because its only a four hundred foot roll in the camera. I
opened up the camera and with all my preparation, all the waiting, all the cleaning of the
age and everything else, somewhere in the line I forgot to put the film back into the film
gate, I had nothing. But lucky for me and lucky for the viewers back in the United States
there was a second plane, because they needed more than one place to take these guys
back, so they did the same thing, they struck up the band, the stewardesses were throwing
kisses and kissing the guys as they were going on and well, what the American public
saw was not the first real group to leave Vietnam, they saw the second group.

RV: Well that worked out well for you.

TA: Yes, nobody else knew.

RV: Let me ask you quickly about the Vietnamization process, based on what you
witnessed in Southeast Asia over the couple of years, did you think that the South
Vietnamese forces were capable of taking over that war and defending their country
themselves?

TA: Unequivocally no. I thought it was an easy way for us to pull out and try to
save face, I had no confidence whatsoever that they could pull this off.

RV: Why is that?
TA: They just, number one the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese really didn’t have a will to win this war. They really did not have the spirit to win it and I also saw it come down from the top, I mean all the way from the graft that was going on at the very top, it filtered all the way down to these poor soldiers that we would encounter in the field and these guys would have their families with them, who were cooking meals for them, they had nothing and whatever they had, part of their paycheck went to the senior NCO above him and then that NCO part of this went to the officer above him and et cetera all the way up the ladder, so there was graft even within the military. I mean these people didn't, I mean they were conscripted, they had no will to go out and fight, even though it was their war, I don't really to this day felt that they really cared one way or the other. There certainly was a group of people in South Vietnam that did but they had no majority to back them up. Everybody it seemed like in the South was intent on making a dollar and rather than having to fight the war, they’d rather have the Americans do it for them.

RV: Do you think they had become dependent on the Americans, overly dependent?

TA: Oh, absolutely and it was, you know if they needed something they would have the Americans do it, they wouldn’t do it themselves and that’s what I saw a lot of. If they needed a water plant, well they’d have the Americans build it and they wouldn’t get involved in it, it was too much work. In fighting, if they got into a bad firefight it was better to retreat than to charge forward. It was, they had really no will and I found that the VC and of course the NVA felt that that was their country and there was North/South, it was Vietnam to them.

RV: Do you think part of the problem might have been teaching democracy or trying to install capitalism in a country that really had no tradition of those two things?

TA: I really don’t know if, I really think it came down to a philosophy, I don’t think, I mean this could have been any kind of government. I just felt that the people of the North felt that this was part of their country, I don’t know if Ho Chi Minh had gone to socialism instead of communism or if he’d gone to capitalism, I don’t know, that part of their country was theirs in their mind and they wanted it and there was a lot of the people in the south that felt somewhat nationalistic as well, that country was part of, there was no North and South, it was to be one Vietnam. But I do think we, in the South the
capitalism, they sure found out how quickly they could make a buck and they did. And
I’m not saying that, hey if I was in their shoes I’m probably be doing the same, trying to
do the same thing but there was nobody left to really morally defend their own country,
because nobody wanted to take that upon themselves to go out and put their own life on
the line, they’d rather have the Americans put their lives on the line.

RV: Okay. Why don’t you go ahead and continue then.
TA: All right. In this villa we had, the officers had a room on the bottom floor, the
next floor we had a big screening room and I think we even built a little bar area up there
and then there were one, two, three bedrooms on the second floor, one bedroom was a
single and then we had two bedrooms I think that had two or three beds in each and then
on the next floor up there was one large room and then the NCO that was in charge had
his own room, then we had a little rooftop on top of that, a little balcony. But we had one
fellow that lived with us that he was, he’d have a few drinks and he was wound a little
tight about being in Vietnam and I can’t remember if he’d been to Vietnam with another
group before or what but he spelt with his M-16 with the safety off and a round in the
chamber.

RV: Really, in his bed?
TA: In his bed. And his name was Akers and he would have, if he had a little bit
too much to drink he would just say pass out or fall asleep in his bunk and then outside
we always had, I mean there were trucks backfiring all the time, of course everybody
would jump but while you were sleeping and if they set off some fireworks or something
and a truck would backfire, he would come just charging out of his room with his
skivvies on, just screaming and running around with his M-16, “Where are they? Where
are they?” and all of us would scream at him and hit the floor and I said god, I didn’t
know if I was ever going to get shot by the enemy or if I was going to get shot by Akers.
But I had an M-16 in my room at that time, but I certainly didn’t have a round in the
chamber or the safety off.

RV: That’s pretty dangerous to say the least. Let me ask you, what did you guys
do for recreation, entertainment?
TA: Well we had, that’s excellent because we had a little basketball court in our
yard and we had a nice front yard and we had several dogs that we used to go out and
play with and rough house with and we also, I think we had a basketball game just about
every night and then we also played cards a lot, played poker and even some of us
learned how to play bridge over there bit poker was the main game. And we had a couple
of officers that were really bad poker players.

RV: You invited them to play as often as possible?

TA: That’s exactly right and I mean we had one poor guy that just, I mean I don’t
know how much he lost but his name was Brown and he was probably one of the worst
poker players I’ve ever seen in my life and he lost a lot of money. But we used to, we had
I think everybody had their own, I can’t remember what our policy was on alcohol but I
mean we could have a drink, we could have some beers in the villa, it wasn’t a problem.

RV: How about drug use?

TA: You know we had a few guys that would go up on the roof and smoke some
pot. I think everybody just about in our unit had smoked some pot at one time or another
and I do know when you would get it over there, they’d walk by our front gate and you’d
get a pack of Winstons or Marlboros that look just like a pack of regular cigarettes, even
with a filter with the. They had a factory pumping them out with grass and you’d just go
up on the roof and smoke. I think just about everybody in the unit including some of the
officers partook in having a joint once in a while but nobody, there was no one in our
group that did any hard, what I called hard drugs or LSD or anything of that nature but
we did have some occasional pot use I guess, go up and smoke a joint up on the roof,
watch the fire fight at night and the lights of Saigon, that was about it but it was amazing,
it sure was very prevalent there. I think you paid maybe a dollar or two bucks for a pack
of weed.

RV: I assume it did not get in the way of your job?

TA: No. Even out in the field, there may have been one or two guys that might
have smoked a joint in the field and I can only think of one or two guys that possibly ever
did that but none of them, I mean the guy was serious. I’d say of the majority of our guys
in our unit were very, very serious about their work. We had some guys that drank
considerably and the me that was; they were in rougher shape than the guys that smoked
dope at night. I just, I cannot think really of anybody that actually took some grass out in
the filed and smoked except for possibly one or two guys in our unit. And again I was
there through the end of ’69, I knew of no one that was doing any hard drugs at all and I
can’t, I just can’t think of anybody that would have been doing that.

RV: Concerning entertainment and recreation, how about music, did that play a
part in your days?

TA: Oh, yes we used to go to the library at Tan Son Nhut and we would, we all
had through the PX, we always had a, somebody in our unit would buy a brand new teak
our a Sansui tape recorder and we’d go over at, they had machines that we could record
new needle drops over there, record off of music and put it on a reeled seven and half
inch, seven IPS reel to reel player and at that time that was the most sophisticated way to
play music. We all had our own speakers and somebody in the room always had a unit,
like my first time over I don’t think I bought anything in Thailand but when I got to
Vietnam I did buy some speakers and an amplifier and a tuner and the next time over I
bought a reel to reel and possibly a turntable.

RV: What songs come to mind when you think about those times?

TA: Oh, I was recording Beatles, The Doors, Mamas and the Papas, that type of
thing.

RV: Okay, how much contact did you have with home?

TA: Well, I had, my uncle worked for the telephone company in Flint, Michigan
and he was, it had something to do, he would occasionally get a phone call over to me in
Vietnam and patch in my parents and that was maybe once or twice during my stay, the
three or four months stay that I had and that happened I think on tow stays when I was
over there. It was letters from home and that type of thing, that’s how we communicated
basically, so really fortunate to have those two. I know after I got hit I was out of the
country within several days after that and when I got back to Hawaii the first phone call I
made was to my parents to tell them everything. I said, “You might be getting something
from the Army saying I’ve been wounded and I just didn’t want to scare you” I said, “it
was just a flesh wound, I just wanted you to understand that I’m okay.” And other than
that, I think that was the only other ways. And again you were asking about other
entertainment, we’d go down into Saigon and there were some great French restaurants
that we would occasionally go to, it wasn’t a weekly experience but maybe once a month
or three times, three or four times while I was there we would go down and do that. Oh,
the other funny thing that we would do for entertainment, it was really fun I mean, we’d
go to the Five O’clock Follies, I don’t know if you ever heard of that.

RV: Yes, sir.

TA: Okay, well a number of us would go down to the Five O’clock Follies and sit
in the back and laugh.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and describe it for those listening who won’t know
what that is.

TA: Oh, the Five O’clock Follies was a daily briefing, I believe it was at the Rex
Hotel and it was the, somebody telling the press about what went on in Vietnam for the
last twenty-four hours and it was basically just a press briefing and a couple of officers
would stand up and talk about all of the gains that we made and the big thing then was
body counts. Now to give you an example, I mentioned earlier I flew with my uncle and
we lit up a bunker complex along a river in South Vietnam, in the delta and I thin there
were five bunkers. Well he actually had a little book that he could go to and after the F-
104s went in and destroyed the bunker complex, size of bunker, location of bunker, what
the bunker looked like, he could tell exactly how many people were killed in there. And
of course he had to put that in as a, in his report and whenever there was combat or any
type of action happening in Vietnam there was an after combat report sent somewhere
and so this after combat report, be it from my uncle who was a forward air controller or
from a captain that engaged in the enemy with a tank squad, these reports would filter
back as fast as they could to headquarters, MACV headquarters and then that information
was disseminated to this press conference at the Rex Hotel. And it was laughable how
many people we supposedly killed every day, the body count was such a big deal for the
U.S. government, it was such an exaggerated account that nobody believed it and how we
were winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese was the other issue and a lot of us,
you know if I’d been there my first time I might have believed some of this, but after
being there two times and traveling from one end of Vietnam to the other I just thought it
was pretty funny.

RV: Do you think others in attendance, the press and the non-DASPO guys or the,
everyone else, do you think they had the same feeling that this was laughable?
TA: Oh, absolutely, there was, I don’t know who they were trying to sell this to but nobody was buying. The dogs didn’t like the dog food.

RV: Why do you think the government did that?

TA: Oh I think they did that to justify their position in Vietnam, either needing more troop strength or more equipment, more money and this was their way of trying to let the American public know how the war was coming along. Now, to be honest with you even during Tet and the second Tet Offensive we decimated the VC and we certainly hurt the NVA very badly but we’d been telling, again it goes back to these Five O’clock Follies, how they’d been telling the American pres show well we’d been doing and how we had control of certain areas and everything else, they became their own worst enemy because their lies finally caught up with them and it was a turning point in the war. Not because, I mean we really, really battered the enemy but the enemy showed that what we’d been telling them was certainly a bunch of BS and so this continued on. They never really, I don’t think they ever really understood the marketing of the war if you will. And of course with the press being able to go anywhere, not just being embedded with one unit, if one unit wasn’t doing anything the press could jump from there and go somewhere else and actually verify what was happening. So again we did have a good time going down there for a few laughs, then we’d go to the Continental Hotel and have a couple of drinks and maybe head back to the villa and have a late dinner or something. But that was, I mean, I’m trying to think of any other things. We’d listen to music and like I said play cards and, you have to understand there was a lot of times we were out of the villa and the times back were probably, I’d say we probably spent two thirds of the time out of the villa.

RV: Did you keep up with news back in the United States?

TA: The only way we could do that was *Stars and Stripes* and again we got a biased paper there. We really, but when I got back to Hawaii see I was able to catch right back up to where things were and be able to compare. We really could get a grip and an understanding of what was going on. We had AFVN and Armed Forces Vietnam radio and television, which we got and we had the *Stars and Stripes*, and that was it but being able to go back to Hawaii as frequently as we did, we got a pretty real picture of what was happening in the world.
RV: Let me ask you more of a personal question, did your spiritual beliefs change or alter any because of the war or during the war?

TA: You know what I think I became a fatalist.

RV: Really?

TA: A true fatalist, yes and it still carries over to this day.

RV: Why did that happen?

TA: Well, I think if my time was up over there it was going to be up and I certainly had a couple of instances not only in Vietnam but the one I mentioned in Korea as well and I just became a true fatalist and after seeing men killed, both Vietnamese and Americans I really just said if its going to be, its going to be and I carried that all the way through. And as far as a belief in God, I don’t think that changed any as far as being able to say that I was more religious or prayed more in Vietnam than I do now, probably not.

RV: Could you make some comments on the enemy, what you, some general impressions of the NVA and VC and then perhaps strengths and weaknesses of both?

TA: Well the enemy were, I mean, I think they wrote the book on guerilla war, I mean they were very, very hard to pin down to ever really actually fight with when it was our advantage, we fought them when it was their advantage. And I mean they just had, they had also the, I think they had the backing of the peasants and if they didn’t they were brutal; they had no qualms about killing people to make them understand their point. There was a lot of things I thought about Vietnam, I felt that Vietnam one day would be a united country under communism, I felt that the South would probably corrupt the North some day and I just, I really felt that they enemy was, especially the NVA, they really were, they had a true belief, I mean it was like to me I would say it was probably like our Revolutionary War. They believed that that was their country, I mean how many men can you think of that would walk a bicycle hundred and hundreds of miles and carry just enough ammunition for several rounds to go out and turn around and go back and get some more. And they were tough; they wanted to win that war. And that inherent belief that they had carried over and we were there and I think our failed policy was sending people back after one year, I really feel that once we got to understand how to fight these guys, all the experience that we had gained left and I remember reading We Were Soldiers once, when Hal Moore was right in the middle of the first, biggest firefight,
Westmoreland wanted him to be pulled out so he could just give Westmoreland a briefing and again that was typical, that was just typical, I really felt that guys like Westmoreland was a constant politician, he wasn't a soldier’s soldier, he didn’t understand or get the grip on what was going on, of course he was influenced by politicians in our country as well, his hands were tied. I think it; you know that went all the way down, that was just the wrong way to fight that war. And had we had the support like we did in Desert Storm and this last conflict where we could go after the enemy I think it would have been a different story.

RV: Do you think there was a crisis of leadership on the part of the United States and Vietnam?

TA: Oh there’s not question in my mind there was, I mean it was just a huge crisis in leadership and its like with any unit, even with our unit we had some people that were so-called leaders, they were put into a leadership position and they had no vision. You know that’s the one thing, they had no idea where we were going to go, they had no plan for where do you to see DASPO go now and I think because of that is one of the reasons that DASPO collapsed. But getting back, I Mean the North Vietnamese soldiers were tough, very tough, I don’t know if that answers your question or not.

RV: Yes, sir.

TA: You know a lot of, I told you about my cousin, I went back down tot he Delta quite a few times and I just enjoyed going down there and being with him and some of the Air Force guys and that was, I did that on my days off, but I would go down and shoot it and send the film off to Washington, I also filmed, and I’ve got it on some film that I’ll be giving to Texas Tech, that I had processed myself, there were several doctors that just gave of their time when they had any time off, they would do surgical procedures for the Vietnamese. One woman had a clavicle that was shattered by shrapnel, I filmed that operation and actually the doctor did the whole procedure himself, he had no help. I think Bud, my cousin helped him hold some instruments and had him some instruments and that was about it but like I said when we weren’t typing captions we were either playing basketball or poker or making runs to the commissary and we hung out at the gate and there are always a few ladies coming by and asking us if we wanted anything besides marijuana and guys out there trying to sell dirty pictures of their sister.
We had a few of our guys that actually partook of these gals and fell in love with them even.

RV: Really?

TA: Yes, I think that was maybe their first love of their life, I think one or two even married a couple of gals that they met over there. You know Saigon was a pretty city, I mean it really was, in its day it was really great. I mean there were a lot of scars in it when I had gotten there but you could just tell by the way that streets were lined with trees, the architecture, when you got down into downtown Saigon it was very French and I enjoyed going down there. I went down to the cathedral a few times, attended mass and I enjoyed going down and just looking at the city, but I just, I don't know I never really felt comfortable with the people of Vietnam then. And I say then because I’ve been back and I have a whole different feeling for them.

RV: Do you want to describe that feeling, what has changed?

TA: Oh, I think their philosophies have changed a lot even though they’re so-called “under communist socialism” you talk about guys that are really hungry for work and willing to do anything now, I mean it just changed, the whole generation difference. Really was, oh the people there were very, very friendly and outgoing, and I think even some of the people that were carryovers from the war, there was no, it just didn’t seem like there was any animosity towards Americans there at all. I know we had a guide and one of the reasons, he said “You know we fought the Chinese for three hundred years” he said, “We fought you guys for approximately twenty-five years and the French before you, you guys were like a mosquito on a water buffalo compared to what we did with the Chinese.” So that was one of the differences and I just felt, I felt very welcome and I never felt that somebody was doing something behind my back as I did before. You remember I was telling you about a couple of guys, we had a couple of other guys in our unit that would, we had two real wild men, one guy, his name was Dan Bower, he got a, some kind of, he convinced the doctors that he had a skin condition and he got some kind of a deal where the doctors would let him have a beard. So Dan had a beard and this Talmadge B. Harverson I mentioned earlier grew his hair real long and both these guys would sleep with hairnets at night, keep their hair down when they would get up in the morning. These two guys went out the Big Red One, first infantry division, they would
catch a ride out of Tan Son Nhut and when we would take them out and drop them off, they would change out of their, their Army fatigues, the jungle fatigues, all they had on their was DASPO and their name in black, so there really wasn’t any recognition but they would change out of those into a white T-shirt and a pair of bellbottom pants okay, and they would jump on a plane with their cameras. And the two of them, as the day went on their hair got springier too and so I’m sure they just kind of combed it out, so they had the long hair, Bower with his beard, whit T-shirt, bellbottom pants, they’re walking down the road into the Big Red One and who comes by them then the commanding general and he had the driver turn around and swing back and wanted to know who these two hippies were working for, what news organization would let these two hippies.

RV: Did they say DASPO?

TA: Well, they had to eventually and of course the phone call went to Saigon, Saigon to, our phone call went to Saigon, the general’s phone call went to Washington DC and these two guys were kicked out of Vietnam.

RV: Really?

TA: Yes, and I said there’s only about a half a million other guys that would have liked to have traded places with them, I think they got Articles Fifteens and busted a grade and I said geez, how many guys would have loved to have that happen to them, right. So that was kind of a, that was kind of an interesting story with the guys in DC were climbing all over the major that was, I think it was Friend then who was the major and he just got nailed by Washington, I’m sure he got ripped and of course that was passed on to a real nice guy that was first lieutenant who happened to be the officer in charge. Well anyway, I think one of the last combat assignments I had was another search and destroy in I Corps in November, again I was with the 101st Airborne near Con Tien and the mission was blowing up bunkers that had been spotted and you know I didn’t know how they were going to do this and I just figured some C-4 and that would be it. Well they were using sacks, like cement sacks and these cement sacks were filled with tear gas, it was a powder and they would take that in and then blow the bunkers, they’d detonate that with the C-4. Well every hole through these tunnels that stuff would seep through and it would drift up in the air. Well nobody tell me to bring a gas mask or anything on this mission, I’m telling you I had just, my eyes were running, snot was
coming down my face and I could hardly see and like I was moving away from this stuff
coming out of these bunkers, what do I run into a bramble bush and it just ripped me
apart and there were red ants all over it. I said, the heat, the gear, the tear gas, the red
ants, I said, “What a great day” but I think they blew up about fifteen bunkers before we
had to return to base camp and we never ran into anyone at that assignment. Let’s see
another one I had was back up into Phu Bai again and this was one of those great
assignments where we went to an island about ten miles off the coast of Hue and I’d been
reading about this group in Stars and Stripes and I went up to CO and proposed that we
do a shoot on this. And it was one Air Force man, a Marine Seabee, an Army guy and a
Navy guy, it was like four guys and there might have been two of each, I’m not exactly
sure but they were on this island to help rebuild the island infrastructure and they would
ask the village elders what they wanted to do and he said, “Well, we need a bridge to get
across this river because it would really help us.” Well instead of them just giving them
the money and watching it disappear they actually bought the money with the people; the
Vietnamese and the Vietnamese built the bridge. I mean they actually had them building
things and doing things and these guys were like really heroes to the people of this island.
And I had a guy named Stu Barbie go with me on this, Stu had been I think about six
weeks in the morgue, he was doing a job, they needed a training film on how we were
identifying bodies and Stu had been in there for six weeks doing this and it was a
gruesome job so I said, “I’d like to take Stu with me on this” and so the CO let us go.
And he was, I mean Stu was so happy to get out of there; it really, really affected him.
We had another guy, Bert Peterson who spent weeks in there and it never affected him, I
mean it was just a job but Stu it really, I mean it really bothered him. I mean ever night he
had to light up on the roof and just smoked until he could finally fall asleep and to this
day that graves registration project still haunts him. But we left Saigon and it was a great
day and they took us a, we got up to Hue, we choppered over to this island and it was just
a beautiful day and they showed us what projects they had planned and what they were
doing and we said, Well we were going to stay up there and we were going to film, you
know where we were going to start and where was the sun coming up and that type of
thing, so we figured that evening exactly where we were going to shoot. Well the next
morning we woke up and it was just raining cats and dogs, I mean it was just a monsoon
and it rained for a straight week there, we never shot one frame of film the entire time we
were there. But we had a great rest and recreation one week, it was one week I didn’t have
to go out into the boonies and film some other little combat operation so it wasn’t too
bad. I mean these guys made homemade doughnuts every morning and I caught up on, I
think I read *Lord of the Rings* while I was up there. That was my last assignment and one
other interesting thing, the village priest decided to have us over for dinner one night and
it was a feast but we got, being the guests of honor, they passed around this silver bowl
that had a top on it and they passed it to us and Stu and I opened up the, to eat it, and it
was boiled chicken heads and here you had a nice little old chicken head looking at you
and the idea was to pick it up by the beak and, oh god.

RV: And you had to do something with it because it would be disrespectful.

TA: Okay. After I got back I went to, I came back to Saigon for one day and then
I left for Hong Kong. I got back and I had to spend two more days there with Peter Friend
and he was the, he was the then, like I said had been elevated to the commanding officer
of DASPO Pac and he told me at that point in time I needed to get a haircut, which I did I
went out and got a haircut, I was just about ready to get out to the Army and I’d come
back from that and he had, I came back about nine o’clock, he said “I thought I told you
to get a haircut?” And I said, “Oh, I did, sir.” He says, “Well, you’re going to get a better
haircut when you get back to Hawaii.” I mean this guy was really an unusual person.
When he was the OIC of the group before he became the commanding officer we had this
little eating area and the floor was like a tile, marble tile and every time you would move
your chair, the chair would squeak. Well he just would go nuts and make the guy stop,
not move, I know on this last trip that he came in on, he screamed at us and I think he
even ate some of his meals in his room. But he was, I think he, he had gone through the
Army, he was an enlisted man to begin with and he had gone through the National Guard
and somewhere the in the National Guard he was made an officer, he was an enlisted man
to begin with. Other officers that knew him a lot a heck of a lot better than I knew him
said the guy had an inferiority complex big time and one of the officers that lived with
him caught him one morning when he thought everybody was out of his shared apartment
complex saying over and over again in front of a mirror, “Why doesn’t anybody like
me?”
RV: Really?

TA: And well he knew why guys didn't like him prior, the guys that were there prior to 1968 and that had to do with Rick Ryan but he really, he really had a complex and before he came to Vietnam he had gotten word that we were trading in huge amounts of grass, we were supposed to have tons of it at the villa somehow and one night we were watching a movie with and Captain Richards who was the CO over in Thailand came barging into the villa, unannounced and he had us all come downstairs immediately at the dining room table and he inspected the villa for the stash of grass. Of course he went to the CONEX containers, there was just nothing but tools in there and then he went through everybody’s lockers and drawers and everything and I think he came up with one pack of grass was all he found. Later we discovered that this was some theory that our new CO had concocted but he was really directing it at one guy that he felt was real hippie and he really wanted to make an example of him after this thing happened with Dan Bower and Harverson getting busted and he was going to make an example of this guy but as it turned out it was an illegal search and nothing could have even happened to him. But I think our OIC Bert Harris was replaced because of that and because of the two guys that were busted for wearing those clothes, and a another really good guy, Captain Edmund Wiston was sent there and he ended up getting screwed over by this Major Friend as well. But I know Captain Richards picked me up in Hawaii when I got back the first thing he said to me was that Major Friend had called him all the way from Saigon to inform him that he was to make sure I got a haircut when I got back as well.

RV: Really?

TA: Yes, I said wow what a waste of money that is. And guys that came in after me said that this guy had them washing and polishing the office floors in our office where we did all of our training and they had civilian contractors that were doing that and he just wanted to, you know play Army and I just also felt that you know if this guy, he could have been Major Burns in MASH, the only difference was that Major Burns had a personality.

RV: It sounds like he was tough, or tough to exist with I should say.

TA: No, he wasn’t tough the just was a very odd guy. He would always have the first sergeant do anything that was the dirty work, he never did anything, he would never
confront anybody himself but the thing I really felt that he never really had a plan for
DASPO and what we were going to do and he just became a real politician and that’s all
it was. We had some guys that came into DASPO that were looking for promotions as
well that had their own agenda and it all hurt DASPO but I sure enjoyed my time with it,
I mean it was really great. I couldn’t wait to get back into college but I was really focused
on getting back to school, getting my degree and looking forward to graduate school.

RV: So why did you get out of the Army, was it just you did your two years and
that was it?

TA: No, I was in three. I really enjoyed what I did, there’s no question about it but
I mean I really had a, after being in the Army and after being in college I mean I really
couldn’t wait to get back to school and I know the last, I think I was back there for three
weeks after I got back from Hong Kong, three or four weeks and I mean the only thing
for us to do was screen footage that was coming in and critique and I mean we were
really avoiding the office and I know I just couldn’t wait to get out. I wanted to get back
to school. The Army sure made, even as great of a job I had in DASPO I just couldn’t
wait. I mean when I was with DASPO I felt that our, I accomplished an awful lot, had a
lot of things on network news, as I mentioned I was cinematographer of the year and I
think I was nominated for that for six different times but I really couldn’t wait to take
what I learned there and expound on it and that’s what I thought I did. I left DASPO
December 26, 1969, day after Christmas and I was back in college in ten days. I got out
as an E-5. I look back at DASPO now and I really didn’t understand what a really a
special group we were in and the history we covered. I mean I knew some of it but I
mean I still really didn’t realize it. I remember ten years after I got out of DASPO I was
sitting at an airport waiting for my red eye flight back to Michigan and I was watching a
show on TV, it may have been PBS, I’m not sure but it was the one thousand day war and
what pops up was a whole bunch of scenes I had shot. I’m looking at this, I’m going
wow, what a strange feeling, I wanted to say, “hey, that’s something that I shot” but I
think back then nobody really cared. It was interesting seeing that. I know, you know we
went to that, we went to a reunion this year in Washington DC of 2002 in October and we
went to the 55th Combat Camera Group at Fort Meade, in Washington DC and the
cameraman in this group, they had the greatest year you could possibly have, they even
had satellite phones to get the problems out, but their chain of command, I couldn’t
believe it, I mean that was one of the things that we were very fortunate with. I mean we
could never be biased and we could go anywhere we wanted. I mean these guys were at a
brigade level and they really had a hard time, would have had a hard time getting around,
even you know since Vietnam other than this latest war the press never really got a
chance to go in the field like they did in Vietnam, the Gulf War coverage was limited and
so was Afghanistan. I mean these guys were embedded but they couldn’t leave once they
were embedded, they couldn’t leave and go to another area and I often wondered what
happened with the 55th Combat Camera Company, how much they go to go and see and
what they were directed to do because they didn’t have the flexibility or the power that
we had. I think DASPO did a great job covering the Vietnam War and when I talk to
other veterans I tell them what we accomplished and what they did and they still can’t
believe what we did, I mean many of us, we’re still friends, we still can maintain really
close relationships that were what, thirty-five years ago and yes, we just enjoyed that.

RV: That’s a very special relationship you formed with these guys.

TA: Yes. Well after I felt DASPO I did finish my degree at the University of
Wisconsin, Milwaukee and then I got my Master’s Degree there as well and I taught
some classes there, I taught a cinematography class and I also taught an English class that
film was adopted from novels. I worked for seven years as a producer of national
commercials back here in Detroit and then I’ve owned my won production company for
the last twenty-three years, doing film and music production for just about every division
of General Motors, Chrysler, Nissan, Honda and Acura to name a few. And the last thing
I, the last one of my accomplishments, I’m still on the board at Henry Ford Hospital
Heart and Vascular Institute and I chaired that for three of the years that I’ve been on the
board. So I’ve got three kids and two still in college and one working in the advertising
field.

RV: Let me ask you a couple questions about, general questions about your
experience in Vietnam. First of all do you feel that you have experienced any disabilities
or kind of PTSD type incidents since you left Southeast Asia?

TA: None, whatsoever. I think I had one dream, maybe twelve years ago and that
was it, that’s the only dream I’ve ever had, any flashbacks, anything to do with Vietnam.
RV: How did you deal with seeing so much death and destruction, especially the
death of young American bays?

TA: Oh, I think it was just death of anybody, I mean our citizens number one but I
guess I got very hardened and very, I’m trying to think of the correct word, I just like I
said I became such a fatalist after seeing all of that, not to say that it, and it bothered me
and I still you know, if I dwell on it I guess it could bother me but I’ve never stopped to
really dwell on the death, I mean I looked at it as a waste of our people and was too bad
that going back to, oh I guess at the end of World War II when we supported the French
in colonizing Vietnam and we went against the wishes of basically the UN. I mean I
really never realized much of this until after I got out of the Army and really started
reading about the history of Vietnam and reading some of the books that had been written
about Vietnam, how the politics worked and what was going on at the time.

RV: So you did read about it and try to understand it more.

TA: Oh, yes, yes and I still like to read books about Vietnam and not just Vietnam
but all Asia, but Vietnam particularly still really interests me, just to find out more and
why we did what we did. I mean I saved a lot of information about Vietnam because I
like to read it; I like to go back and still see what things were said and see where things
maybe possibly could have gone right instead of going wrong. But I just became very
hardened.

RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently?

TA: Could have done differently?

RV: Yes, sir.

TA: Well, again I think it all goes back probably to 1945, Ho Chi Minh was
certainly a socialist at the time, had not really became a communist and I really believe
that Dean Acheson supported the French in keeping Vietnam and some of their other
countries around there as a colony and the French preyed on us to do that and we decided
to help them. I think if we would have changed course right then and there things would
have been different, but be that as it may I think the politicians should have listened to the
generals once we decided to go in, put it that simply.

RV: What were your impressions of the anti-war movement?
TA: Well at the time, at first I thought they were certainly wrong but then after getting back to Hawaii and seeing what was going on in Vietnam I think they, I think after a turning point in Vietnam I think they probably helped shorten the war believe it or not. I certainly didn’t like at the beginning where they were doing things but at the end they had their right to make their protest and I guess I still have some ambivalent feelings about what they did. I mean you certainly are over there and you’d certainly like to have some support but what I really didn’t like was when we came home from Vietnam and how I felt, how other I think men that served in Vietnam felt as well, there was no appreciation for what we did, what we tried to do.

RV: How did you feel?
TA: How did I feel personally?
RV: Yes, sir.
TA: I felt like a outcast, not that people spit on me or anything else but I felt that you know, he was in Vietnam, he must you know there’s a stigma and I felt that even in college when I got back.

RV: Really?
TA: Yes. And some other people thought it was great knowing veterans but I really felt there was a stigma.

RV: Do you think the United States population had overcome that stigma or do you think its still there?
TA: Oh, I do, I think they did. I think they finally after the first Gulf War I think that was stigma was lifted and appreciation was given for what American veterans did during Vietnam.

RV: Do you remember where you were April of ’75 when the country fell and how you felt then?
TA: Yes, I don’t, I know I was back here in Michigan and I knew it was falling and I watched the helicopters pulling people off the embassy and I felt horrible, horrible for the people that got left behind that we said that we were going to help, I thought that was just inconceivable that we didn’t have a plan to get those people out of there. I was not surprised at all at how fast it happened, no shock for me that it happened when it
happened and actually I was happy to see that it was over with. And I felt no shame for
our country because I think our country did the best we possibly could.

RV: How do you think the war had most affected your life?

TA: Well, it affected me because of what I did over there positively. I mean I was
able to take what I did and turn it into a position in life for me as a camera, you know I
started out as a cameraman and I became a, I worked my way up to director and producer
and its afforded me a very nice living, style of living for my life. And it affected me in
that way and it also, I also made some really terrific friends while I was there and those
friendships, really its amazing how after all of these years these friendships still continue.

RV: Is there anything you would change about your experience in Southeast Asia
if you could?

TA: Yes, I think knowing what I know now I certainly would have done my job
even better, I really would have. I mean there are some things that I could have, I used to
say god, I wished I would have known that then, you know and been able to even
enhance what we filmed and do other things over there to show what the American
soldiers were doing. I just would love to have a second chance to have that knowledge
that I learned after Vietnam on filmmaking.

RV: Right. Speaking of filmmaking, could you comment on the movies that have
come out on Vietnam, do you see those and so what’s your opinion?

TA: Oh, yes, sure, sure. First one that I saw was Apocalypse Now, of course there
really wasn’t anything truthful about the movie if people were looking at that as how it
really was but it sure gave you a sense of the desperation of people and that’s what I,
from a psychological standpoint I thought it was a pretty good movie. Deer Hunter was
another psychological type of thing about stereotype again. The one that was really
stereotyped I thought was Platoon, they threw everything in there they possibly could
from fragging to raping young girls to, I mean, it did go on but it certainly, they made it
look like it was a common, everyday experience and I thought that movie was a bit
exaggerated. Gosh, the last movie I can think of that I’ve seen on Vietnam was We Were
Soldiers Once and I thought that was fairly realistic, but it still was, it still was
Hollywood and it could have even been more realistic I thought but it gave people a little
bit of an idea of what was going on. I think probably one of the best films I’ve seen since,
if you’re going to talk about war was probably the way Black Hawk Down was filmed, I
mean it looked like it was filmed from a documentary standpoint and yet that little
incident wouldn’t have even made it on the scope for what was going on in Vietnam, I
mean that wouldn’t have even been a blimp.

RV: Have you seen the movie Eighty-Four Charlie Mopic?
TA: No.
RV: It’s a Hollywood film but it’s supposedly kind of a pseudo documentary of a
government motion picture cameraman following around a squad in Vietnam. I was
wondering if you had seen it if you could comment on it but if not then.
TA: Geez, I’ve never even heard of it.
RV: You should check it out, see what you think.
TA: I’m wondering where I can find that, I will.
RV: It sounds like something similar to what the DASPO
TA: Guys were doing, yes. Like to see that, huh. And there was one other film
that was I just going to comment on as well, oh gosh, I can’t remember what it was.
RV: Was it Full Metal Jacket?
TA: Yes, that was it, Full Metal Jacket. That was a pretty good film.
RV: They did have some DASPO guys in there didn’t they; they had some
footage of American servicemen filming other servicemen.
TA: Shooting something, yes, yes. Well and that’s basically, I mean that film, that
film also was I thought fairly well done and its certainly from an emotional standpoint, it
gave a feeling of desperation in Vietnam.
RV: Can you make some comments on the overall media coverage of the war?
We talked a little bit about your experience with the civilian press in country but overall
looking at it, what do you think?
TA: Well, for what they did I thought they did a terrific job actually. I mean there
were some guys that ended up losing their lives covering that war, men and women. I
don’t know if you have ever seen the book Requiem?
RV: Yes, sir.
TA: Well, I mean there’s a perfect example. These people were doing what they
thought was the best job they could do and they did it. I think the media basically did a
fairly good job covering the war although I do still think they were somewhat liberally
biased in their reporting but looking at what the other side was doing as far as bias I think
they counteracted each other because the Army certainly, when I say the Army, the
Department of Defense was certainly, was being biased in Vietnam, MACV, they really,
General Westmoreland’s group really slanted the news to their favor and so I think the
press was slanting it the other way and I think somewhere in between they kind of met.

RV: Okay. If you had to talk a group of young people today about Vietnam, what
would you tell them; I mean to these guys, this group of people Vietnam’s ancient
history.

TA: Oh, yes.

RV: What would you say to them?

TA: Well, I would try to tell them a little bit about the history of Vietnam, talk
about he French a little bit, very little because I didn't understand or read a great deal
about all of the French involvement in it and tell them about how they Gulf of Tonkin
incident really got us involved in it and how the troops ramped up and then tell them a
little bit about my experience in it. I would basically talk about my experiences because
those are the ones I really know the most.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

TA: No.

RV: How many times have you been back to Vietnam?

TA: Only once.

RV: Do you want to go back any more?

TA: Absolutely I want to go back, yes.

RV: What would you do?

TA: Well, I want to go to some other places besides Saigon; I want to experience
some of the other areas. I really would and I’d also like to get a little flavor of the north. I
understand Hanoi is doing gang busters, I know when we were in South Vietnam in
Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City, but everybody there still calls it Saigon, I was aghast that
nothing has really happened. It really has been, in the years, I mean I look at Bangkok
for example and Bangkok looks a little bit like what Hong Kong looks like, with towering
skyscrapers everywhere, huge amounts of commerce and then I look at Saigon and it was
really, there has been hardly any new building there. Free trade is not happening there
and these people want to work and make some money and the old guard, and they’re still
the old guard, until they die I don’t think anything much is going to happen there and I
still think they’re punishing the South Vietnamese as well from the North because Hanoi
is pretty much booming from what people tell me and these are people that I trust because
they’re CNN people that have been both places and they’re saying Hanoi is a great town
and lots of industry there, but not much in the south.

RV: Have you ever been to the memorial in Washington DC?
TA: Yes.
RV: What was your experience like there?
TA: I worried about it for years, I avoided it like the plague, I did not want to go
there.
RV: Why?
TA: I was just afraid I was going to have an emotional breakdown, seeing one of
my best friend’s name on the Wall, I really felt that I just didn’t want to be around
anybody when I went there. I just can’t tell you how apprehensive I was and I did go and
I was glad to, we went with our reunion group and I’m glad we did, there was a lot of
emotional support there. I just dreaded going there and if we hadn’t had that reunion I
probably wouldn’t have gone. The first reunion that we had was in DC and I actually was
working on a job and I could not get there and I wasn’t unhappy that I couldn’t go
because I dreaded going to the Wall and seeing not just Rick’s name but the fifty
thousand other names there. It’s very dramatic; it’s a very quiet, dramatic spot. I think the
design of that, it was just phenomenal.
RV: Well sir is there anything else that you’d like to add to our conversations
we’ve had the past two days?
TA: I think that’s enough, don’t you?
[Both laugh]
RV: I don’t know if it’s ever enough.
TA: Yes, I’m sure there’s twenty million other things that I could think of at some
other time, but at least you get kind of a flavor of my experience in DASPO and in the
Armym in Vietnam. I hope it helps.
RV: It does. Let me go ahead and sign off. This will end the interview with Mr. Theodore Acheson. Thank you very much, sir.

TA: Oh, you’re welcome.