STEPHEN MAXNER: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Tom Striegler in the Special Collections Library, Lubbock, Texas, on the 1st of August, year 2000 at approximately 10:50 a.m. Mr. Striegler, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

TOM STRIEGLER: Sure. Tom Striegler, I was born in Dallas, Texas. My parents were Harvey Striegler originally from Fredericksburg, Texas and Mary Elizabeth Miller Striegler originally born in Amarillo but raised primarily in Dallas. At the time of my birth my parents lived in Irving and I was raised in Irving and lived in Irving up until the time I went to college. I graduated from Irving High School and attended Texas A&M beginning in 1961 and graduating in January of 1966. I obtained a degree in wildlife management and was commissioned to 2nd lieutenant in the regular Army following graduation from A&M, which in case anybody reading this doesn't know, at the time was all-male military to the university that it is today. Following graduation from Texas A&M I…well let me back up a bit; while working at A&M and majoring in wildlife management, I got a summer job with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service which turned out to be a permanent full time position unbeknownst to me at the time, so I spent summers in college working for the Fish and Wildlife Service in several areas around the country. Once I graduated I went immediately to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Oklahoma for about three months awaiting call for active duty in the United States Army. I entered active duty on 28th April of 1966 at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in
field artillery, spent eight weeks as a field artillery in Field Artillery Basic School
grouped by three weeks at airborne school and then was assigned to the 9th Infantry
Division which had been reactivated at Fort Riley, Kansas. I was training for
deployment to Vietnam. I spent four years on active duty in the Army with a tour in
Vietnam and a tour in Korea and also a tour as an instructor in the artillery school in Fort
Sill. Following release from active duty in 1970 I went back to work for the US Fish and
Wildlife Service in Yuma, Arizona as an assistant refuge manager on a national wildlife
refuge. In 1972 I transferred to Houston, Texas as a special agent with the division of
law enforcement for the Fish and Wildlife Service and for the rest of my career worked as
a special agent with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, ultimately retiring as Chief of Law
Enforcement in 1998 and then moving to Fredricksberg, Texas where I now reside as an
unemployed individual. You go from here.

SM: Okay. Well, okay, let’s go ahead and discuss briefly some of your reasons
for entering Texas A&M. Why did you choose that school in particular?

TS: Well, part of the family tradition. My father graduated from Texas A&M in
1930, my mother graduated from SMU. Texas A&M and the military tradition at Texas
A&M always held a fascination for me and while there was no pressure put on me by the
family to go there, it just always seemed like the place I wanted to go. There was never
any question in my mind from my earliest days that I was going to go to Texas A&M and
a large part of that had to do with military tradition. As I say, at that time A&M was all
male so at least the first two years everybody was in the Corps of Cadets, and I fully
intended...I was raised in the tradition of the generation of World War II that we owed
service to our country. In the 50s and 60s we had the universal draft where everybody
was going to be drafted and my mother used to say, “If you’re going to be in the Army,
you might as well be an officer.” But, beyond that, there was a tradition in the family of
military service going back to relatives who served in the Civil War. My grandfather
served in the Spanish-American War and my father was in World War II and Korean
War, so there’s a long history of military service in the family and Texas A&M seemed
like a good way to continue that tradition.

SM: With regard to the training, the ROTC training at Texas A&M, what was
your...do you recall much of it? What was good about it? What was lacking?
TS: Well, yeah, I recall quite a bit. A&M was, like I say, a military school so we lived in dormitories by companies, by battalions, in a military organization, we were in uniform 24 hours a day; it was very similar, I suppose, to the Citadel, BMI, Westpoint, service academies; in fact, as an aside, a little fact is that Texas A&M provided more officers to World War II than any other school in the country including military academies. So, A&M has strong military position and the training, the ROTC training was pretty much standard ROTC training that you would receive except that it continued beyond the classroom to the extent that you spent, as I said, 24 hours a day in uniform, in a military atmosphere. In addition, at A&M as opposed to most ROTC schools, the training was, I think, more intensive. We certainly, in our junior year, engaged in a lot more field type training, tactics, small units tactics training that other ROTC units did not provide at other colleges, and that became very evident that that preparation…how important was that we got ROTC summer camp between our junior and senior year because those of us from A&M had already had much, much, if not all, of the summer camp training. So it was much easier to excel in some things because we’d already been there. Certainly we hadn't fired heavy weapons like the machine guns and the mortars or the things like that, but as far as small unit tactics, platoon level tactics, familiarity with the M-1 rifle which was what we trained with at that time, the .45 pistol and those sorts of things, we were clearly ahead of most of the folks, other folks, that had summer camp. So, I think the level of the training at A&M was superior to most other ROTC units and once I got out of the Army and served with Westpoint graduates, I felt the training we had received was comparable to the training that West Point graduates had.

SM: Okay, your decision to continue with the ROTC, you said that everybody at Texas A&M was required to take at least the first two years and I guess the second two years were voluntary?

TS: That’s correct. By the end of your sophomore year, your military record, military science record, was reviewed and assuming you had passing grades you were offered what was called a contract to complete the next two years and basing the contract upon successful completion and you were commissioned as 2nd lieutenant in the Army or Air Force depending on which branch you chose. In addition, you were paid a small stipend. I think the first year I received $27 a month for the nine months of school. The
2nd year they doubled that, so we actually got $54 a month; we thought we were wealthy
at the time. But, the decision to pursue a contract was not something that I had to deal
with at the time because I went into A&M with the intent of pursuing a commission in
the Army. So in fact, the second two years were voluntary, really made no difference to
me; that was what I wanted to do and seriously was considering a military career at the
time so obviously the way to start that would be to go ahead and get a commission. So, it
wasn’t really a decision that I…I’m not sure I consciously made it; it was just something
I always knew I was going to do.

SM: And the trainers that you actually had at Texas A&M, the officers and the
NCO personnel that were training you, what was your opinion of them, and what did you
think of the training that you received?

TS: Well, I thought the training was excellent. I thought the officers and the
NCOs that were in the military science department at the time were excellent. I don’t
recall any of them being what I considered bad officers, either then or later having more
experienced in the military. I always have looked back on the officers that were in the
military science department at A&M at that time and thought that they were some of the
better officers that I had knew in the military.

SM: What was the size of Texas A&M at the time you were there?

TS: At the time I was there it was between six and 8,000 students total, of which
more than half of that were in the Corps of Cadets so the college was much smaller than
it is now; now it is 40 something thousand students and the Corps of Cadets was probably
twice the size it is now. I think they have 2,500 as compared to we were running around
5000 students in the Corps of Cadets at the time, I believe.

SM: Now you graduated in, I guess, the spring of 1965?

TS: Well, actually I graduated January of 1966. I managed to compress my four
years of college into four and ½ as a result of changing majors and minors too many
times.

SM: Alright, when you graduated January of ’66, by that time we had experienced the
Gulf of Tonkin incident in Vietnam, off the coast of Vietnam, and President Johnson had
committed American ground forces to Vietnam. How much were those events discussed
at Texas A&M, amongst the Corps of Cadets and amongst the cadre that were training you?

TS: Well, amongst the cadre...well, let's take the Corps of Cadets first; it was discussed you might want to say ad nauseam, endlessly, because most of us in the corps, at least the upper classmen, knew we were going to be commissioned. We assumed that we would soon be in Vietnam so that it was foremost in our minds throughout particularly our senior year, first combat troops but even prior to that because there were advisors over there prior to that and involvement in Vietnam even the beginning of my sophomore year and my junior year in the escalation we were well aware that there was a good possibility that at least some of us could end up as advisors in Vietnam. Certainly in the summer of '65 – in the spring and summer of '65 – when combat troops were actually committed, then those of us who were around in the fall of '66 knew very well that we were probably going to be headed for Vietnam. So, it was as I say it was foremost to be discussed. Now among the cadre – and we did ask the cadre, the ROTC officers about it, but none of them had been because they were much like us. We had one officer, one major as I recall who had been in combat in Korea. The rest of the officers we had had gone into active duty subsequent to Korea but prior to Vietnam so none of them had any combat experience, so they...while we asked questions, they really didn't have too many answers for us and admittedly they didn't because they just had not been there. I do recall they brought in an officer who had returned from Vietnam and I don't know whether they found him at one of the local military bases or what to talk to us about it and I do he gave about a two-hour lecture on what it was like to be in Vietnam. But, certainly Vietnam was foremost in our thoughts at the time because we all assumed we would be over there and I think most of us were.

SM: Do you recall much of what that officer talked about in that presentation?

TS: Not a whole lot. The one thing I remember him saying, because he talked...I do remember him talking about the amount of weight he lost. He was an advisor to the South Vietnamese Army, and I remember him saying that he went from something like 175-180 pounds down to about 135-140 pounds the year he was there and I remember him talking about what it was like to walk through the rice paddies and he described it as walking upstairs all day long, that it was just exhausting to walk through a
flood of rice paddies all day. Beyond that, I don't really recall a whole lot of what he had
to say.

SM: And in your ROTC training, how much did they talk about the different
kinds of warfare; I mean, conventional versus unconventional, counter insurgency, things
of that nature?

TS: Well, during the early ‘60s of course we were amidst the Cold War and the
entire focus was on Europe; warfare with the Soviet block in Europe, another either
nuclear or conventional World War II type conflict. So, most of our training was directed
towards that end. It wasn’t until probably my senior year that they began to provide
some instruction and information about the counter insurgency type warfare. That
however was very limited because none of the instructors had any experience with it and
the Army had not really created much doctrine towards that type of warfare and so for the
most part not only at Texas A&M but even when I got to Fort Sill as a 2nd lieutenant
taking Field Artillery officer’s Basic Course, the training was still directed toward the
European-type warfare, the European style of World War II tactical warfare as opposed
to Vietnam. We got some limited orientation into changes we might see in Vietnam, but
for the most part it was still directed at the conventional World War II type situation.

SM: Did that change much from going from ROTC to the active duty military
schools, Officer Basic Course, and then your advanced training as a Field Artillery
officer, Field Artillery Basic Course?

TS: No, because once again, by the time I got into Field Artillery Basic Course,
it was spring of 1966. Army combat troops had still only been in Vietnam really less than
a year because most of them didn’t go in until the summer of ’65 so you didn’t have
people who’d come back and the Army had not yet adjusted its training doctrine to take
into account. We did one of a few things; the different deployments in artillery there
versus the World War II situation, but we never practiced it in the field. What we did in
the field was still very much World War II type of situation. So, it wasn’t until…now let
me jump forward a year or so. By the time I got back to Fort Sill as an instructor in the
artillery school in early ’68, that had completely changed and what we were then teaching
was Vietnam type artillery and tactics, Vietnam type conflict, so it took a year. You had
to get people over there and get them back and get those people and get them into the
system of training before you really…the Army is really able to make that adjustment. I
don’t think anybody can fault the Army for that because I think it was still learning over
in Vietnam; it was just a timing situation.

SM: But knowing…I mean, you had a strong feeling that you would be going to
Vietnam?

TS: Oh yeah, well it’s…if I can jump aside to a little anecdote here?

SM: Oh, absolutely.

TS: One of my daughters has spent most of her life lecturing me about various
and sundry things which I always found more than amusing, but one of the lectures I got
was shortly before she graduated from college. She decided to start lecturing me with
how much harder she had it graduating college than I did and so I listened to her for a
half hour, 45 minutes, and then finally realized that her primary concern was, okay, here
she’s got to graduate from college and she’s got to go out and find a job. So I said,
“Okay, Marty, I will conceded that you had it a lot rougher getting out of college than I
did,” I said, “Because in one day I got my bachelor of science degree in wildlife
management from Texas A&M, I was commissioned as 2nd lieutenant in the Army, and I
received orders for active duty to go into Vietnam. My initial orders to active duty
assigned me to the 4th Infantry Division, parenthesis, for ultimate assignment to Vietnam
on or about January 1967.” So, yes, before I ever entered active duty I knew I was going
to Vietnam. Now those orders subsequently had changed and I was reassigned to the 9th
Infantry Division, but and there they were a little more circumspective as parenthesis for
ultimate assignment to Southeast Asia on or about January ’67, but that doesn’t take
rocket science to figure out where that’s going to be. So yes, by the time I was on active
duty I was already on orders to Vietnam.

SM: Well knowing that you were going to Vietnam and receiving a certain
amount of classroom training in field artillery tactics and deployment that would be
relative to the experience in Vietnam, what did you think when you ultimately went to the
field but weren’t able to practice that?

TS: Well, I guess I didn’t really think that much about it. I mean, I understood
and we did ask and, “What are the differences?” and the instructors, to the best of their
ability, tried to deal with it but they had not been there either. Again, we were less than a year into combat troops being in Vietnam, there had not been a rotation back of core career military officers, so there was nobody that had that experience other than maybe someone who was over earlier as an advisor and maybe a little bit different situation, and as it turned out there were some differences but we were still...well, we can get into those later, but we were still...the bottom line is you had to compute the data in the [?] center, you had to transmit that data to the guns, you had to get that data on the guns, and you had to get that round on target. That didn’t change; that basic concept of how you shoot artillery and how you got the artillery on target never changed and it hasn’t changed from World War II to the present day. Now to some extent you can say that’s not quite true because we were doing it all manually with firing charts and slide rules and today one computer talks to another computer and there’s virtually no human intervention which scares me to death when I think about it, but the basic principle is still the same. So, what really was changed was not so much the basics that we were learning in Officer Basic School. What really was different were things such as firing 360 degrees. In World War II, the enemy was out there, you had a front line, your guns were pointed towards the enemy, and you had a zone of fire that you didn’t fire beyond this direction to the right or this direction to the left and that was your area of fire and all your fire went out that direction. In Vietnam, you were stuck in the middle with infantry operating 360 degrees around you and you were subject to be firing in not only any direction on the compass at any point in time, but literally firing 2-3-5 missions out of one battery in several directions. In at least one situation, more than one situation, I can recall where I would be firing three different fire missions in three different directions and support three different fire fights going on around us. So, that’s the kind of thing...the other thing that drastically changed in Vietnam that never changed that we were not taught was splitting...well, first of all splitting of an artillery battalion in individual batteries. That did occur. In World War II, all fire direction information, all firing data was computed by the battalion fire direction center, sent down to the individual batteries, the batteries put on guns and fired. In Vietnam, we operated as independent, separate batteries. The battalion really was just a logistical support more than anything else. We computed all our own firing data fire missions were called directly into the battery firing direction
center, we computed our own firing data and fired our own fire missions. As a battery executive officer I not only operated as commander of the firing batteries but I essentially operated as the operations officer in battalion would function as the fire direction control officer for the battery. The other thing the happened in Vietnam is not only did we split up in independent batteries, but many times we would split the battery where I would take a platoon of two guns or two platoons of four guns out separate from the battery so the infantry would be going beyond our firing range so we would take part of the battery out and operate as a split battery so that I would have to be firing several miles away but have fire direction center and I would be doing the officer firing in support of part of the infantry while the rest of the battery back me fire base supporting the rest of the infantry. So, those kinds of things were virtually unheard of. Again, getting back to the history a little bit, in World War II just prior to the Battle of the Bulge there were a couple of artillery battalions that because of the front through the spread so thin they actually had to split the battalion up and have some of the batteries separate from the battalion. That was virtually unheard of in World War II. In Vietnam, that was common practice, that was standard practice, and even splitting the battery into separate segments was not uncommon for Vietnam. So, those were the kinds of adjustments we had to make as opposed to the kinds of things that were taught in basic because Field Artillery officers basic was designed to teach us how you compute the firing data, the types of rounds you have, what types of firing you put on what types of targets, how do you actually fire the guns, that type of basic information; that did not change even with all of the differences in Vietnam. So the training in Officer Basic was still relevant, its just we took that and moved far beyond it in certain areas once we got into country.

SM: Was there…what was the most difficult part of that training for you, in artillery basic?

TS: Probably the most difficult for me, and I won’t, I could probably look at my scores. I think I’ve still got my scores in here and I’ll tell you exactly, gunnery was, I think, the most difficult for me. I think that was mostly because it wasn’t something that interested me that much and I’m not sure why, but it was basic mathematics which I’ve always been good at but I’ve never been that interested in mathematics. So it wasn’t so much that the gunnery was that difficult, I just didn't have interest in it and therefore I
didn’t study it as much as I did other things. I much preferred being out on the hill as a forward observer calling the fires as opposed to being back in the battery calculating the data to hit the target. That was much more enjoyable and in my opinion much easier to do.

SM: And as a forward observer, how much control did you have over the battery fires in terms of the types of rounds that were being used? When you called in a mission in Vietnam, did you just ask for whatever fire they could provide or would you ask for a particular type of munitions?

TS: Well, in Vietnam, and you have to understand my period… I only spent a couple of weeks as a forward observer and during that period we had very little action. It was during Tet cease fire. We had some sniper fire but no serious action and most of what I called in was just defensive concentrations and I think I called a couple of fire missions in on sniper fire suppression, but nothing of any significance. However, if a battery executive officer and commanding the firing battery and being responsible for the rounds that went out. I had a working relationship with the forward observers. I just let them know that it was primarily their call; they were the people on the ground, and you tell me what you need and we’ll do our best to provide it. I do not remember a single instance where I overruled a forward observer on the fire he requested as long as we were able to provide that fire. It just never made sense to me to try to second guess them; they were the ones out there getting shot at.

SM: Now you went from the Field Artillery Basic Course to airborne training at Fort Benning?

TS: I went to airborne training at Fort Benning, yes.

SM: And I guess before we talk about airborne training, is there anything else you want to discuss about Field Artillery basic?

TS: No, it was pretty straightforward. Basically, we learned the basics of being a 2nd lieutenant, a junior officer in artillery. It was an exciting time because it was new and it was very interesting, but there was not anything that really stood out in my mind through that. To me it was a period that had to be endured in order to get on with the real work, which is I guess the way I’ve always viewed training education, even college to me was just a period to be endured so I could get out in the real world and work and I know a
lot of folks…I know most of my kids for instance like education for its own sake. A
couple of them would be professional students if they had somebody to support them,
unfortunately, but that was never the way I looked at education. It was a means to an end
to me and I viewed Officer Basic in the same light, which is probably reflected in my
grades all the way through.

SM: Okay, so the transition to airborne school, first of all why did they send you
to airborne school if they knew you were going to the 9th ID?

TS: Well, because while I was at Field Artillery officer…well, let me back up;
when I graduated from Texas A&M I graduated as a distinguished military graduate and
was offered a regular Army commission which I accepted. However, it took a while for
the paperwork to be processed. That has to be approved by congress. So, I actually went
on active duty as a reserve officer and then it was about halfway through officers basic
until my regular Army commission came through. Now, what happens then, I don't know
if it’s still correct, but at that point if you had accepted regular Army commission you had
or were required to attend either airborne school or ranger training. I took a look at it and
it was three weeks of airborne school, it was nine weeks of ranger training and to me that
was a no-brainer. I chose airborne school. It also…chasing snakes in the Everglades
seemed a lot more exciting to me than jumping out of an…or less exciting to me, I should
say, than jumping out of airplanes. I was a wildlife management major at A&M, I’d
already chased snakes. I knew what that was all about. So, the reason I went to airborne
school primarily was I wanted to, but it was required so I didn’t have any trouble getting
in, yeah. But anyway, once I graduated from Field Artillery basic, then it was…I think I
had a couple of weeks in between and then reported to airborne school at Fort Benning
and that was basically your standard three weeks airborne school; the first week was what
you called ground week, 2nd week tower week, and 3rd week you jumped out of airplanes,
and I did my five jumps and that was the last time I’d seen a parachute since.

SM: How did you enjoy that?

TS: I enjoyed it, being young and naïve and stupid. It was physically
challenging but not impossible. Obviously being a 2nd lieutenant had some advantages;
the cadre didn’t cut you a whole lot of slack but they did treat you with a little more
dignity than the private E nothings were treated. The actual jumping out of an airplane, I
guess that’s where…I’ve always been impressed with military…with Army training, let me put it that way. I was impressed with the quality of training at A&M, and I was impressed even more so with the quality of training at Fort Sill at Artillery Basic School but I think airborne school was the one where I was probably the most impressed with training there because what they did, and I assumed it was intentional, but from the day one they began teaching you that when somebody said, “Jump,” even if you were just standing around, you immediately went through the motions of jumping out the door of an airplane and into the position. So, you went through two weeks of that training, of many times a day somebody coming up to you and saying, “Jump,” and you jump. So by the time you got to the real airplane and somebody said, “Jump,” you were out the door before you even realized what you’d done. It was too late to climb back in. The other thing, I think, that I contend was a psychological point on the part of the Army was that they brought in a bunch of Air Force reserve pilots with the old C-119s, the old flying box cars, they had two booms out back for us to jump out of, and if you’ve ever flown in one of those things, you’ve ever taken off in one of those things, there’s no way you would ever want to land in it so you were more than happy to jump out the door of that airplane.

SM: Is that what you primarily jumped out of?

TS: That was the only thing we jumped out of.

SM: That’s the only thing you jumped out of? Wow.

TS: In fact, those things rattled so bad that you could never tell when the wheels left the runway. You couldn’t; it wasn’t any smoother once you got in the air than when you were rolling down the runway. So, yeah, I was very happy to jump out of the airplane.

SM: So you left there and went back to Fort Sill?

TS: No, I left Fort Benning and went directly to Fort Riley, Kansas.

SM: Oh, Fort Riley, I’m sorry.

TS: Where the 9th Division had been activated that spring and I arrived at Fort Riley on August 1st of 1966. The 9th Division had actually been activated in spring and had received 15,000 draftees from the reception center still in civilian clothes, and they took those 15,000 draftees through basic training within the 9th Division which was the
first time that had been done since World War II. I arrived shortly after the end of basic
training so that they were, at that point, in what they called advanced individual training
and was assigned as a forward observer with a battery of 2nd Battalion with 4th Field
Artillery and we went through advanced individual training, then through basic and
advanced unit training, and from 1st of August when I think we had just started, we had
probably just started advanced individual training until we went through full combat
evaluation prior to Thanksgiving was the shortest period I believe a division has been
from activation to combat in the history of the Army. In fact, I read recently that the
training cycle was compressed by something like 12 weeks I believe in order to time the
arrival of the Division in Vietnam with the dry season so that we wouldn’t be going in
during the middle of rainy season.

SM: Now besides the artillery training you had received up to that point, what
kind of individual weapons training did you have?

TS: Well, of course going all the way back to ROTC, in ROTC we received
both rifle and pistol training. At ROTC summer camp we actually also received some
very basic machine gun training, some basic mortar training, i.e. “Here’s how you drop
the round in the tube,” type of thing. Then, and I guess we did receive hand grenade
training at ROTC summer camp. Then in Field Artillery basic we again received basic
small arms training, rifle training, machine gun training, grenade training, that…your
basic defensive weapons, [?] weapons training, although most of the training was
designed to fire artillery. We did go through…I do remember at the artillery…at Fort
Sill, at artillery basic, going through a combat, live fire combat, almost like an obstacle
course type of training where you would run down, it was live fire, they had live
weapons, and they had pop up targets so that you would run down there were three or
four on the line and there would be target pop up and you’d have to fire those. We did go
through that type of small unit training. We also went through a lot of map reading
training, a lot of ground navigational training, because certainly in the artillery if you
don’t know where you are it gets very dangerous to start calling in artillery fire. So, map
reading was extremely important of course. Once we got to Fort Riley with the 2nd of the
4th, again, we still went through the basic small arms training. We took our folks through
machine gun training, both M-60 and .50 caliber machine gun training. We took them
through...even though they had it in basic training, we took them through grenades and rocket launchers and grenade launchers and pistol and rifle and all of that. One of the more amusing aspects of it, we trained with the M-14 rifle. We did not get issued M-16s until after all our equipment had been packed up and shipped, within just a week or two before we left for Vietnam they finally gave us M-16s, so we were taken out and given a 30 round orientation on firing on it; we didn’t even qualify on the M-16 before we went to Vietnam. But, we did have to get everybody qualified with at least an M-14, and we had a certain group within the battalion which were just absolutely incapable of qualifying with a rifle; they just couldn't get it but they had to be qualified in order to go to Vietnam. So, after Thanksgiving, after basically all the other equipment had been packed up – the M-14s were still there because we were taking M-16s and we carried our individual weapons with us on ship - we had to go out and get these folks qualified and I don’t know if you’re familiar with what they called the train fire firing range? It goes back to the ‘50s. What they found was during Korea, during the Korean War they did a study and they found something like 67% of the troops never fired their weapon in combat and the reason given was they never saw the bull’s eye; nobody would run up with a bull’s eye [?] so the Army changed their training during the ‘50s to train fire range and the way it worked was you actually were in a foxhole on the range and there were a series of burns from about 50 meters all the way out to 300 meters and within your lane targets would pop up anywhere along that and you had to knock the target down and it was everything from just the head of a man, a head size silhouette at 50 meters all the way down to a full size silhouette maybe at 300 meters. Well, what we did to get these folks qualified is we took those of us who had been shot experts and we would put one of these individuals who couldn't shoot and then one of us who could and then they’d put two more who couldn't shoot and then one who could all the way down the firing range. So, when the target would pop up, what I would do is I would shoot the target of the guy on the left of me, then I would shoot the target of the guy on the right of me and then I would shoot my target and that’s how we qualified them.

SM:  Okay.

TS:  May not have been kosher, but we got them all qualified, and I suppose if you were in infantry it might make more of a difference but be that as it may, it worked.
SM: What did you think of the M-16 compared to the M-14?

TS: It had its plusses and minuses. It was much easier to carry, much lighter weight, the ammunition was much lighter and you could carry more ammunition, the full automatic capability was both a blessing and a curse. If you were in a situation where you suddenly needed that kind of fire power, you couldn't beat it, but on the other hand it wasted a tremendous amount of ammunition and in my opinion it caused a lot of troops to get real sloppy. They would…anytime some shooting started they would immediately throw that thing on full automatic and just start spraying the tree line or spraying the woods; they never bothered to aim so I think it caused a real problem with accuracy in a lot of situations. The M-14 was quite a bit heavier. It had much heavier rounds and I think it had better penetration capability if you had to shoot through doors or particularly if you were in a jungle situation I think it was more probably traveled through the jungle, through the vegetation, better than the M-16 would. I had experienced no problem with the M-16 as far as malfunctions, but then again, I was…the firefights I was in were defensive in nature. We were being usually a perimeter prove or something along that lines where we were within our fire base or at least within the battery area so it wasn’t…we never had a situation where they tried to overrun the battery so it was never a full-blown fire fight as in the Infantry Division. But like I say, there were advantages and disadvantages to either one.

SM: How much…when you got to the 9th ID at Fort Riley, how much training did you do with regard to the type of artillery fire missions you would eventually conduct in Vietnam contrasted to the conventional style that you were taught at the Basic Course?

TS: Training at Fort Riley was still conventional World War II type artillery training. We would go up on the hill and the way the firing, the impact zone in almost any fort is, and you go up on the hill and you have a series of bunkers you get in which actually at Riley we did not; we would go up and have to establish our own position. But, you go up the hill and you look out over the impact area and there would be a whole series of car bodies out there painted yellow, red, white, whatever, blue, and those would be the targets. So the instructor or the cadre who was grading you would assign you such-and-such car body, that’s your target, its infantry war [?] describe what the target was supposed to be but what you were shooting at was this car body. Then you would
have to determine where that car body was on your map call the coordinates and then fire
direction back to battery and then adjust fire on to that fire [?] car body. So, from that
standpoint, that was classic World War II type of training. We just did…one of the
problems with doing that realistic training for Vietnam is we didn’t have the facilities, we
didn’t have…there was not the capability because in Vietnam when you would call fire in
you would be calling it into your perimeter; usually you’d call it in within 50 meters of
your perimeter. The safety factor precluded engaging in the kinds of training that really
dealt with in Vietnam.

SM: Now what about direct fire training? Did you do much of that?

TS: We did not, to my knowledge. Now, let me correct that; at no times was I
ever in any direct fire training. There were times where I…but I was not with the firing
battery during training at Fort Riley. I was a forward observer. I cannot categorically say
that they didn’t at some point take the firing battery out and give them direct fire training,
but I don’t believe they did, but they may have. I do know as a result of the reunions
there were things that happened at Fort Riley that I was totally unaware of at the time;
either I was doing something else, it wasn’t intended to involve me, or whatever. So, if
they did direct fire training, I am not aware of it. Now we did do quite a bit of counter
ambush and combo ambush training, and in that I usually commanded the aggression
forces and set up the ambushes because as a forward observer I was not going to be with
battery combo so but we did a substantial amount of combo ambush training at Fort
Riley.

SM: And when you…just to keep on track of this line of thinking, when you got
to Vietnam, were there ever any incidents where you actually had to use your weapons in
a direct fire capacity?

TS: Yes, there were. There was one. We were not…and interestingly enough,
the only weapon in the Army that has ammunition at that time for direct fire was the 105
Howitzer.

SM: Which is what your unit had?

TS: Which is what the 2nd of the 4th had.

SM: Okay.
TS: Towards the last, the last four months of my tour was with the 7th of the 8th which was eight inch and 175s; eight inch howitzers and 175 millimeter guns. The only weapon I fired direct fire was a 175 millimeter gun, and it was kind of an interesting situation. We were located up in at area near Song Be which is up along the Cambodian border, a little town of Phuoc Binh was the village and they had...in fact, it was the first air lift of heavy artillery in the Vietnam War and they loaded us onto C-124s which were great, big, humongous - the ones that have the clam shell doors in the front - and flew us into an old Japanese air strip that was long enough for airplanes to land fully loaded, but they couldn't take off fully loaded. So, as far as I know they could still be there rusting. We established a fire base that had been built by the engineers when we were the first unit down there. We had four 175 millimeter guns and we were firing long range artillery fire against whatever targets. Corps, we were essentially corps artillery at the time, [?] artillery, whatever targets they would give us. Off our perimeter, about 1200-1500 meters was a mountain called [Nuey Ba Ra] which was a smaller version of the [Nuey Ba Dinh] I guess, and on top of that was a Vietnamese, a South Vietnamese, outpost. One night we...and as an interesting aside, the advisor to the Vietnamese ranger battalion that secured that outpost happened to be a fellow I went to college with at A&M so one night he called on the radio and it seems that this outpost was under heavy attack by Viet Cong, North Vietnamese, somebody, and he asked if we could help, and I said, “Well, we’ve got one 80 millimeter mortar, but all we know how to fire is illumination out of it,” and about that time the battery commander came in – at this point I was the fire direction officer of this battery – the battery commander came in and he had been over there before with Special Forces so he...I said to him, “Can we fire HE? Can you get...train some folks to fire HE out of this mortar?” and he said, “Yeah,” and I said, “You figure out how to do firing data so I [?] fire data for this mortar,” and I said, “We can...it’s too close to fire the 175s unless we try direct fire.” I said, “We can try to fire direct fire and see what happens,” and he says, “At this point, anything will help,” so we literally went out and looked through the tubes around until we got to the mountains in there through the tubes of the guns and we fired direct fire out of these 175s on the side of this mountain. At the same time we fired indirect fire with the 81 millimeter mortars and we had a couple of quad 50 machine guns on the perimeter and eventually we began
firing those indirect fire onto the side of this mountain. Well, the next morning we got up
and the Viet Cong flag was flying from this outpost and there is a swath of bare ground,
the whole length of this mountain, about ¾ of the way up where we had just leveled
everything with those 175s. I don’t’ know whether we accomplished anything to speak
of, but that’s my one experience firing direct fire in Vietnam.

SM: Alright, so when did you actually depart for Vietnam?

TS: Well, we actually departed Fort Riley on the 7th of January 1967. We
loaded onto a troop train, the 2nd Brigade of the 9th Division in the 2nd of the 4th
Artillery, left Fort Riley about five o’clock in the afternoon, and I remember it was a very
cold, snowy day, and we started heading west on this troop train. We traveled all night
and woke up and I actually have some pictures of this that I brought that I can show you
when we pop the CD in. I woke up the next morning and we were traveling across
southern Wyoming; we had already gone to Denver and turned north at Denver and came
up the next morning traveling across southern Wyoming and it was about a probably a
foot of snow on the ground out there and it was obviously very cold; still the most
desolate country I have ever seen in my life was that trip across southern Wyoming and
that took almost the entire day to make that trip across from about [Laramie] across the
Utah border. I didn’t think about it much at the time but subsequent I had made the trip a
number of times by car and all I can say is the train must have been going very slow
because it took a long time. We turned north once we got into Utah and up through Salt
Lake City and across. By that time it was dark and we went across Utah and Nevada in
the dark and the next morning just about dawn we were going up the Sierra Nevada’s, up
through the Donner Pass, Immigrant Gap western and then down the slope of the Sierras
through Sacramento and on into Oakland and they let us off at the Oakland Naval
Terminal. We walked through a big warehouse type building and there was our troop
ship, the USS General John Polk, which was an old World War II troop ship. In fact, I’ve
got a picture of it because I found out later I wasn’t supposed to take one. But, we loaded
on that ship and within a couple of hours had left the docks and were cruising out under
the Oakland Bay Bridge and by Alcatraz and the Golden Gate and on out into the Pacific,
and it was about 18 days on the ship until we hit Okinawa and we stopped at Okinawa.
We got there about noon and they let us off the ship for about 12 hours to run around
Okinawa. Then we loaded back on the ship and took off about midnight again, or two
o’clock in the morning. We were gone about 24 hours out in the middle of the South
China Sea when about two o’clock in the morning all kinds of noise was going off,
Klaxons and bells and things and it appears that one of the troops has smuggled a bottle
of liquor on board and gotten drunk and the MPs found him and arrested him and were
taking him to the brig and when they got up on deck I guess, as I recall the story, they
were going down one of the ladders and one of the MPs went down the ladder and then
this kid went down the ladder and then followed by the other MP. Well, when the kid got
to the base of the ladder he broke and ran and went overboard, jumped overboard in the
middle of the South China Sea, so we spent 24 hours in the area looking for him and
never found him. What they think about it at the time was, from the point of deck where
he went over, was he probably slipped into the propellers of the ship. Anyway, we spent
24 hours looking for him so our 21 day voyage became 22 and we arrived on the coast of
Vietnam on the 31st of January, 1967 which brings up another amusing story that we still
laugh at at our reunions because all of us were the sons of World War II veterans or had
been raised on the John Wayne movies, the World War II movies, so when we get to
Vung Tau Harbor in order to get all these troops off the ship, what do they do? They
throw open the landing net and here we are climbing down this landing net into a landing
craft just like Normandy and we had all seen The Longest Day so here we are and we’ve
got M-16s and they issued ammunition on the ship before we got off so we’re all locked
and loaded and scared and we’re ready to assault the beach!

SM:  At Vung Tau?

TS:  At Vung Tau, and nobody bothered to tell us what we were getting into so
we were all huddled together and this ship, this landing craft, roars off across the bay and
of course you can't see anything over the sides of those things so the first thing we see of
anything on the side of the landing craft is we feel it hit the beach and they start lowering
the ramp and we’re ready to charge across and assault this beach; what do we find there
but the 9th Infantry Division band playing some march music for us which was a bit of a
let down to say the least. So we loaded onto trucks, loaded the whole brigade onto truck
and convoysed the whole brigade then from Vung Tau to Bearcat Base Camp which was,
the recall, a few miles east of Saigon. I couldn't find it on a map if I had to I suppose.
Our equipment was already there, they had that shipped out by Thanksgiving and the advance party that went over had things pretty well organized so we moved very smoothly into place and we were actually only in place 24 or probably 48 hours before we went out on our first Vietnam mission.

SM: Now you’re coming into Vietnam kind of slowly on ship; when you finally did get on land, besides the band playing marching music for you, what were your impressions of Vietnam as a country and of the people as you saw them?

TS: Well, it was different certainly. Other than being immediately across the border into Mexico, I had never been into a foreign country before – not even Canada. In fact, my trip to Fort Benning was the first trip I’d ever had east of the Mississippi. It was the first time I realized that not everything east of the Mississippi was a big parking lot with skyscrapers, and being raised in Texas you tend to think that. So, in Vietnam it was very strange. The trip from Vung Tau, I had very little memory of Vung Tau itself. We just right of the ship on these trucks and out. I do remember the convoy lighting up the road, a very narrow two lane road with no shoulders, and I remember going past these little regional force, popular force outposts which were very small and looked like they were manned by maybe a squad at most of Vietnamese soldiers and all I could think of was what a terrible place to be. It looked like they were very vulnerable to me; perhaps they weren’t. Perhaps they were more secure than I was at that point giving them credit, but it just seemed to me that those folks were in an extremely vulnerable position and any time a significant force wanted to overrun one of those things it wouldn’t have been a big problem to do so. But the trip, obviously, up to Bearcat was uneventful to the point of boring other than the fact that we were seeing sights we’d never seen before. I’ve since learned that if you’ve seen one third world country, and you’ve to a large extent since seen them all, they all have the same very similar feeling to them whether its Asia or Africa or wherever. But at that point, again, that’s the first one I’d seen and it was all very exciting on one hand and then all very boring at the other. But we hit Bearcat and immediately were put to work digging foxholes and trenches because standard policy over there was nobody…you didn’t go to bed until you had overhead cover so we ended up having to spend the next…the rest of the day and much of that night making sure everybody had overhead cover digging foxholes and trenches and getting the general
organization; getting the guns set up and fire direction center set up. As a forward
observer there really wasn’t a lot specifically for me to do. I supervised a lot of the
digging and some of that type of work, but I wasn’t directly involved too much in getting
things set up and organized. I spent most of my time just trying to stay out of
everybody’s way that was working. One of the things that…particularly in an artillery
unit, an artillery battery, if you’re not in a combat situation, you tend to have more
officers than you have use for because you’re forward observers really don’t have a
whole lot to do within the battery area and so you’re almost a fifth wheel, head garrison
type of situation.

SM: Now the convoy up to Bearcat, that didn’t involve any kind of ground fire,
no snipes?

TS: Oh no, it was just as secure as driving from here down to Fredricksberg.
We had…there were no instances at all; sniper fire, mines, or anything else. They had
very little evidence of US security. I think maybe in one or two road junctions there
might have been small US units; maybe a tank here or an APC there, but really no…there
didn’t seem to be any big attempt to have providing security for the convoy. So, I can
only presume that that road was fairly secure most of the time.

SM: Had you received any kind of a briefing prior to departing in the convoy
and what to expect; deployment in the event of fire, things like that?

TS: Very little, I believe. I think we probably received more than I remember. I
believe, perhaps, maybe the battery commander had called us together. I do remember
them making sure that the officers and NCOs were spread out amongst the trucks so that
each truck had at least one officer and some NCOs with it. But, I don't recall any
significant briefing on what to do in the event of an ambush or something along that line
probably because the road was considered secure and the likelihood was fairly remote.

SM: When did you first encounter Vietnamese people?

TS: We were at Bearcat…well, let me back up; one of the things the 9th
Division had unique to units, major units in Vietnam, was the 9th Division had a very
strict policy against fraternization with the local population. They just absolutely did not
allow it, so my contact with the Vietnamese people was fairly limited as long as I was
with the 9th Division. Actually, it was pretty much limited throughout my tour over there.
But, my first contact...we arrived at Bearcat, and about 48 hours later we deployed on
our initial operation and at that time I was assigned as the forward observer with the 3rd
squadron, 5th cavalry, which was the organic cavalry unit for the 9th Division. I don't
remember which particular troop I was with, but they assigned me to one of the armored
personnel carriers. I do remember I had a...the NCO was a Filipino native on our
personnel carrier and he was a fascinating individual to talk to and talk about the
Philippines and how he got in the Army. I don't remember much of it, but anyway we
spent the next two weeks out in the field mostly just patrolling in an armored cavalry
troop level patrols, patrolling the area out and around Bearcat. At the time I knew where I
was, but now I couldn't really tell you exactly where but I know we were in an area where
there were rubber plantations, we were in an area where there were a lot of scrub brush;
not heavy jungle, but some areas were fairly overrun with forest. I remember the first
night. Well, the first night we went into a perimeter of defense co-located with the
artillery fire base somewhere along a major highway out of Bearcat a few miles. The
second night...the second day was when we actually began active controlling out there
and we did...the second night we went into a clearing in this brush to set up a nighttime
perimeter and the first two vehicles, the first three vehicles in the clearing were the two
M-60 tanks we had and the tank retriever and the clearing was so soft that all three of
those vehicles were literally buried in muck so that this cavalry spent the rest of the night
digging the three vehicles out and I never quite figured out why the tank retriever was the
3rd vehicle in line on convoy, but that wasn’t...I wasn’t from the convoy. So, the next
two weeks we spent a lot of time just, like I say, patrolling around the area. It was
primarily...most of that time was during the '67 Tet cease fire, so there was really very
little activity, it was just ensuring the cease fire stayed in place and making sure there
wasn’t any major Viet Cong or North Vietnamese infiltration during the Tet cease fire.
We did have a few instances where we received some sniper fire and returned fire, but if
we hit anybody I’m not aware of it; I don’t think anybody was. Nobody was injured, and
no real damage. There were a couple of times where we received sniper fire and I went
ahead and called in artillery on the suspected position just because I was bored and didn’t
have anything better to do. We figured at least it would teach them a lesson and they
wouldn’t do that again.
SM: Do you think it worked?

TS: Well, they didn’t shoot at us anymore.

SM: Okay.

TS: Now what they did when the next bunch came down, I don't know but they quit shooting at us. So, but all in all that two weeks was very uneventful, other than just the excitement of actually being in a combat zone and playing Army for real.

SM: Well, what kind of rules of engagement briefing had you received when you first got to Bearcat?

TS: Virtually none. Basically, the way artillery worked over there is the rules of engagement were really handled more at fire direction center level and in order to fire artillery, there were three types of clearances you had to get before you could fire artillery; you had to get US ground clearance which certified that there were no US troops in the immediate area, you had to get Vietnamese ground clearance which certified there were no Vietnamese troops in the immediate area, and you had to get US air clearance which basically gave them a chance to broadcast the artillery being fired along a certain point along a certain direction. So, as a forward observer, I didn’t really worry about rules of engagement. I would call in a fire mission and then it was up to the fire direction center to make the determination were they able to fire in that area, over that target. The exception to the clearance policy was what we called a contact fire mission when our infantry or our forward observer was actually in a fire fight with the enemy. In those cases, you still had to get clearance but you started firing first. So, we would fire and as we were firing we would notify – instead of getting clearance you actually notified – US ground clearance, US…Vietnamese ground clearance, and air, US air, that we were firing artillery on a contact fire mission.

SM: So what was it like to be a forward observer in this field artillery unit, and…excuse me just a moment. [Interruption in tape] Okay, so again, what was it like being an FO, a correct?

TS: Right.

SM: Yeah, forward observer, and what kind of operations did you conduct?

TS: Okay, a forward observer, of course, is an artillery officer who goes out with the infantry - there is one forward observer assigned to each infantry company – for
the purpose of calling in artillery fire and adjusting artillery fire, whatever the infantry
may need. Along with the forward observer himself, the forward observer team consists
of a reconnaissance sergeant who is an E5 and a radio telephone operator who is an E4,
so there is really a three man team. From the standpoint of being a forward observer the
key things are you always have got to know exactly where you are. Like I say, if you
don’t know where you are, it’s hard to call artillery fire in and also dangerous. So, to a
large extent, a lot of your job is – besides keeping aware of what’s going on around you –
is keeping track of exactly where you are which, particularly when you’re in an armored
situation you’re moving fairly rapidly and that can be almost a full time job, just keeping
track of where you are on the map, and particularly the area that we were operating in
because we weren’t operating on established roads. We were working off road, and in a
very brushy, scrub brush type of area where there are no significant terrain features that
you could keep track of for the most part. So, that was, to a large extent, the job. It was
mostly riding around in an armored personnel carrier trying to make sure I could keep
track of where I was. Once you went into a defensive position at night, your first job was
to set up what they called defensive concentration or DEFCONs. That would be to tour
the perimeter of the infantry or the, in this case, armored cavalry, get set up, decide where
are the most likely avenues of attack, and make sure that you establish pre planned
artillery concentrations around the perimeter. Usually what I would do in absence of any
other better information, I would establish four to six defensive concentrations around the
perimeter and those would be numbered. Generally I might fire in, actually fire in one of
those before dark and then the others would be [DEFCON] so once I knew where one
was I could be fairly safe that I had the others correct. Those would all be registered with
the battery fire direction center so that if we got attacked by night, it would be just…to
get artillery fire, would be a matter of calling the fire direction center and requesting
[DEFCON] 1, 2, 3, 4 or however they were numbered and then from that point, once you
got artillery on the ground, then its just a simple matter to adjust that fire to wherever on
the perimeter it was needed. So, that was the first task. Then, once you got that taken
care of, you make sure…I always tried to make sure that at least the platoon leaders knew
where the DEFCONs in their area were located, so that if something happened to me
somebody would still be able to follow with artillery fire and I made sure that both
members of my forward observer team knew where they were and so then it was a matter of really just settling in for the night. Usually we were eating C-rations so that’s a fairly quick type of meal, and then all the tracks….usually the tracks were set up riding train fashion with the 50 caliber machine gun facing out so we all took turns during night…you know, night watch, manning the 50. So, that was kind of how we spent the night. The next morning we’d get up and start patrolling again, so it was pretty much of a routine; at least the field operations I was forward observer on was pretty much routine. A few times we did get some sniper fire in and once or twice (?) or anything else I’d call artillery fire in on where the fire was coming from. I don’t know if we hit anybody or not, but it seemed to stop the sniper fire so that accomplished my objective.

SM: How many men would be in one of these patrols with you?

TS: [On all tracks]….well, that’s hard to remember now. This was actually a troop which (?) infantry company. The infantry company was about 185 men if you had the whole company out there, so let’s see, and we had some tanks, so I would venture to say we probably had 15, 15 to 18 track vehicles with this on this counting the tanks and the tank retriever and the armored personnel carriers. So, I think it was probably 15 to 18 vehicles on this particular patrol.

SM: The tracks you’re talking about, the M-113?

TS: Yes, (?) M-113s and then we had M-60 tanks. There was one…I think they had one in the whatever the number was, the command tracks, the big high ones, and we certainly had tanks. We had big tank retrievers as opposed to the smaller tank retriever. I’ve forgotten all the numbers of those. But, the primary vehicle was the M-113, the armored personnel carrier.

SM: Okay, and the artillery that you had, was it (?) artillery? Is that what it was?

TS: Yes, it was the old M-101-A1, 105 Howitzer that weighed about 5,000 pounds. It was the same 105 Howitzer that was used in World War II; in fact, most of ours were packaged in World War II and Korean War.

SM: This is CD number two of the interview with Tom…

TS: Striegler.

SM: Striegler, I was going to spit it out!
TS: I hope you didn’t forget.

SM: No, I was going to say Striegler [pronounced differently].

SM: I know, because the I is before the E, it’s RE, okay. Okay, so when you would go out on these patrols, you would take occasional sniper fire? What about heavier unit contact?

TS: Well, this was during the ’67 Tet cease fire and for the most part, the cease fire was [?] on both sides. We did not have – during those two weeks that I was out in the field – any heavy unit contact. We had nothing other than sniper fire, and then at the end of about two weeks – in fact, I think it was…I’ve made some notes here on dates, it was the 16th of February so it was right at two weeks – I estimated that we started operations on February 2nd and on February 16th I was pulled out of the field as forward observer and reassigned as executive officer of the battery because the current executive officer, Fred Chesboro, had been relieved as the executive officer by the Division artillery commander for reasons that really didn’t make a whole lot of sense to anybody, but that’s command perogative. So, I was assigned as executive officer and Ches replaced me as forward observer with a battery. At that point we were still on that operation, so I went from being out with the combat units ready to call in, or calling in, artillery fire to being in command of the firing battery delivering artillery fire. We spent about two more days on that operation and then returned to Bearcat and during that time there were significant enemy contacts. We were still…we came back into Bearcat just at the end of the Tet cease fire so there was really no significant enemy action during that period. We returned to Bearcat and were there only about 48 hours, just long enough to clean up equipment and replace our ammunition supplies and so forth and then we were sent on our first air mobile operation which was quite a fiasco. We had not had any air mobile training at Fort Riley, so about nine o’clock that night someone brought us a manual on how to rig all the stuff for air mobile and told us we had to have it ready by daylight the next morning which we were [?] unsuccessful at so when the helicopters showed up on the landing field, we were not at all ready which made for some very irate helicopter pilots because they had to get out of their helicopters and come back and show us how…give us a quick course in how to rig artillery for air mobile, but we got it done and they hauled us out into an island in the [?] special zone south of Saigon and initially
we were in…all I can best describe it as was just almost a dry mud flat down there. We set up the artillery and set up the battery and got settled in and we only spent about two days in that position and again, no significant activity happened. Then, they relocated us again by air mobile. The only way to get in and out was air mobile. By this time we’d figured out how to rig everything so we knew what we were doing and we moved forward to another island adjacent to us, a small Vietnamese fishing village and I’ve got some pictures of that, by the way, and we sat on that island for about a month, and most of that time we ate C-rations. There was no fresh food [on hand]. The only thing we would bring in would be additional ammunition. I had…at that point, I basically had no idea why we were there. I read later in some history books that what we were doing was training the mobile riverine force, that in fact we were the chosen artillery battalion for the mobile riverine force, but we never were really a part of mobile riverine force so I understand – found out at this last reunion – that apparently the brigade commander from mobile riverine force and our battalion commander did not get along well, so the Division made an adjustment and sent us elsewhere and put another battalion with mobile riverine force. Anyway, we spent a month on the…in the [?] of this island. There was really no way to dig in. Fortunately, we never encountered enemy activity ourselves. There’s no way to dig in because if we did we would [?] ourselves out of house and home so it was just a matter of everybody had cots set up, we had a few tents set up, and after about a week I was laying there asleep one night in my cot and I kind of dropped my hand off and felt water and I realized that the water was almost up to the level of my cot. What they’d forgotten to tell us was that we were about 12 feet above high tide and high tide was about 14 feet in this area so we spent several nights there getting flooded out twice a day every time a high tide showed up. The first time, we lost…most of our ammunition got wet because we weren't expecting it so we had to completely resupply the ammunition. After that we figured it out and got ammunition up off the ground. But, we did spend… it was a kind of fairly… [?] sleep on the ground with air mattresses and they woke up floating. The other interesting thing about that was that all the creepy crawlies were looking for higher ground, and I guess it was the second night – we knew the floods were coming – it was the second night I was asleep in my cot which I did manage to adjust to above the water level when high tide came in, but I woke up in the middle of the
night with the feeling of pressure on my chest and I kind of looked down and I was
staring eyeball to eyeball with the biggest rat I had ever seen in my life that had
obviously swum over and found this nice, warm bed. I did not have a calm reaction to
that; I screamed and leapt up and I want to say this, fortunately I couldn't find my .45
because I probably would have killed half the battery going after the rat. But, once the
tide - monthly high tide - went back down things were back to normal again. I did
find…at one point I lifted up my air mattress off of my cot and I found two nests of ants
and a couple of lizards and a few centipedes had taken up residence under my air mattress
during the floods, so I had to get rid of all those. But all in all, other than the fact that we
spent 30 days eating nothing but C-rations, one morning for whatever reason they flew in
a bunch of fresh eggs and some cook gave us all fresh eggs for breakfast and that was
probably the best meal I’ve ever eaten in my life, and we ate C-rations for 30 days
straight to the point that I don’t know about anybody else but I was so sick of them that
from then on if it came down to eating C-rations I’d generally skip the meal. It was
just…they were good rations, they were very nourishing, but after a while they got real
old. The couple of other incidents on that…at that point, at one point the Vietnamese
brought a child to us whose leg had been cut – I think it was with like a caning knife –
and clearly from knee to ankle laid open the bone, and so we called back at battalion and
got the battalion surgeon flown in to sew that up and take care of that. There was also, on
one end of the island just outside the village, was a little boat repair operation which was
fascinating to watch. These boats were just completely rotted out of the hull and they
would do all kinds of measuring and then they would take a few stakes in the ground and
bend the board to the right curve and then they'd build a fire up against that board to set
that bend in it and then when they’d pick that board up it would just fit perfectly right
onto the bow of that boat; just amazing craftsmanship. After a month there, we
did…there was some minor enemy contact with infantry out there, and we did fire some
contact fire missions during that period but not anything that I would call significant.
There were more ambush patrols and that sort of thing. The only other significant
incident during that period was about mid morning one morning, just felt like the world
was blowing up right off our perimeter. It was just these huge series of explosions,
geysers of water and mud going up what appeared to be hundreds of feet into the air into
the ground. Our ground would actually tremble, so I got on the radio and called battalion
and asked them if they knew of anything going on and they said, “Oh yeah, we were
supposed to have mentioned it to you but there was a three plane B-52 strike about 4,000
meters off your perimeter,” which was probably the most [impressive] thing I saw in
Vietnam was the B-52 strikes. It was even more [impressive] the fact that we didn’t
know it was coming. But after a month in the [?], we were air mobiled back to Bearcat
and that would have been, by my guess, around the 13th or 14th of March of 1967. We
spent a couple of days at Bearcat, a day or two at Bearcat to clean up and get everybody
dried out, and then on the 16th of March we moved out into Long An province becoming
the…well, to support the 3rd Brigade, the 9th Division, becoming the first US combat
troops into the Mekong Delta. We set up into a [?] rice paddy just outside off the edge of
the village of Bien Phu about seven or eight miles south of Tan An which was provincial
capital and battalion headquarters. At that point we were in direct support of the 5th
battalion, 60th infantry which was a mechanized infantry battalion and we remained in
support of them until I left 9th Division in August and actually I think the 2nd of the 4th
remained in support of the 60th so sometime after the Tet offensive of ’68. As I say,
when we first moved in there the firebase had not yet been constructed. In fact, the
engineers were just starting to build it after we got there and secured the area, so we were
in a dry rice paddy, sat in a dry rice paddy with the infantry providing security for the
firebase that we had, and things got hot very rapidly there. We took occasional sniper
fire into the fire base area but fortunately whoever they…we were real careful about
doing too much about that because the sniper or snipers that were assigned to us were not
particularly good shots and we kind of developed the philosophy that if we have to do
anything to them they might bring somebody in who was a good shot, so it was easier just
to put up with the nuisance as opposed to doing anything about it; its kind of a [?] type of
approach. The 5th of the 60th had had…was very leery of artillery when we first became
associated with them. They had had some unfortunate incidents. I don’t know the details
of those, but they really didn’t want to use artillery when we first got down to Bien Phuc.
That lasted for a few days. They would [?] go out, they would get into a fire fight [?] call
for artillery. It was very frustrating for everybody. Within a week, however, one of the
companies or either the company or platoon, I forgot what they called it, was out one
evening – it must have been a platoon – and got hit very often and were in danger of being overrun. They had no choice but to call for artillery and we fired support and broke the attack and from then on we were their artillery. The battalion commander would not move without us, his battery. There were instances which we’ll get into later where he was told to go on operations in another part of the area and artillery would be provided and he would just have to refuse to move without his artillery battery. So, the next few months, particularly…well, throughout the rest of the time I was there, that area and the entire area that the 3rd Brigade was in at Long An province was extremely hot. We lost a number of casualties in the battalion. B Battery did not lose any. There were none killed, although I think as a battery we had the highest casualty rate of any battery at the time. We had more wounded. The infantry would go out on patrols through our [?] area. Apparently they would get into contact almost every time they went out. We were firing contact missions often several times a day. Many times they would send a company to one area or outside of our area, outside the range of our firebase. If it was an entire battalion going out, we took the entire battery out. One time we were traveling south and east of Bien Phuc which was one of the major areas of operation, up over towards the areas of [Long Kin] and Tan Phu. We were in convoy with the infantry going up to set up a fire base out there so that we could keep them within range and the head of our convoy was actually ambushed by Viet Cong, so we had to pull off the road and lay our guns and fire artillery support in support of the head of our own convoy which was one of the things we were trained to do. It was called a hip shoot. Its one of the things that you practice and practice and practice in artillery is if you’re in convoy to take the fire mission on the run, pull off…find the location, pull off, lay your guns, and fire, and you’re actually tested and timed on that in any kind of combat readiness test on how fast you can get the first round down on a hip shoot.

SM:    Now how far up was the head of the convoy?

TS:    About 1500 meters.

SM:    1500 meters?

TS:    About a little [?]. If you’re talking a battalion of mechanized infantry plus a battery of artillery, that’s a lot of vehicles stretched out. We were kind of towards the rear of the convoy.
SM: So that you could provide that support in the event that it was needed?

TS: Yes, yes, yes, and…

SM: Now what was the minimum distance you had to be away from the head of the convoy and from the attack in order to provide indirect support?

TS: Well, we could provide it fully effectively at about 1500 meters or maybe even a little less. [?] direct fire, but on more than one occasion we would fire at 15-1600 meters. In one situation, one of the early operations, in fact, the first operation where the battery actually came under fire we were down southwest of Bien Phuc in a rice paddy and it was several days of operation we were just in dry rice paddy to secure the infantry and about the second evening there, second night there, we came under mortar attack in the battery area. We did not have any casualties, but [?] small arms fire on the perimeter, too. But, in that particular operation, on the last day, we were actually fine with less than 1500 meters to the point that we could actually see our own maneuver elements and see the Viet Cong we were firing on in the tree line just across the highway, so I mean, it was that close that we could actually watch the fire fight and watch [?].

SM: Do your own adjustments?

TS: Well, you could, yeah. We could have except for not being on the ground we didn’t know what all the forces were, so you would never do that unless you were adjusting for your own defense.

SM: Now, and you mention that you were actually timed on that…

TS: Hip shoot, yes.

SM: What was the standard time that you had to at least fall under?

TS: I want to say that from the time that you got the initial fire mission call, you had [?] in five minutes. I believe that was probably…

SM: And your guys usually could do it?

TS: Oh yes. If you didn't do it, you weren't' combat ready.

SM: Okay, so it was a combat readiness test?

TS: Yeah, it was a combat readiness assessment that you would have to have [?] and I believe it was either five or seven minutes, and we were fortunate enough that actually we’d beat the time I’m sure because we were fortunate in the fact that we didn’t have to locate a position. We had dry rice paddies on both sides of us so we were ready
to just pull off and in fact as I recall what we did just to make sure because we weren't sure how dry the rice paddies were, we basically added the howitzers on the road and pulled the trucks along the rice paddies. So, it was just a matter of stopping the trucks under the howitzers. Then we had to lay the battery and by laying the battery means getting all six guns pointed exactly the same direction and you do that with – or at least in those days – you did it with means of what’s called an aiming circle which was a combination compass and telescopic sight set up in the mills. Artillery always worked in mills instead of degrees; there was 6400 mills in a circle, so the first thing you had to do is – and that was the job of the executive officer, is to…the first thing you have to do is lay the battery so that by giving the reading on each gun, the sight on each gun, they’d give a reading back and until those two readings matched. Then you knew that gun was pointed the direction you wanted it pointed and you’d have to gun pointed exactly the same direction and then from there while I was out laying battery the fire direction officer and fire direction would be calculating the firing data, and so it was a…

SM: That’s a lot of work in five minutes!
TS: It’s a lot of work, but like I said, we had lots of practice in it.

Anytime…what we did was anytime we pulled into a new position we treated it as a hip shoot so that anytime we pulled into a new position, our policy was we needed to be ready to put the first line out in five minutes. So that was just kind of the way we kept in training.

SM: One quick question going back to your time on the island; what size was that island, and how many Vietnamese were on it?
TS: I really don’t know how many Vietnamese were on it. The village was off of our perimeter. It looked like…it wasn’t a large village, but it wasn’t just a tiny village, either, and I’m just not sure how many Vietnamese. The island itself, at least the area we occupied, was probably 100 meters long by maybe 30-40 meters wide; not quite as big as a football field probably.
SM: Pretty small island.
TS: Pretty small. Now, the island was much bigger than that because that was the area we occupied. We had a river running on one side of the…the east side of the area and there was a canal or drainage ditch a bum that probably was part defensive and
part flood control for the village on the other side, and to the north of us was just mangro
swamp and to the south of us was...actually the island formed a junction of two rivers,
two canals, two whatever these were. This was really in the...I think pretty much the
Delta, the Saigon River area, so two of the channels kind of came together at the point at
the south side of the little island.

SM: And just out of curiosity, you mentioned some of your interaction with
animals there. Were there any other incidents that you recall, especially with poisonous
snakes, spiders, other animals?

TS: The only other significant incident was, again - and as a matter of fact it
was on the same operation where we did the hip shoot – once we got that situation under
control we went on down the road and established a fire base, again, out in a dry rice
paddy and one of our policies was that – and it was standard policy, I think, for
everybody over there – was that you had to have at least fox holes. You wanted overhead
cover but sometimes in the Delta that wasn’t possible. So, everybody had to have a
foxhole available before you went to bed at night. Well, I’m digging my foxhole and as I
started...I get down into it, I found a whole bunch of...I ran into a nest, actually, of small
snakes, little black and white snakes about six or eight inches long. They obviously had
not been hatched out too much longer and being a wildlife management major and kind
of having a live and let live policy generally I just kind of tossed them all off into the
[burrow] around my foxhole and we kind of get along just fine there for...I don't know, a
week or whatever they were out there. I had no idea what they were at the time. Later I
did a little checking on them and it turned out they were rice cobras. But, they didn’t
bother me and I didn’t bother them so we were happy. That was the only other
significant incident with wildlife over there that I had.

SM: No tigers, no monkeys?

TS: No, not down in the Delta. The tigers were up, you know, they would have
been found up in the jungle. Monkeys, again, were up in the jungle. I was never in an
area...I did get up into the central highlands, on the edge of the central highlands a
couple of times, but never in an area where there were monkeys or other significant
wildlife.
SM: And you mentioned when you moved to Long An that there was some
hesitancy on the part of the unit you were supporting to call in artillery fire?

TS: That’s correct.

SM: I would imagine...you alluded to...there must have been some friendly fire
incident that was involved with their...

TS: I am presuming there probably was, yes.

SM: While you were in Vietnam as a field artillery officer, were there ever any
friendly fire incidents that you were directly aware of?

TS: Yes. There were a couple with our A Battery. One was questionable
whether it was our artillery or whether it was the infantry mortar fire, but we got the
blame for it; A Battery got the blame for it. There was another one I don’t know the
details of it with A Battery again where they fired across some no fire line and again, I
don’t know the details of that. There was an incident...we had in addition to our battery
located at Bien Phuc there were a couple of South Vietnamese artillery guns, two
howitzers, they were 105s. They fired into a village between us and Tan An one night
and killed a couple of people. In all honesty, I don’t think there’s an artillery battery that
served in Vietnam that didn’t fire a mistake at some point. Most of us were lucky and
didn’t hit anybody or at least didn’t hit any of our folks but so the friendly fire was more
a matter of luck than anything else. Its hard for me to blame anybody on a friendly fire
situation because you’re looking at situations where, particularly if you’re in heavy
combat, you guys on the guns have been up maybe 48 hours straight [?] people in the fire
direction center have; human error happens. I also was aware of several instances of
friendly fire involving our own infantry getting in fire fights with each other because they
didn’t recognize each other. We had one where they called in and a platoon leader called
in and said, “We’re receiving fire from across the river and we need to know if that’s
friendly or enemy,” and the response was, “Well, its friendly but I’m worried they’re
shooting at the enemy.” The most significant one that I recall was one of our forward
observers was out with the infantry, his infantry company, and they came under heavy
fire from a South Vietnamese infantry company so he called back to me and I had a direct
line to our artillery liaison officer located with the South Vietnamese commander so he
asked if I’d call over and tell them to stop shooting which I did, and the liaison officer
relayed that, but dealing with the South Vietnamese was sometimes very frustrating; I
don’t know if it was just they stubborn or they weren't going to do what the Americans
told them or if they just didn’t understand or what was going on. Anyway, the fire
continued, so we tried again, I called again and told them, I said, “You’re firing at US
troops; knock it off!” and the fire continued so I called the forward observer back and I
said, “Give me some coordinates,” and he said…so he did, so we ran the firing data
through. One of the things – let me back up a little – one of the things the 9th Division
did in artillery that nobody else did, and we were criticized for it but I think it saved a lot
of lives, first round out was always white phosphorus round at 200 meters in the air and
what that did was if you had a mistake, you recognized it without hurting anybody. So,
what we did was we figured up the firing data and I put out a white phosphorus right over
their heads and I called the liaisons and I said, “I’ve already got white phosphorus on top
of them,” I said, “Next its going to be a battery of six” and I had battery loaded when
they stopped firing. So, that was the main incident. Fortunately there were no casualties,
but that was the main incident of friendly fire as I recall.

SM: And that was an ARVN battery?

TS: No, it was an ARVN infantry company firing on a US infantry company.

SM: What were they firing, small arms?

TS: Small arms, small arms, rifle grenades; I don't know if there were any
mortars involved or not, but small arms fire.

SM: Were there ever any incidents where you actually had to fire on an ARVN
unit that had…

TS: No, no. There were instances where I actually fired on top of our own
troops, but that was intentional. As one platoon leader put it when he called in the fire I
went back, he called for fire and I went back and I said, “That’s right on top of your own
position,” and his response was, “Well that’s where Charlie is,” and so we did; in fact,
we’re the ones who fired on top of our own position because that’s what they needed the
artillery fire for, and there were friendly casualties from our own artillery fire but it was
not an accident. We would have to fire so close to our own infantry that we took some
casualties from our own artillery, but that’s true in any combat situation.

SM: They wouldn’t call those in as danger close missions?

TS: Well, it doesn't matter. Yes, it was danger close.

SM: Well, so that you would already know that they recognized that this is
either…

TS: Oh yeah, they were well aware. Everybody was aware of what we were
doing. It wasn’t…yeah, it was danger close. All danger close means is we’re going to be
very careful about how we put the [?] because [?] where we fire, but we would be
firing…in some cases, we would be firing if not on top of our own position, within ten or
15 meters of our own positions. It’s just terrible that the situation can be that desperate.

SM: How often did that happen?

TS: I can remember at least a half dozen times where I would have to fire either
on top of our own positions or so close that I expected to incur friendly casualties.

SM: Did you have to provide, or did you ever provide, fire support for ARVN
units in the field?

TS: Yes, as a matter of fact. We did it in any number of situations, we would
provide support for ARVN units. It was almost routine. The most significant one was an
operation called Concordia II which occurred down in a place called Ky Lai, which is
further down in the Delta. We went on a couple of operations down there; both times
were turned into major battles. One, on this occasion, we hit…set up our fire base and
started firing and over a period of 48 hours we fired over 4,000 rounds continuous fire.
In fact, it was so chaotic that the infantry battalion commander was in my fire direction
center because we were the only ones that had radio contact with everybody and knew
where everybody was, and in that particular situation what that was…again, one of the
times we fired right on top of our own troops. The last morning the infantry
reconnaissance platoon woke up, or when daylight appeared – I shouldn’t say they woke
up – when daylight appeared they found themselves surrounded by an overwhelming
force that attacked and so they just buttoned up the tracks and we put an ambush right on
top of them for about a half hour and broke the attack, and then immediately after that a
company of Vietnamese Marines, South Vietnamese Marines, got into real trouble and
we ended up firing support for them for a couple of hours to bail them out. But, during
this whole thing, at some point, I don’t remember exactly when, a South Vietnamese
battalion got into significant trouble and we had to bail them out with artillery fire and
just before we were leaving, as we were packing up, the battalion commander of that
infantry, the South Vietnamese battalion, showed up and presented….and like I say at
that time I was the senior officer in the battery, presented me with a Viet Cong flag in
appreciation for the support we had provided them and a large story which I’ve largely
forgotten about of how they had captured the flag. My personal opinion was they
probably had a bunch of women sewing them in the village to hand out to the Americans,
but any way, that flag two years ago I presented to the 2nd tactical artillery at Fort Sill and
I’ve got some pictures here from the display. They’ve got it displayed in their battalion
with them now.

SM:  Oh, excellent.

TS:   But yes, it was not uncommon to fire in support of Vietnamese units. One
time, one incident later on in my tour when I was with 7th of the 8th, again this friend of
mine from college was the advisor to the Vietnamese ranger battalion out at Song Be and
he called in one night. They were being hit with recoiled rapid fire, RPG – rocket
propelled grenade fire – and wanted to know if I could do anything for them and we only
had 175 millimeter guns which are not the most accurate artillery weapon in the world,
but I said, “Sure, we’ll take a shot at it,” and so I said, “Give me some coordinates,” and
this was after dark so he was guessing at the coordinates of where this thing was [?]. So,
he gave me the coordinates and I said, “Okay, we’re going to put one round out and then
you adjust from there.” Well we put the round out and there was dead silence on the
radio; absolute dead silence. I called, got no response. So, I’m figuring I had wiped out a
Vietnamese outpost. That lasted for about a half hour, and then this guy calls back and
he says, “Sorry about the silence,” he said, “I wanted to send a patrol out.” He said,
“They stopped shooting and I wanted to send a patrol out before I called you back,
thanks.” Well the patrol got cut there, turned out we’d made a direct hit with our first
round on this recoilless rifle, so every once in a while things…

SM:   Wow, talk about lucky!
TS: It was pure dumb luck, absolute dumb luck. And the 175, for all its reputation for inaccuracy, there were times that it could prove extremely accurate. We had a situation back down in the Delta when I was back with the heavy artillery, back down supporting 9th Division. In fact, one of my forward observer friends was...called the fire in. They had gotten outside their own artillery support and we were the only guns that could support them. They were under heavy attack. We were the only guns that could support them and it was max range at 20 miles and we were notoriously inaccurate at 20 miles. He called and wanted to know if we could provide support; well, you just didn’t provide direct support with a 175. The accuracy is not there; you’re talking a 150 pound projectile, bursting radius and kill radius of 90 meters, so it just wasn’t something you did. So, I kind of tried to talk him out of it and then the response was, “Well we couldn't be much worse off than we are right now.” So I said, “Okay.” The real unfortunate part is they were on the gun target line which means your error of right and left is not too bad but you’ve got a 200 meter error just from one round to the next in range error. So, we ended up firing direct support at max range with a 175, and that lasted for about a half hour. Fortunately, as far as I know, there were no friendly casualties from the artillery on that. So we did a lot of things with artillery in Vietnam that were virtually unheard of prior to that point.

SM: Now in an hour of firing, how many rounds did you generally put out?

TS: On a 175, you were limited – or eight inch howitzers – you were limited. The maximum we could fire was about two rounds every three minutes. A 105, you could go a lot faster; in fact, a 105 you could put out a what you call a barrage where you just put everything out in about two minutes. We could put about 180 rounds out in a six gun battery in two minutes with a 175 battery. But, if you exceeded maximum fire for any length of time with an eight inch 175, you’re going to overheat the tubes and then you can have some real problems; a round could cook off inside the tube and that made everybody’s day unpleasant.

SM: Did that ever happen?

TS: It has happened. It didn’t happen to me, but I know of it happening, yes, so you had to be careful when you were firing for long periods of time. You had to be careful not to exceed your maximum fire and what we tried to do with that is often we’d
alter guns so that we’d try to keep one or two guns firing at the same time, but we
didn’t…so in a half hour, you can kind of compute the math. You aren't going to get that
many rounds out when you’re talking 150 or 200 pound projectile, they’re...you can
make a difference with just a few of them.

SM: Okay, now the…let me ask you one of the bigger questions. As field
artillery officer, what did you understand to be the purpose for the American force
present in Vietnam when you arrived and while you were there?

TS: Well, when I went over and while I was there, my understanding was that
we were going over there to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves from
communist aggression, and the entire time I was over there that’s what I believed we
were doing and I still believe we were doing that. A lot of folks want to revise history
and say it was a civil war. To some extent there may have been, since you had both the
Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, but there was also a treaty line that both sides
assigned, the 17th parallel, and the North Vietnamese were coming across the 17th parallel
and around it and the Viet Cong were under direct control of the North Vietnamese; they
were not, as far as I know, an independent, rebellious force; they were under the direct
control of the North Vietnamese at all times. So, I still believe that we were over there
defending South Vietnam from communist aggression. Whether we should have been
doing that or not is a different issue, but I think if you take it in the time, place, and
context, it’s probably at that time the only thing we could have done. Today, given the
world situation, it’s a lot easier to look back and say, “Well, it didn’t make a difference.
I’m not convinced that in fact we took a stand over there even though we weren't
successful.” I’m not convinced that it didn’t make a difference.

SM: What did you think of the strategy that was being employed by the Army
when you were in Vietnam; not retrospectively, but you remember what you thought…

TS: At the time, I had no idea what strategy was being involved; primarily what
tactics we were doing to be honest. Strategy is something that’s done at high level and a
lot more than I even know today about the Vietnam War much less what I knew as a 2nd
or 1st lieutenant in an artillery battery sitting over there. So we didn’t even…as far as I
know, I never gave strategy a moment’s thought when I was over there. My main
concerns were keeping my men alive and putting fire on the target and keeping as many
as possible in the infantry from getting killed, and killing as many of the enemy as I
possibly could. Beyond that, I really didn’t worry about or never gave any thought about
the bigger picture as it were or the strategies involved or any of that sort of thing.

SM: Well what did you think about the American leadership that was in charge
of American forces in Vietnam, both your immediate leaders and then also above them…

TS: Its hard to make judgements above roughly the battalion level because I
didn’t have any contact above that, and I say that with some exceptions; the Division
artillery commander that we had when we went over there a full colonel, I was not
impressed with at all. I had very little contact with the man, but he just did not impress
me even as a 2nd lieutenant and being a full colonel. I was singularly unimpressed with
the man. Our battalion commander who we went over with, I was not impressed…too
impressed with at the time and neither…even talking at the reunion to people who knew
him better than I did, none of them were particularly impressed with him either although I
actually ended up next to him on an airplane from San Francisco to Kansas City on the
way home and we had a long talk and I became more impressed with him after talking to
him on a very one-on-one, personal type of situation than I was…because…and part of
that was everything I heard from him was filtered through my immediate superiors and
the other thing is, in talking to him directly, I began to realize how much of what I
considered stupid things we did were at the direction of this Division artillery
commander. So, I think I bear him much less ill will than I did, and maybe many of the
folks who didn’t have that opportunity do. That Division artillery commander was
replaced with another colonel who was, in my opinion, an outstanding officer.

SM: Before you talk about him, what kinds of stupid things or mundane things
would the other commander have you do that were so troublesome or bothersome? Do
you recall specifics?

TS: It’s really hard to recall the specifics now because I really haven’t thought
that much about them since then, but its just…the term Mickey Mouse is always…just
the Mickey Mouse kinds of things. It was almost as if you could understand doing some
of that stuff in a garrison situation at Fort Riley, but then once you got into combat it was
time, “Okay, let’s get rid of the Mickey Mouse. We’ve got a job to do over here,” and
some of the folks just didn’t seem to be willing to get rid of that. Another officer was the
battalion executive officer which, again, was very poorly thought of; even worse than
battalion commander. This was a major, and I can give you a specific example with him
of the kind of thing we had to put up with. We came under fire; the battery area came
under fire one night. It was a combination of rifle grenades and small arms fire, and the
next morning the battalion…the battalion executive officer comes in and he grabs me and
wants a tour of the battery area to see what happened. Well, it’s not much to show, I
mean a little. He said, “Well,” he said, “Did you do crater,” he said, “Did you do crater
analysis?” and I said, “Well, no,” I said, “It’s kind of hard.” There weren't really any
craters. He said, “Well show me where they hit.” And I said, “Sir, these were rifle
grenades. They weren't mortar rounds, they weren't artillery rounds, they were rifle
grenades.” “Show me where…” Well, I found a couple of little pock marks in what was
essentially dried mud, almost like concrete, and I showed it to him and [?] whether in fact
of these rifle grenades coming in or not, I don’t know, it made him happy and then he
says, “Well, is that all?” and I said, “Well, sir, there was small arms fire coming in also,”
and he said, “How do you know it was incoming small arms fire?” and at that point - I
was never really tactful - at that point I just looked at him and I said, “Sir, have you ever
been shot at?” and he says, “No,” and I said, “Well let me tell you; when you are, you’ll
know whether its incoming or not.” But, it was that kind of mentality that we had to deal
with when we first got over there. Now, the…as a result of the second friendly fire
incident, the main battery [?], the battalion commander, the battalion exec, the battery…I
don't know if the battery commander was relieved, but they did relieve a lot of people and
we got a new battalion commander in who came down shortly after he arrived. This
would have been late April of ’67, and put the battery in formation, and by that time
everybody was getting a little skittish on this friendly fire issue. Although we had not
been effected ourselves, we were still pretty nervous about it, and he stood our battery in
formation and he stood up there and he said, “Okay,” he said, “I want everybody…I want
y’all to understand just one thing,” he said, “We’re artillery,” and he said, “When we
shoot artillery, we hurt people.” He said, “Our job is to make sure we hurt more of them
than we do of us,” and that attitude kind of relieved a lot of the tension that was going on.
We’re still about every round that went out, but it wasn’t quite so fearful as it was under
the previous regime, as it were. So with a new battalion commander, and we got a new
battery exec, or battalion exec officer in, and a new Division artillery commander, then
things kind of straightened out. These folks all seemed to understand that yeah, we were
over there to fight a war at the lower local at the battery level. The battery commander at
Fort Riley for A Battery, that was my battery commander, was probably the finest officer
I have ever served with in the Army; probably the finest supervisor I ever had. When I
left A Battery and went to B Battery, the battery commander was adequate but strange; he
would come in in the middle of the night and make me put the entire battery on full alert
because he had had a dream and in his dream his father had told him that we were going
to get hit that night. So, we were dealing with a guy that may not have been playing with
a full deck. When he left, they brought in a lieutenant, 1st lieutenant for battery
commander who was a fine officer although he apparently had been in more trouble than
not during his military career. I think he just couldn't deal with the authority and tended
to rebel against it, but as far as being a battery commander he was a fine battery
commander; best I’ve ever had. What was happening is they were trying to get
everybody their command time in, so every two months they’d send me a new battery
commander so it was kind of like I was exec officer of this battery for six months of my
tour and yet I went through three or four battery commanders during this period, so we
were just rotating battery commanders through to get their command time on paper. The
guy after the next one was, again, a very poor officer. Besides not being particularly
competent - he was cavalry - which didn’t endear him to me particularly or anybody else,
and then he was still battery commander when I left and went on to the 7th of the 8th
heavy artillery unit. Over there, basically, all battery commanders I had were very good.
The difference, though, which was interesting, we were talking about this at the reunion,
the real difference that struck me between those two battalions was not in the officers, but
NCOs. I think the 2nd of the 4th had probably the finest crew of NCOs that I ever knew in
the Army; just absolutely outstanding NCOs, and 7th of the 8th were, at best, mediocre.
So, it was…that is where I noticed the real difference and that I think is…I think the
NCOs make more of a difference, by far, than the officers were. But, I just found that the
NCOs in the 2nd of the 4th were just absolutely outstanding.

SM: Why do you…can you account for the difference why?
TS: I think it’s the luck of the draw; just absolute luck of who got sent where when. I don’t think it was any casual thing you could put your finger on. Its just I found the 2nd of the 4th NCOs to be just to be caliber and top, and I think that was proven out because several of them retired as commander sergeant majors, or 1st sergeants; I mean, they retired very high NCO ranks. What happened to those in the 7th of the 8th, I don’t know, but I do know that the 2nd of the 4th NCOs, a large percentage of them retired very highly.

SM: How do you think the high rotation rates for the battery commanders affected unit morale?

TS: Interestingly enough, I don't think it had a lot of effect on the morale because in an artillery battery, the executive officer commands the firing battery and that’s roughly three quarters of the battery, so the battery commander really is overall commander of the battery and makes those types of full unit decisions, but the fact that I was there for six months added the stability for the firing battery so the only things that weren't directly under me were the maintenance section, the mess hall, and the battery headquarters. Everything else was either a gun section or a fire direction center or the ammunition section. So I think the fact that I was there for so long tended to offset…and not only to me, but the rest of the officers and the NCOs who were by and large there for most of that time, so I think that tended to offset the fact we were just rotating battery commanders through on a regular basis.

SM: Okay. How do you think that high rotation affected the overall capabilities and effectiveness of the artillery units?

TS: Probably not. One of the things, going back in history a little bit, one of the things I read either during the Vietnam War or shortly after was a critique that the fact that we were only over there a year and then came home effected the combat effectiveness of the US Army because just about the time you learn the job, you’d be out of there and they’d bring somebody new in and yet if you really think about it, US troops landed in Normandy in June of 1944, and less than a year later the war was over with. So, we actually had more time in combat than a GI that went ashore at Normandy, and the fact is if you read about casualty rates in the European theater, people didn’t last that long. A platoon leader might be there, if he’s lucky, he might make 30 days and then
they had another one in, so in combat you’re going to have a high turnover rate and I
don’t think that the turnover rate of battery commanders was particularly that significant.
I think what they tended to do was leave people as fire direction officers and make the
evac officers in place longer because they had more effect on the actual performance of
the unit because they were the ones that got the rounds out and got the rounds on target.
So, I just don’t really believe that the turnover made a whole lot of difference.
SM: And did you have a lot of turnover in terms of your NCOs and enlisted
men?
TS: We had some early turnover on NCOs. Two or three of them were moved
out but for the most part the enlisted men…and we had a turnover of the enlisted men
because we went in as a unit. We had what was called a diffusion program where they
would send people out, they would bring people in, so we did have some constant
turnover, but there were some NCOs and officers that stayed if not the entire tour,
certainly the majority of it and I think that tended to help maintain some continuity there,
kind of getting back to a little bit more of the history of some of this. You’ve kind of
gotten into things. A couple of things; one of the things, we got down in the Mekong
Delta there. We got down there on March 15th, I believe.
SM: Ky Ly?
TS: No, March 15th we got into Bien Phuc. That was when we actually arrived
into the Delta at Bien Phuc. On March 16th we lost our first casualty, both Mike King
and Fred Chesboro were forward observers in A Battery and were killed in action the
same day. Both of those I had replaced; I mean, they were…Mike and I had ridden…the
battery commander had swapped us after we got off the boat and then Chesboro, I
replaced him as exec officer so the two guys I replaced both got killed the same day. A
few days after that on the 20th, again over around Hoa Kien an infantry company got hit
hard and virtually overrun; in fact, in the first five minutes the only officer left alive in
the company and functioning was the power forward observer, Howard Bridgeway who
took command of the company and ended up earning a silver star. A little interesting
side note on Howard, he was wounded at the same time the company commander was
killed. A round hit the command post and he received some fragment wounds to the
stomach, but they finally Medicaid him to the hospital to do exploratory surgery to
determine how severely wounded and what they found out was that there had been no
penetration of the abdominal wall, so he probably would have been over the wound in a
couple of weeks but it took him six weeks to recover from the exploratory surgery. But,
Howard got a silver star, Chesboro got a silver star, and then we got later on that spring
we lost Ray Fickum and when Howard Ridgeway was wounded his recon sergeant was
killed, John Cushman was killed. Just a few weeks later in May we lost David Gray and
Ray Fickum, both forward observers. I don’t know if we ever calculated, been able to
figure out how many casualties we had. Within the battery area, we were getting hit
routinely with small arms fire and rifle grenades, recoilless rifles, throughout the time we
were there at Bien Phuc. They never tried to overrun the position, they would just probe
the perimeter or just sit off to the side and shoot at us. But, we had a large number of
casualties and more so than I think were in the other batteries, and then of course in
November after I’d left battalion, C Battery and D Battery were down at a place called
the Old French Quarter down in the Delta when they got hit by a reinforced regimen of
either hard core VC or NVA, I’m not sure which, and that was when Sammy Davis won
the medal of honor. But, we went through that spring and summer generally in
several…a lot of heavy engagements. We would go down the Cai Lay area and get into
heavy battles down there, usually would bring a riverine force up from the south and
we’d be coming in from the north. So then actually at the end of August, that’s when I
transferred to the 7th of the 8th and was fire direction officer for C Battery…for B Battery,
I’m sorry, for B Battery, and I figured that I had found my little niche because as a fire
direction officer you worked…I worked all night and sleep all day and I had an assistant
fire direction officer take the other shift and I was kind of fat, dumb, and happy. Then on
October 15th, B Battery…or C Battery came under mortar attack at Ben Luc and the exec
officer took a direct hit with an 81 millimeter mortar and I heard it on the radio, didn’t
think much about it, but the next day the battalion commander was replacing the battery
commander. I think the change had already been in effect, but as a new battery
commander said, “Well, I won’t be able to select my own exec;” so he took all the
lieutenant files and he came across mine. He was from Texas, I was from Texas, I’d
gone to A&M, but most importantly I had six months experience as exec officer so I got
capped to replace Bicardi, his name was Bicardi, as exec officer and spent the rest of my
tour as exec officer of C Battery. We were out at Ben Luc which is right down back in
the same area where the 3rd Brigade, 9th Division was where I’d come from down there
for a couple of months, up until around the 1st of December and then we moved on up
into the Dau Tieng area supporting the 25th Division for the last part of the tour. We had
some interesting incidents down there. That was when we used the 175 for direct support
in the infantry. Another incident we have which…we were right along…right off
Highway 4 which was a main highway from Saigon down into the Delta and there were
constantly convoys being run up and down that highway and so one night not far off
our…well, close enough to our perimeter that we were receiving ricochets, there was a
fire fight on the highway, obviously the ambush went in convoys, and so I could
remember all the frequencies that we’d been on so I started flipping frequencies until I
found the one that had the fire fight. I had kind of broke into this radio net to contact the
convoy members who wasn’t real happy with somebody breaking into the net – he was a
little irate – and something to the fact to, “We’re in the middle of a fire fight, get off this
net,” and I said, “Well, I’ve got four eight inch howitzers here within range if you’d like a
little support,” and somehow became his best friend! So, I said, “Give me some
coordinates,” and he did and we put one round out and the silence was deafening. I don't
know if we ever hit anybody or not, but certainly the VC decided they didn’t want a part
of that and left. So from then on…and then so as soon as that ended, I went back to
Brigade, the 3rd Brigade of the 9th Division and just I don't even know who I was talking
to, some major or somebody, and I said, “I’d like to know why we weren't notified that
the convoy was coming up here,” and he said, “There was no reason to,” and I said,
“Well, they just got ambushed and we just bailed out, you know? We’ve got supporting
artillery; why wouldn’t you notify us?” So they finally [?] yeah, they ought to do that, so
they started notifying us whenever they were getting a convoy from then on so that we
had at least one gun on the convoy route. But, it was just some of those kinds of things
they never thought about, and part of it was we hadn't been there that long and I don’t
think they would have thought of us being there and the infantry, it really should have
been more of our battalion, our artillery battalion, coordinating that or the liaison officer
there. But anyway, we got that worked out.
SM: Now your whole time in Vietnam, was your battery or were your batteries
never actually targeted by a main force attack by Viet Cong or PAVN units?

TS: No, never.

SM: What kind of security did you have out in terms of protecting your
batteries?

TS: Well, that really just kind of depended. Some...when we were in the fire
base at Bien Phuc, obviously we had a battalion of infantry in the same fire base with us
and they provided security. Now granted, at least a couple of those companies were
usually out in the field, but we still had a substantial infantry presence there. Usually
when we would go to the field, we would be provided generally the platoon of infantry to
provide perimeter security, and then in addition to that we would provide our own
perimeter security. But there were occasions; one incident I remember in particular, I
took two – and again, I’ve got some pictures of it – I took a couple of guns and had to go
up to Bien Luc and this is before the fire base had gone into Bien Luc and we...there was
a small American compound there which had virtually no security that I could see, and
we pulled into that fire base, set up our two guns, and all I had was a rudimentary fire
direction center and two gun crews, so we had...virtually had no security other than what
we could provide with direct fire with 105s. So, there were times when we were not that
secure and it was just probably dumb luck that we didn’t get a major attack. We always
carried a bee hive with us. I think the standard load of bee hive was maybe two or three
rounds per gun. I think I managed to scrounge up 15 or 20. So, we always had bee hive
with us with 105. Now, with the eight inch 175, you didn’t have that so what we did, we
would keep a bucket...a couple of buckets full of nuts, bolts, anything else we could find
figuring if worse came to worse we would pour them down the muzzle and shoot those at
them. We never had to do it worked; at least it made noise!

SM: What would you have used as a round to push all that out, just a standard...

TS: Well, see, anything above a 105, the powder comes completely separate
from the projectile

SM: Oh, gotcha, gotcha.
TS: So you just shove a powder bag...I mean, you put the powder bag in there and shoot it out and you’ve got a 30 foot flame going out if you don’t have a projectile in there.

SM: Okay, so like a Navy gun in that respect?

TS: Exactly, exactly. We were just going to pull that down, put the powder bag in there, pour this stuff down, and let her go and see what happened. No, at Bien Luc, for example, the whole time we were at that fire base at Bien Luc the only security we had was what we provided ourselves. We did have a couple of quad 50s there to help us, but the rest of the security was provided by the battery itself; we had no additional security. So, like I say, it just really depended upon where you were and what you had, and unfortunately as they found out in the what we called the [?] fight which was won in November, they had infantries out, but the infantry that was providing the security had been out in the field for two or three days when they came back, and their concept was, “Hey, we’re back here. We’re relieved.” The infantry on security actually went to sleep in foxholes and got their throats cut and they walked right through them. In fact, the reason Sammy Davis won the…one of the primary reasons he won the medal of honor is that he, unable to swim, paddled a rubber raft, an air mattress, back and forth across this canal three or four times bringing wounded infantrymen back across to safety under fire. So, just because you’ve got infantry out there doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re completely secure. And then there were times we got very nervous because one of the…one of the Chi Lai fights we were out there and we kept getting intelligence reports about large infantry...large enemy movements around, so we started plotting it on the map and we’re surrounded, and so...and we had no security at that point other than what we could provide ourselves, and I think that at that point I was down to...I had four guns down there. I think the other two were back at the fire base. So, we were…very many...often times we were very vulnerable, but the artillery always is. If you go back to the Battle of the Bulge, several artillery batteries were just completely overrun by the German offensive. The only security they had was what they could provide.

SM: I’m just surprised that you weren't targeted more frequently.

TS: I think one of the reasons was that we did have bee hive, and I think we were...mostly we were up against Viet Cong rather than NVA. I don’t think they were
able, in most cases, to mass unit strength to take on…a 105 battery, even by itself, is pretty imposing because we not only had the howitzers with the bee hives, but we had four (?) machine guns, M-60 machine guns, M-16s, and its not like we were totally defenseless, and I think down there in the Delta I think the logistics of the Viet Cong massing the numbers to launch that kind of attack – particularly when they’re already being harassed by our own infantry out there – was probably beyond their capabilities. They were…I think they were…I think once we got down there they were just being run ragged just trying to keep away from the infantry and deal with our own infantry out there, and I think the infantry did get involved in several large scale battles down there, but they just never seemed to come after the artillery. We always kind of expected it, but they really didn’t.

SM: Now you mentioned harassment, H&I missions, harassment and intervention missions. I was wondering, were those missions conducted into free fire zones or were they in suspected enemy areas? How did those work?

TS: Well, all I can tell you is how they worked for us.

SM: Okay.

TS: Every evening, 365 days I was over there or whatever it was, we would get…battalion would call down - or whoever we were under if it wasn’t battalion – would call down and give us our H&I firings; a list of grid coordinates for our H&I fire targets. Usually there were probably 20 or 30 of them a night. Beyond that, it was up to us to decide when we were to fire these targets. They would often tell us how many rounds per target; usually it was one round or two rounds per target, but it was up to us to decide when we were going to fire them and we could fire them all at one time, or we could fire them once every ten minutes or whatever. And by and large, I had no clue what we were shooting at. I assumed there was some basis of intelligence there that somebody knew more than I did, but we really didn’t know. Every once in a while I would recognize one of them as a trail junction or a road junction or something that we had fired on before; maybe the infantry had a contact mission out there or something. There would be areas that were familiar, but a lot of it was just, “Who knows?” I assume they were getting intelligence from somewhere. The other part of it very well may of just been looking on a map and saying, “Well here’s a trail junction, here’s a road junction that would be a
likely avenue for the enemy to use at night, therefore we’re going to drop a couple of
rounds on it at some point and see what happens,” and likewise, feedback on
effectiveness of H&I was very slim. I think one or two times we got some feedback that
yes, we had actually hit somebody. I think one time we dropped a round right in the
middle of VC, an entire VC squad and wiped them out completely. But again, it was just
absolute dumb luck. But no, the H&I fires, we always considered them kind of a
nuisance because it was just something you did, you had to do, you did it every night, and
yet you really got no feedback on it and you had no idea whether you were effective or
what happened to it.

SM: Now what about firing into free fire zones?

TS: Well, we didn’t have what I…I’m not sure how you define a free fire zone.

SM: How was it defined in Vietnam?

TS: Well, we didn’t have…we didn’t use the term fire zones.

SM: Oh, you didn’t?

TS: No, not that I recall. We had no fire zones.

SM: Areas where you could not fire?

TS: Areas where we could not fire, but if it wasn’t a no fire zone then we could
fire into it.

SM: So as an artillery unit, you never had areas that you could fire into without
impunity? You always had to do those checks unless it was from a forward observer that
was taking fire, then you could that informed you could fire back?

TS: Yeah, we had no zones. We never fired. We never fired a round…well, I
take that back; as an artillery battery, we never fired a round either with the heavy
artillery or 105s. We never fired a round that was not the result of somebody calling a
fire mission in to us. The one exception to that was on the 4th of July, 1967, we fired a 50
gun salute as the artillery always does, except this time we fired it with high explosives
and we picked [?] but we still had to get clearance.

SM: Okay, so there was no free fire zone?

TS: There was no free fire zone anywhere that I was located.
SM: So why don’t we…why don’t you discuss the incident on August 5th where you got wounded?

TS: Okay, we were actually in the fire base at Bien Phuc and it was rather common for us to hit perimeter probes or whatever. I used to kind of jokingly refer to it as in America the kids would go out to a drive-in movie on Saturday night, and in Vietnam the VC would go shoot up the American compound. But, on this particular night, it was shortly after dark, it was relatively early in the evening, I had already actually been making a check of the perimeter. In addition to all my other duties I had command of the battery defense force who was responsible for the perimeter defense of the battery. In the fire base, that was generally taken care of by the infantry although we did provide some folks to support that, so I was kind of touring the perimeter and just checking to make sure things were settled down and I was on the far side of the battery from where we normally would take fire, there was a tree line off our perimeter where we would normally take fire from, and when I heard an explosion - kind of a muffled explosion that didn’t really sound like incoming which was - had a very unique sound to it – off to my right. So, I stopped for a minute and tried to figure out what it was and then I heard a second explosion which was definitely incoming off to my left, so I began to run along…we had, actually, an elevated wooden walkway through the battery because this was the rainy season and it was…everything else was just pure mud, so we had a series of wooden sidewalks. So, I started running along this wooden sidewalk heading over to the side of the perimeter where we normally receive fire. I got about halfway there, was pretty much in the middle of the battery area although behind the guns themselves when there was just a blinding flash just right almost at my feet and I felt not really a pain in my leg but I felt a blow to my leg and I knew I’d been hit. I felt a blow to my face, particularly my eyes, and so when I obviously closed my eyes at the point of the explosion, when I opened my eyes again I couldn't see; I was blind, which caused a moment of real panic. I knew I’d been hit in the eyes, and I could feel something warm running down my face, so I put my hand up to wipe this blood from my face and I opened my eyes again and I could see, and at that point I realized that I hadn't been hit in the face, I actually was…or at least not by fragments. The round had landed in the mud, in a
mud puddle, and what it...had thrown mud and water into my face and in my eyes. But, I
had been hit in the leg and so at that point I moved on out to the battery perimeter to
make sure that the defenses were set up and we were ready. By that time, we were
already firing defensive fires and illumination flares. I got on the field phone out at one
of the guns and started checking on other casualties to see what we had. I stayed out
there until we got the situation stabilized the first time around, and at that point somebody
or another finally realized that I had been hit and by that time my pants leg was soaked in
blood, so they kind of did the TV thing of grabbing my arm and putting it around the
shoulder and I kind of...I think I kind of said something to them about, “I can walk. I’m
not incapable of walking,” or something like that. Anyway, I went back to the...when
things settled down I went on back to the fire direction center where we usually had a
medic stationed and I went in there and there was light in there so I went in there and he
cut my pants leg off and did an emergency banding and checked to make sure there was
no arterial bleeding, did an emergency bandaging, wrapped it up, and about that time the
perimeter opened up again so I went back out to the perimeter until we could get that
stabilized, so once we got it all stabilized we had three or four other casualties besides
myself. We got the casualties put together, organized, and on stretchers like usual on a
jeep. The helicopter landing pad for the Medevac was over on the infantry side so we
headed over there and Medevac chopper came in and we all got on board and flew us
down to My Tho or what they call Dong Tien, the 3rd brigade headquarters, headquarters
to the surgical hospital down there. So, they sent us to the MASH, they had some other
term for it, but it’s essentially a MASH hospital. We went in and they put me on the
table and did a debreeding – they call it debreeding which is cutting away the dead flesh
and stuff – and did not remove the fragment because they decided it had gone in at an
angle and then turned and was up against the bone and decided that they’d do more
damage by removing it than by leaving it in, so the doctor said, “Well, we’ll keep you
here for ten days and then we’ll sew it up.” I think the theory behind that was see if it
worked its way out. My first thought was I would be bored to death sitting around there
for ten days, so I said, “How about just checking me out? I’ll go back to my unit and
battalion commander or a surgeon can sew me up in ten days.” So, they kind of agreed.
They weren't real happy about it, but they agreed to that. So the next morning I got up,
checked myself out of the field hospital, went over to supply and traded in my old ragged
uniform for a new one. I didn’t have my steel helmet, and my boots were pretty muddy
still at that point, so I then called…I guess I went over to the airstrip, got a ride over to
the airstrip, and called battalion to set a plane down and they said, “Well, the planes are
all busy, but we’ll get one down there as soon as we can,” so I spent basically the entire
day waiting around the little shack there at the airstrip for a plane to show up. At some
point, a major showed up who was in spit shined boots and starched fatigues and I forget
which branch he was with but it was something like personnel or one of those foo-foo
branches and he took one look at me and proceeded to chew me out for being out of
uniform and sloppily dressed. I think I did have lieutenant’s bars on. I think I had a
lieutenant bar on and rank, and he was getting very irritating at the time so I admittedly at
that point couldn’t take this guy seriously. About that time the infantry battalion
commander from the 5th and happened to…for whatever reason, I guess he’d been down
there, I guess he was flying in to meet the brigade commander, anyway, he flew in and
walks in about the time this major is giving me business and of course we knew each
other so he invited the major over to have a little chat and that was the last I saw of the
major. He kind of told the major how the cow ate the cabbage. But eventually, it wasn’t
until five o’clock or so in the afternoon before they could finally free up an 01 little
Birddog to come down and get me. So, I got into it and I’d kind of been watching; well,
obviously I’d been watching planes take off all day and I had nothing better to do, but I
noticed all three had been taking off from about mid way up the runway and I noticed this
guy, first thing I noticed is he taxis all the way to the far end of the runway. I’m kind of
wondering about that. Just at the time he turns it around and gets ready to start his take
off run he says, “We need all the runway we can get. This thing’s been a little sick
today,” and I’m thinking, “I’m not sure I want to be here right now!” So he threw that
throttle forward and we rolled, and we rolled, and we rolled, and we rolled, and he finally
wobbles that thing up in the air and we get up 800 feet, maybe 1000 feet off the ground
and if you’ve ever heard the term deafening silence; when the single engine on a plane
quits, it is deafening silence and that’s exactly what happened. So he called back to the
tower and requested the emergency…well, he requested to land. As he put it, “The
gine’s a little sick up here. We’d like to put it back down.” I thought, “Sick? This
thing’s dead!” But he dead stucked it right back on around and put it right back down on
the runway. So, I then had to go back over and call battalion up again and I says, “Tell
them to send me down another airplane, and please send one that works this time.” So
that took about another hour so they sent another airplane down and by the time I got
back to Tan An which is the battalion air strip, It was getting pretty well dark so I just
spent the night at battalion and went on back down to battery the next day and then
everyday I’d go over to the infantry aid station and they’d redress the wound and clean it
out. After about ten days I took a ride up to battalion and got our battalion surgeon to
sew it up which was kind of interesting experience...a friend of mine from college
happened to be there that point plus some of my friends in battalion. When they heard
what was going to happen this whole crowd accompanies me over to the battalion aid
station and so here I am laid out on this gurney with the battalion surgeon sewing up my
leg and there’s just this whole crowd of spectators around watching this little side show.
But, that was about it. They sewed it up. I actually ended up…once I got back to the
battery and kind of looked, I had a couple smaller fragments all up and down my
side…but nothing serious. That was kind of it.

SM: Now how did the other gentlemen that were injured in that same attack,
how did they fare?

TS: One of them I know lost an eye. He apparently had been laying on a cot
between...the round landed between the two of us, and he lost an eye out of it. The other
one was not…I don't believe was seriously injured. Both of them, the other two that were
injured, were not really part of our battery. They were actually a military…part of the
military intelligence attachment that were there listening to radio…intercepting radio
signals and just happened to be located in the battery area.

SM: Now for the units that you served with, what was the morale like in those
units, especially amongst the enlisted men?

TS: The morale was generally very high, certainly in the 2nd of the 4th. Morale
was extremely high. I’m not sure I ever served in a unit since that had the morale that the
2nd of the 4th did. The 7th of the 8th, once again I think the morale was very high;
probably not to the level that the 2nd of the 4th was, but still had very high morale. One of
the things I have observed over the years is that people’s attitudes, veteran’s attitudes, towards the war, and when they talk about the morale of the units, a lot of it depends on when they were there. If they were there prior to the ’68 Tet offensive, usually they’ll tell you they had very high morale, they had a very positive attitude towards their experience over there. They were over there – we were all over there – to fight a war. Somewhere after ’68 Tet offensive, it became very obvious I think to everybody over there as well as those of us still in active duty in the States, that we were just over there…it was just holding action; nobody was out to win the war anymore. It was just giving the politicians a chance to get out, as Mr. Nixon put it, peace with honor, and I think that’s when morale really plummeted and when the real drug problems and other problems surfaced.

SM: So the units, when you were in Vietnam, there wasn’t a whole lot of drug use or alcohol use?

TS: I was aware of absolutely no drug use over there, and I have talked to the NCOs at the reunions, the NCOs and the enlisted men that were there at the reunion and none of them were aware of any drugs. The only incident of drug use that I am personally aware of over there, and I didn’t find this out until one of the reunions, is one of our forward observers who was a young lieutenant, when we arrived, the day we arrived in country, apparently some friend of his who’d been there a while showed up and took him over to the Bearcat officer’s club and fed him a reefer, gave him a...they smoked pot together that night. He said it was the first time he’d ever had it, and he said it was the last; he said he’d never felt so sick in his life. But, that’s the only incident of drug use that I’m aware of. As far as alcohol goes, that was another interesting situation. Shortly after we got over there, well, shortly after I got to B Battery as exec, we took all kinds of strange things with us from Fort Riley not knowing what exactly we were getting into. One of the things we took were a couple of chest freezers. Now, we didn’t have the electricity to run them, but they made great ice chests, and we could get regular deliveries of ice. So one of the things we did shortly after I got to B Battery, we took up a collection, the officers and senior NCOs and we bought several pallets of soft drinks and beer and put it in those freezers. Then, we would just basically charge a replacement cost for anybody that wanted them so that we could keep the thing going, and it was all
on the honor system. If somebody wanted a coke or a beer they could go and get one, and in the six months I was in that battery we probably went through at least four or five or six times as much soft drinks as we did beer. Beer would last forever; nobody really drank a whole lot of beer. There were a couple of exceptions; there was one sergeant that was obviously an alcoholic who started out over there as an E6 and by the time we court marshaled and shipped him home he was a private E1, but by and large alcohol use was very minimal. A guy may have a beer in the evening or when he got off duty or something. I think, personally, as I recall, I had one beer when I was over there and that was…in fact I’m sure I only had one because my two NCOs that I worked most closely with had a big laugh over the fact that things were so screwed up that Lieutenant Striegler was actually going to drink a beer! But, it was just we were in the middle of a very frustrating situation and I decided I was going to have a beer. But, I think that was the only beer I’d had the whole time I was over there. So, it was just alcohol drug use during that period, at least with the units I was with, it was not…and I suspect that it may have been higher with the rear echelon folks. I think it would have been very difficult to have been in Vietnam and not been in a combat unit because even in our unit, there were times where things got very boring. I mean, nothing’s going on and we’re just pumping out H&I fires. It can get pretty boring, so I can just imagine if all you’re doing is in ammunition supply at one of big base camps or something along that line. It can be a very boring year that you spent over there and I can understand why they might drink too much or they could maybe resort to drugs. I think that’s probably more than the situation down in the line units where they were actually in combat.

SM: Now what other discipline problems did you have? You mentioned this one NCO that eventually busted down to private and shipped out. What was the biggest discipline problem you had with your soldiers in Vietnam?

TS: Actually, we had very few discipline problems. We had that one. The only other significant discipline problem we had is we had a private - I guess he was I don’t think he ever made E4, a private or private first class – that was probably…I won't say he was…I doubt that he was actually retarded; all I know is his IQ wasn’t all that high. If the term below normal is appropriate, that’s probably what you would use. He did not have much of an education and just didn’t seem to get it. I caught him sleeping on guard
duty one night and we took some minor discipline, I think I just basically chewed him out. He was caught sleeping on guard duty two or three other times, finally got to the point where we court marshaled him, and after he spent six months in the brig or in Long Binh jail for dereliction of duty…and of course I thought that we were rid of him but as soon as he got out, why he came right back to us. Fortunately that was just about the time I was leaving so it wasn’t my problem. But, that was the only other incident of any serious disciplinary problems or conduct problems we had. There were the minor things, I mean, I could go through our orders and I can find where some spec four gets an article 15 for 15 bucks or 20 bucks or something like that for dereliction of duty which probably means being late with the morning report or some such thing as that. But, there were no…there were no significant disciplinary problems that I was aware of other than those two incidents.

SM: Why was the NCO demoted?
TS: Well, it was being drunk on duty, basically.
SM: Oh, okay, drunkenness?
TS: Oh yeah. The last time, I think the last time before they actually court marshaled him he was inside an empty ammunition crater trying to make a phone call.

SM: Okay.
TS: It was to that level of problems.
SM: Well, is there anything else you want to talk about with regard to what you did in country in Vietnam?
TS: Well, I’m trying to think. Probably not. I think we’ve pretty well covered the war front as far as the oral interview, I think. I’ve got a bunch of papers here that you may want to go through and see. Some I’ve made copies for you, and some if you want copies you’ll have to copy them here.
SM: Absolutely.
TS: I’ve got…we’ll go through some of these pictures and see what you want.
SM: Okay.
TS: Other than that…but no, I think we pretty well covered the war.
SM: Well, when you left Vietnam, how were you received when you arrived in country? Where did you come in through?
TS: I actually…we flew from Saigon, I guess Tan Son Nhut air base I think is what we flew out of. We flew to Guam, refueled, flew to Hawaii, refueled, flew to San Francisco. As soon as I got to San Francisco - we got there about midnight or maybe a little before – I was able to get a ticket. At that time my fiancée was in Kansas, going to school in Kansas, and I got a plane ticket from San Francisco to Kansas City, or actually Wichita, and flew straight back to Kansas and spent some time with her and her family and then we both went down and spent time with my family, and from there I took - I guess I took a couple of weeks leave, I don't think I took more than two weeks leave – from there we went, or I went, to Fort Sill, Oklahoma and reported in for duty as an instructor in the artillery school, and was then on active duty for another two years, little under two years. So from that standpoint, I think my experience with returning home was a lot different than the average soldier over there because first of all, I had family support; my family had a tradition of service in the military. My brother had just gotten off active duty while I was in Vietnam. Then I went right into a community where we all had the same shared experience. I was an artillery officer as part of a team of artillery officers instructing other artillery officers in artillery. So for the next 18 months, I served at Fort Sill as an instructor in the artillery school and that’s a built in community all into itself. So it really wasn’t until I got back from Korea in January of ’70 and went off active duty that I actually got back into the – if you want to call it – the real world of US society. Well, by that time, I’d been back long enough and exposed to it enough that I didn’t have the problems at that point that I think a lot of guys did with coming home to an expectation of what homecoming was going to be like and that wasn’t met.

SM: When you were at Fort Sill, at Fort Sill teaching, were you able…was the course of instruction flexible enough that you could incorporate the lessons you had learned personally in Vietnam…

TS: Yes.

SM: —into your course of instruction for the students?

TS: In fact, we were encouraged to do that to the extent that we had approval, but you couldn't just go tell war stories.

SM: No, no, practical lessons.
TS: In fact, to the extent that I actually was given the privilege or ordered, however you want to put it, of putting together a class which was really a slide show and tell class designed to do exactly that; not to the 2nd lieutenants that we normally taught because my group normally taught the ROTC 2nd lieutenants, but this was a group of officers who would come back for a two week orientation course prior to going to Vietnam and they were everything from captains up to full colonels, and I put together a slide show, a two hour slide show, which did exactly that. “Here’s…forget what…don't forget what all you’ve learned, but here’s how you’ve got to do it in Vietnam.” And it went over very well. It was very well received. The more amusing side of it was we would be teaching to these 2nd lieutenants and we would be teaching and by the time I got back we were teaching Vietnam tactics; we were teaching, “Here’s how you should be doing it in Vietnam,” and invariably there was one in every class who would raise his hand and all of a sudden he’d say, “Well, my brother’s sister’s cousin’s wife’s uncle’s nephew was over there and that’s not the way they did it,” type of thing, you know, and it just…you have to deal with it somewhat tactfully, but I just…my solution was, “Well, not everybody over there did it right,” and let it go at that, let them make out what they will. But no, by the time I was back from Vietnam, Fort Sill at least had really turned itself around, and not so much turned itself around but had been able to make the adjustment to use the resources that were available for the officer’s returning to it during the year I was over there to put together a very good training program for being directed to Vietnam because basically that’s…everybody that came through knew that’s where they were going.

SM: Now do you recall any specific aspects or lessons that you took away from Vietnam that you incorporated into that?

TS: Yeah. One of the things that we did I think more so than many artillery units over there was the splitting of the battery and that means you’ve got to…first of all, you’re already operating as a battery fire direction center and as a battalion fire direction center, which was never designed to be done and so then you’ve got to split that and you’ve got to split your gun crews and so it took some learning to figure out how to do that effectively and be able to maintain the fire support that you needed to do. Ammunition control was another thing. Every morning before breakfast we’d have to
send in an ammunition report and it took a while to learn that no matter how much
you try, you could never keep track of all your ammunition. It finally got to the point that
it got to be a joke. We would, a couple of three times I would take two NCOs and myself
and we’d each get a different colored grease pencil and we would physically go through
and mark and count every round in the battery and we’d all three come up with different
answers. So what I finally figured out was that…I really sandbagged ammunition; any
way I could get ammunition I got it in, so I was carrying…I think the basic load was
maybe a couple of thousand rounds, and I never had less than four or 5,000 on hand. My
theory was that if battalion thought I was out of ammunition by their records and I was
still able to keep shooting, they weren't going to say anything, but if I’m out of
ammunition and they say I’m supposed to have 1,000 rounds on hand, I’m in deep
trouble. So I just, by hook or crook, sandbagged ammunition any way I could so that we
always had more than the battalion ever thought we should have. The whole concept of
convoys, when I was over there, about the time I went over there was when the press
started with, “The daytime belongs to the Americans and the night belongs to the VC.”
Well our Division commander decided that wasn’t going to be true in the 9th Divisionary
so he ordered that all convoys be conducted at night. So we did a lot of night movement.
In fact, if I can back up and bring up another story…

SM: Absolutely.
TS: I was explaining earlier that this infantry battalion commander with the 5th
of the 60th decided that we were his artillery, and it finally came to a head on one of these
Operation Concordia movements. He was to go down there and was told, again, that
artillery support would be provided, but B Battery was not going on this operation, and
he bowed his neck and he said, “No, my artillery is going down there,” and the brigade
commander got into a real head knocking contest between our battalion commander and
the 5th of the 60th battalion commander and the brigade commander to the point that
finally the brigade commander said, “I don’t really care, but I’m not sending down the
trucks,” because we didn’t have room for our prime movers our trucks in the fire base.
They were all kept up at battalion. So, the brigade commander says, “I don't care
whether they go or not, but I’m not sending down the trucks, so if you can figure out a
way to get them there you can take your own battery.” So, apparently he forgot this was
a mechanized infantry battalion so we loaded up 105s behind the APCs and we went right
down the road. That was the first time we did that, and from then on we did that very
often. Rather than bring our trucks down to move the artillery, to move our howitzers,
and we’d just hook up behind the infantry and go right along. But he felt that strongly
about it that he was willing to expend resources to drag us down to wherever he wanted
to go. So, we were definitely his artillery; he didn’t trust anybody else.

SM: How would you carry ammunition when you would load the howitzers
behind the 113?

TS: We’d load the ammunition inside the 113s. Nobody ever rode inside them
anyway; everybody rode on top because if you rode inside and you hit a mine you went
up against the top and were killed so you rode on top to get blown off. So everybody
rode on top of them anyway, so we just loaded the ammunition into them. If we didn’t
have quite enough then once we were down there the battalion had to resupply us with
their helicopter. In fact, there was one fight where I was saying we fired 4,000 rounds in
less than 48 hours. We were actually running out of ammunition in the middle of the
night and two o’clock in the morning battalion had to resupply us by air which didn’t
make the helicopter pilots too happy, but they did it anyway.

SM: Now you mentioned the mines, if the track hit a mine they’d want to be on
top. Did that happen very often?

TS: Oh yes, very common. The road between Bien Phuc and Tan An was about
seven-eight miles long, and we called it Thunder Road because we would lose vehicles
on it usually at least one a week, whether it was an APC or a deuce and a half truck or
whatever. One incident, in fact one incident I was going with my jeep up the road and
suprisingly we would run that road unescorted, just myself and my driver but the one
vehicle they never hit was a truck hauling the water trailer. For whatever reason, they
never bothered the water trailer, and everyday we’d send a truck up with the water trailer
to fill it with water at battalion and bring it back and they never bothered that, but one
day I was going up to battalion for some reason, I forget which, and I had my driver and I
were just by ourselves in this jeep going along and its just a one lane road, there’s no
place to go, and all of a sudden from the tree line just off the edge of the road, here comes
a line of tracers from a machine gun right across the hood of the jeep and the driver, my
driver, hits the brakes which of course was not the right thing to do and I, in a not too
polite fashion, told him so. But that was it, one burst of machine gun fire right across the
hood of the jeep and then we kept on going. But yeah, there was an incident about
halfway up that road that a track got blown with a mine. Of course those tracks are
magnesium hulled, so if they got hot enough they’d burn and the diesel fuel…this one
cought fire and there was at least one guy who got trapped underneath in it and nobody
could get to him so that…but mines were…in fact, I remember consciously thinking over
there that one of the happiest days of my life was when I could get back to the States and
drive down the highway without being afraid somebody was going to blow me up as I do
it.

SM: Well, so what was the most important thing you took away from the
Vietnam War for yourself personally?

TS: I think just the fact that despite the fact that we were not successful in what
we did, we at least tried to go over there and defend somebody else’s freedom. I guess
I’ve always felt that the freedom we have in this country we have because somebody was
willing to lay down their life to win it for us and keep it for us and while that wasn’t
something I was called to do, I owed somebody something and by going over and trying
to help the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, keep their freedom, maybe I paid a little bit of
that debt.

SM: Anything else that you want to talk about regarding your experiences?

TS: No, I think we’ve pretty well covered the war front. I can’t think of
anything else now.

SM: Okay, well thank you very much.

TS: Sure!

SM: I really appreciate you taking the time for this. This ends the interview
with Tom Striegler.