Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Mike Davidson. Today is August 11, 2204. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Vietnam Archive on the campus of Texas Tech University in the interview room of the archive. Mike is in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and it is about seven minutes after 9:00 AM, Central Standard Time. Mike, let’s start with biographical information on yourself.

Mike Davidson: I was born on November 26, 1945 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My mother and father had both worked for the Standard Oil Plant in Baton Rouge. I had a normal childhood; I went to public schools.

RV: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

MD: I have two younger brothers. We did some fishing and hunting when I was growing up.

RV: Did you work any jobs in your youth?

MD: Yeah. My mother always made me get a job in the summertime from the time I was fourteen years old on. And I worked bagging groceries at the local grocery store. Neighborhood grocery store in the summertime. And when I became a sophomore in high school, I started playing high school football. And so I didn’t work the month of August, because I was always at football practice.
RV: Right. Ok. Tell me a little bit about your parents, Mike. You said they worked for the oil company?

MD: Yes. My father is from Plaquemine, Louisiana. He got a college scholarship to go the University at Lafayette. University of Louisiana at Lafayette when he was seventeen years old, promptly broke his collar bone and flunked out. He went to work on a dredge boat in the Atchafalaya swamp, where he worked for five years, saving money to go back to college. And then he did go back. When he went back, he went back to LSU and got a degree in Chemistry and Physics, graduating in 1939. Then he went to work at the Exxon. The Standard Oil plant in Baton Rouge as a chemist.

RV: Ok.

MD: Where he worked his entire career.

RV: Did he enjoy his work, do you think?

MD: Yeah, I think he did. I think he was a tinkerer, and he became an expert in the field of gas chromatography. And he arranged the process controls for the entire plant, was one of his projects.

RV: Wow.

MD: My mother was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And became a nurse and during the 1930s, she worked on the TVA dams in Tennessee.

RV: Right.

MD: As an industrial nurse, and then she got a job in Baton Rouge at the Exxon plant. At the Standard Oil plant as an industrial nurse, where she met my father. And they got married.

RV: Ok. Tell me a little bit about your childhood. What do you see when you think about your childhood, growing up there in Baton Rouge?

MD: Well, we did a lot of swimming in the summertime. We belonged to the country club. And dad always wanted us to have a swimming pool where we could swim in the summertime, and so we did. I guess I remember going to the club every day and swimming. In fact I swam so much, I developed swimmer’s ear.

RV: Really?

MD: Then I was on the little club swimming teams.

RV: Your brothers went with you?
MD: Yeah.
RV: Were you all close?
MD: Yeah, relatively close. Two years apart between my middle brother, and ten years apart between my youngest brother. Now my youngest brother developed into a special education problem. And he was emotionally disturbed. And he never got past the first grade. So my parents’ concern for taking care of my youngest brother was always the overriding concern in our lives, and I think it made my mother and father’s life doubly hard having a child who wasn’t normal.

RV: Right.
MD: So I grew up in a family with a mother and a father struggling to make sense out of my youngest brother’s problems.

RV: Ok. What kind of student were you, Mike?
MD: I was a B and C student. It didn’t seem to matter how hard the coursework was. I always made about either a B or a C. I had an equal number of B’s as C’s when I graduated from high school.

RV: What year did you graduate high school?
MD: 1963.

RV: Ok. Wow, what a time for the United States. What do you remember about the early 1960s in high school?
MD: I just remember in high school playing football.

RV: That was a big part of your life then?
MD: Yeah. I went to Baton Rouge high school, which was a very good high school then. It was an LSU college preparatory course. And if you went to Baton Rouge high school, your preparation in English and in mathematics was just superior to prepare you for the freshman courses at LSU. I was never a good English student, but I was pretty good in math. In fact, the first – my algebra preparation, algebra and trigonometry was so good, I didn’t have to study at LSU.

RV: Wow. What were your favorite subjects in high school?
MD: In high school?
RV: Yes sir.
MD: Probably algebra.
RV: Ok.

MD: I seemed to grasp it really well and I seem to be able to do it without any trouble. Biology was my worst subject. In fact, my first semester my freshman – my junior year – no, my sophomore year in high school, I failed Biology. Then I came back and made an A the next six weeks and made A’s and B’s the rest of the year.

RV: Wow. What happened? How did you improve so much?

MD: I started studying (laughter).

RV: That would help.

MD: Yeah.

RV: So, you played football. Any other sports?

MD: I threw the javelin for the track team.

RV: Ok.

MD: But I wasn’t very good at it.

RV: Ok.

MD: The furthest I ever threw it was a hundred and forty-nine feet, which was not very good for high school.

RV: Ok. What position did you play in football, Mike?

MD: I was a left guard. Left offensive guard.

RV: Ok. Now was it expected that you would go on to LSU? Go on to college? Were your parents kind of counting on that, or was that a decision that you made yourself?

MD: No, it was expected that I would go to college and go to LSU.

RV: Really?

MD: There was never any serious talk. Well, there was never any serious talk about going anywhere else. I had thought that I wanted to go to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette because my girlfriend, who later became my wife, was going to go there. But dad had had such a good time there; he said absolutely not, you’re going to LSU. So I went to LSU.

RV: Ok. Did you ever go to LSU football games and things like that while you were in high school?
MD: Oh yeah. I went to a lot of LSU football games while I was in high school. In fact, I started going to LSU football games when I was eight years old with my father. So LSU football was always in the fall, was something that we did. We’d at least see one game a year. So.

RV: Now were you going to be able to play football at LSU? Did you have aspirations?

MD: No, I was…when I was in the ninth grade, I was given an award as the best defensive lineman, and I thought that I might have a chance to play in high school and be pretty good. But I was always very – well, not very small, but small. I only weighed a hundred and seventy pounds playing an offensive lineman. And I was never very fast. So I was never big enough or fast enough to play college football, so it was never a serious consideration.

RV: Ok. Right. Well tell me about your LSU years. Was college something that you really were looking forward to doing, or was it more of a job for you?

MD: Well, I always looked forward to going to college. I didn’t know what I was going to study while I was there. Dad said I had to take two years of chemistry and physics while I was in college, which was kind of bad because it made my grade point average real low for a while. Until I got interested in history, and that’s what I got my degree in.

RV: Now what changed your interest from algebra or that area to history?

MD: I think I could do it. I seemed to have trouble with college-level chemistry and calculus. So. I was always interested in history, I used to read a lot of history, so I just sort of took to it. I seemed to be able to do it pretty well.

RV: Right. Did you have aspirations to teach with that degree, or do other things with that?

MD: Well, I – my sophomore year in school, I got interested in military history. Back then, this is the mid-1960s, there wasn’t much of a military history program in the United States. But then I got interested in ROTC and became a lieutenant. And I began to focus on ROTC and tried to do well in it.

RV: Was this Army ROTC?

MD: Yes it was.
RV: Ok. Now was there any military experience in your family?
MD: Not in my immediate family. My mother’s brothers, she had six brothers and four of them served in the military in World War II.
RV: Wow.
MD: My father did not serve in the military.
RV: Ok.
MD: He was part of an essential industry in Baton Rouge, making the gasoline that was used in the Battle of Britain.
RV: Right.
MD: Aviation gasoline.
RV: Mike, what do you remember about 1963 when Kennedy was shot?
MD: Well, I can remember I was in the library at LSU when somebody came up to me and told me that Kennedy had been shot, and I remember looking out the windows thinking, I wonder what in the world’s going on. That’s all I thought about.
RV: Right.
MD: I can remember my father watching the funeral ceremony on television. That’s about all that I thought about.
RV: Were you interested in politics? In keeping up with current affairs and things like that while you were in college?
MD: Yes and no. I didn’t religiously read any news magazines. My mother used to get Time Magazine, which I would occasionally read. Once the war got started, though, I became very interested in it.
RV: Well that’s what I wanted to ask you about. What did you – you were at LSU ’63 to ’67?
MD: ’68.
RV: ’68, ok. And what did you know about Vietnam? We just kind of got involved in a more overt way in 1965.
MD: The earliest I can remember in 1963 was taking a speech class and making a speech because then one of the issues was whether or not the advisors were being properly equipped for what they were doing in South Vietnam. And I made a speech that
they needed to be supported with the latest equipment, and I guess, well I guess that was about it.

RV: So you were aware?

MD: Yes, I was aware of it, and I was very interested in it.

RV: At that time, do you remember what you believed, what you thought about the United States being in Vietnam, why the United States was in Southeast Asia?

MD: Yes. I felt like we belonged there to stop the communists. I think I analogized it to Korea. I felt that the effort needed to be supported. So I was a supporter of it from the very beginning.

RV: Ok. And I assume when you joined Army ROTC that you knew you would probably be going over there?

MD: Well, I don’t think I really became aware of that until summer camp in 1966, when I went to summer camp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. All of our instructors had either been there or were going, and at least those that had come back had said everybody’s going, so just get ready.

RV: Do you remember what they told you? Or did they talk about their experiences there?

MD: My company executive officer was an artillery major who had a Legion of Merit. He said that he had served in Laos as a Green Beret, and in Robin Moore’s book The Green Berets, he was one of the characters, which I thought was kind of interesting. He did have a Legion of Merit though, which was a very unusual award for an Army major. He was an ROTC instructor at some Houston school as I remember. But I can remember drinking a beer with him and him telling me stories. Him telling me something about being in Laos in the late 1950’s. So.

RV: Ok. How did you take the military lifestyle and discipline?

MD: Oh. Like a duck to water.

RV: Really?

MD: Oh yeah, I really kind of enjoyed it. There was organization. There was structure. I was always interested in the military. I grew up watching the World War II movies in the 1950’s, and I guess I always sort of wanted to be a soldier, so I really took to it.
RV: Right. Ok. So what other things come to your mind when you think about LSU? Before we go to the military discussion. What do you remember about college?

MD: Well, I was a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity, which was an important part of my campus life because I got my meals there at the Sigma Chi house every day. And I lived in the house for a couple of years. Also, in my college, in my last semester of high school and all through college, I dated Judy Begue, who was a beautiful girl of French descent. And we ended up getting married in August of 1967. We’ve been married ever since.

RV: That’s a big event for college. Definitely.

MD: Yeah. So she was an essential part of my life during college. And she supported my aspirations to be an Army officer. She got her degree in English Secondary Education. And when she got her degree and graduated and got a job, then we could get married because I could be supported while I was going to college my last semester.

RV: Right, ok. Anything else about LSU you want to talk about before we move on?

MD: Well, it was called the old war school then, and ROTC was mandatory for the first two years for all freshmen men.

RV: Right.

MD: So we had a big cadet corps of two thousand Army cadets and two thousand Air Force cadets. So it was just a very big part of LSU, a prominent part of LSU’s college life during that time.

RV: Ok, well you graduated in 1968, is that correct?


RV: Ok. Now when that time was approaching, what did they tell you about your military status? Were you going to go do some training and go over to Vietnam, or did you have other options?

MD: Well, I volunteered for the 82\(^{nd}\) Airborne Division. The goal was to graduate from college, go to the 82\(^{nd}\), go to Airborne and Ranger school, and probably go to Vietnam about six to nine months later. That was the goal, so.

RV: Did that come about?
MD: Well, no. What happened was, I graduated from college and got commissioned. I was the only commissioned officer to take a regular Army commission out of the thirty-seven Army cadets, which gave me a three-year obligation. But I was, like I said, I felt like I wanted to be a career officer. And my wife and I had deferred our honeymoon, so we went to Cozumel for a week after that, where I did some scuba diving. Then we came back and went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I signed in to the 82nd Airborne Division, and I was assigned to Charlie Battery 1st of the 320th artillery. The units, the artillery units at Fort Bragg were comprised mostly of about four or five privates and fifteen NCOs and ten second lieutenants. Because of the demands of Vietnam, there just weren’t very many commissioned officers. I mean, there weren’t very many non-commissioned officers or privates in the 82nd. Anyway, I was there three weeks and got assigned to jump school, to go to jump school, and I was promptly injured in jump school. I injured my left knee again, which is the knee from when I had suffered a football injury in high school and had a knee operation. And I re-injured that knee. And by the second week, the beginning of the second week, I couldn’t run anymore. I was assigned back to the 82nd on crutches. I had suffered a traumatic osteoarthritis problem with the left knee, which prevented me from ever being able to run again. At least for several years. So I couldn’t stay in the 82nd Airborne Division.

RV: Right. How did you feel about that?

MD: Well, I felt terrible about it, because I was – there’s a saying in the Airborne, ‘If you’re not airborne, you aren’t shit.’ And I was just a second lieutenant with a banged-up knee in this airborne unit. And I found myself doing a lot of extra duty as duty officer and just being a spare lieutenant who wasn’t airborne qualified and who had a gimp knee. Anyway, eventually the cast was taken off. And then in May of 1968, I was assigned to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to go through regular Army artillery officer basic course, which lasted six to eight weeks. And in the meantime, I had written a letter to the branch, asking that I be assigned to air defense artillery and to work on the antimissile defense system since I thought my left knee prevented me from being a combat arms leader again. So after I got back from Fort Sill, about six weeks later I was reassigned to Fort Bliss, Texas. So I want to say something about the 82nd. One of the things that I remember about the 82nd was all the stories the NCOs would tell about fighting Charlie.
And the 82nd had a junior officer education program on weapons and how to call in artillery fire. And one of the things that was very – it was just a division that was training people to go to war, is what it was. And I thought the training that junior officers received in the 82nd was really pretty good. One other thing about lieutenants in the 82nd is, they’re hard. One of the things the 82nd makes is a hard, tough lieutenant. Especially in the artillery business. So. That was going to pay some dividends for having been in the 82nd when I got out to Fort Bliss, because I’d been exposed to a unit where the officers were always tough.

RV: Right. Tell me about Fort Bliss.

MD: Well, when I got out there, I was assigned to the first activating self-propelled Vulcan cannon unit battery in the Army. And it was going through its unit-training program at Dona Ana Ranch Camp, which was twenty-six miles north of Fort Bliss. So it was a long drive out in the desert every morning at 4:30 to get to the unit at about six o’clock in the morning. The air defense units, that air defense unit, had been staffed with non-commissioned officers that had worked on the Nike-Ajax missile air defense system. And they had worked at a command called a RADCOM. And they were not small-unit leaders as NCOs. They had spent their time in the Army sitting around a missile. Missile units, and they didn’t know how to lead troops. So it was quite a problem in the beginning, getting those NCOs to be able to work and lead troops and take care of their people and take care of the equipment. When I got out to the unit, I was the senior lieutenant. There was one captain who was a battery commander, and I was the senior lieutenant. And I had short, very short hair and highly spit-shined boots, like you had in the 82nd. And as the senior lieutenant, I had a choice of being the executive officer or the training officer. The unit was in its first week of training, which had been badly screwed up. And the battery commander told me, he would rather that I would take over as the training officer and develop the training program for the unit rather than be the XO. So I did that and within a week I had the training program straightened out and developed a training schedule for the unit for the next three or four months, and I gathered up the maps for them to go out at the training areas, and basically I got the unit training program straightened out so the unit could go through its training.

RV: Ok. How did the men receive you in this new unit?
MD: Well, they thought I was a little bit strange because I had such highly spit-
shined boots and really short hair from the 82nd Airborne Division. And I was reflecting
what I’d been taught in the 82nd. So I guess they thought I was a pretty hard lieutenant
stiff.

RV: Did you consider yourself that?

MD: No, I considered myself a better officer than those other lieutenants, though,
because I’d been in the 82nd and what I’d been exposed to. The other officers were all
ROTC graduates like myself, but they had just come directly into the air defense unit out
of the air defense officer basic course into the battery. And they hadn’t had any
experience at any other unit before, so it was all a first-time learning experience for them.

RV: Right, ok. How long were you there?

MD: I was at Fort Bliss until March of 1970. When the self-
propelled Vulcan battery came back to Fort Bliss after its training program and was
assigned to Biggs Field, which is just off of Fort Bliss. That battalion was activating its
battery sequentially so the next battery to be activated was the Chaparral battery. And
that activated I believe in January of 1969. And it was staffed with officers from OCS,
and then I came back when the unit came back, I worked in the S3 office, the operations
office for a while. Then I worked as an assistant S1, assistant personnel officer for a
while. I was just a battalion staff officer, is what I was. And let me say that the battalion
commander came in about September of 1968 and took over the unit and started to build
it up. His name was Colonel Jerome C. Milam. And he was just a fabulous leader. He
was somebody whom I grew to love as an Army officer. I really had so much respect for
him. He commanded six batteries, one and five batteries and was considered a water
walker by the field artillery branch. He had been stationed at the Pentagon, and he was
considering getting out of the Army when he reached his twenty years. But anyway, he
was just a wonderful battalion commander. Anyway.

RV: He seems like a role model for you.

MD: Yes, he was a role model for me, he really was. We really liked each other,
so it was a mutual admiration society. He enjoyed military history, I enjoyed talking
about it. He really liked my wife, Judy. So I hope – we became pretty close. Then in
April of 1970 no, April of 1969, the towed Vulcan battery was being activated. Was to
be activated, and I went and asked Colonel Milam if he would appoint me the battery commander of that unit. Which he did. And then in May of 1969, I took over command of the battery. I was about twenty-three years old, and I had a hundred and twenty men and five officers. A tremendous amount of responsibility for this new activating weapons system. We had to go through an Army training program just like we had done with the self-propelled battery system. And my executive officer was a guy named Rick Jones who was a good friend who came in from 82nd airborne division. I had five days rank on him. And that was why I got to be the battery commander and not him. So Rick was my executive officer for about six months. We were really close friends, so it worked out really well.

RV: Now were they telling you that you were going to be rotating over to Southeast Asia?

MD: No. In fact, Colonel Milam had kept me off the Vietnam levies because our weapons system was brand-new, and we were developing a new weapons system for the Army, doing new training tactics and employment systems for the new weapons systems. Also, remember I had that left knee injury, which probably kept me out of it. But I got interested in politics and going to law school.

RV: This was while you were at Fort Bliss?

MD: Yeah, I really think so. And one day I came home and I saw a portion of Spiro Agnew’s famous speech criticizing the news media at Des Moines, Iowa, in which his famous expression, nattering nabobs of negativism, I think was one of the things he said about them. Anyway, I got interested in the news media. And I started thinking, I wonder how I can save enough money to go to law school, learn about the news media, and learn about the Vietnam War, which was going to be, I thought was going to be a big issue in American political life in the future. So I started looking at the Army organization charts and I discovered that there were information officers or public affairs officers, whatever you call them. And I got interested in the program and on a trip home at Christmastime; I thought that what I would do was go to Vietnam as an information officer. It would give me a chance to save money for law school. I would learn a lot about the news media. And I would learn a lot about Vietnam. So.
RV: That’s interesting. You wanted to go over to learn about where you thought your career would be going in the future.

MD: That’s true.

RV: Ok. What about the prospect of going into a war zone? How did that affect you?

MD: Well, it didn’t really bother me that much because I was kind of a war lover. I didn’t… I knew I couldn’t be a combat arms leader because of my knee. But I knew that information officers or staff officers are at a pretty high level, so I didn’t think that I would be picking up a rifle and fighting anytime soon doing it. So anyway.

RV: Ok. How did Judy feel about it?

MD: Well, at this point in time, when I came home and told her that I’d volunteered for Vietnam, she was about five months pregnant. And she cried for three weeks. She didn’t like the idea of my going and leaving her and all of that. So she did some thinking about it and decided that she would go to Honolulu, spend the year at Honolulu while I was in Vietnam.

RV: In order to be closer to you?

MD: Yeah, in order to have her own adventure.

RV: Ok. So where are we here time-wise when you volunteered to go to Vietnam?


RV: Ok.

MD: I called the branch and asked for the information officer basic course, and go to Vietnam in the summer of 1970.

RV: And were you able to get into the information officer school?

MD: Yes, I was.

RV: Where was that?

MD: That was at Fort Benjamin Harrison Indiana. Outside Indianapolis. I got in in April, I believe it was, of 1970, and stayed eight weeks. It was a wonderful course in all the various news media. How to write television scripts, how to write news articles, how to edit a newspaper. It was just a wonderful, wonderful school. I felt well prepared. And I always felt well prepared in Vietnam by that information officer basic course.
RV: Can you tell me a little bit more about it? What kind of classes did they offer?

MD: Well, they offered classes on public affairs, on the organization and structure of the information officer – information program for the Department of Defense. They offered courses on television. They offered courses on newsprint. I mean, newspapers. How to publish a command newspaper. They offered courses on speech – making speeches. As public affairs, being a public affairs spokesman. They offered courses on how to deal with the American news media.

RV: Do you remember what they told you about that aspect of it? Or how they taught you to deal with the American news media.

MD: Well, one of the things they said was you know, don’t mislead them. Don’t lie to them. I really can’t remember.

RV: Ok. Ok. Going to the school your goal was to once you got back from Vietnam to get out of the Army? Or to stay in the Army?

MD: Yes.

RV: Ok, get out of the Army, go to law school, and practice what kind of law?

MD: Well, to go out into politics. To go back to Washington, to go to Washington, D.C. and get involved in Republican politics.

RV: Ok.

MD: That was the game plan.

RV: Ok. How did your parents feel about your Army aspiration and when you were going to Vietnam? Do you remember what they felt? What they said to you?

MD: I don’t think my father thought very much of what I was planning on doing.

RV: Which one, the law school or Vietnam?

MD: Vietnam.

RV: Why?

MD: He felt like I didn’t have to go because of my knee injury, and I think it was kind of befuddling to him that I actually volunteered to go.

RV: Right.

MD: He always felt like the knee injury kept me alive, saved my life because I didn’t end up in the combat arms and I didn’t get killed as a forward observer. He never
said anything to me about it one way or the other. I came home and told him what I had
done and he just never said anything about it. My mother didn’t say anything either. I
think as parents – if my son told me that he had volunteered to go back to Iraq, I don’t
know that I’d be saying too much to him, either. But I know as parents, you have
anxieties about your children going off to a war zone.

RV: Right. I can only imagine. Did you feel like they supported you? As much
as they could?

MD: Yeah. Yeah.

RV: Were they supportive in your Army career up to this point?

MD: Yes. Yes, they had been. Daddy felt like I ought to stay in the Army. He
felt like I had a really good situation at Fort Bliss. We lived in on-post housing and I had
a house to live in. So.

RV: When you finished information officer school there at Fort Benjamin
Harrison, how much time did you have before you had to ship out?

MD: About three weeks.

RV: What’d you do with yourself?

MD: My wife and I returned to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. On the way home from
Fort Benjamin Harrison, I visited what battlefields I could find of General Nathan
Bedford Forrest. And then we returned home to Baton Rouge. Then we decided to go to
Key West. So we hopped in the car and took Van down. Van had been born on April 4th
of 1970, and we took Van and we drove to Key West. And we went to Hemingway’s
house, and we went to a Sloppy Joe’s bar, and rented a boat and we all went spear
fishing. I killed a nice Grouper, which we brought back and had the hotel cook. We just
sort of had a little vacation before going to Vietnam and before Judy would dive the car
across the United States to put it on a boat to go to Hawaii.

RV: Was there any discussion about going to Vietnam? The war?

MD: With Judy?

RV: Yes.

MD: A little bit about what we were going to do when we got back. That is, I
planned to go to law school. And I’d taken the law school entrance exam and made a
high enough grade on it to get admitted – accepted into Ole Miss.
RV: So there was optimism here that you would go over, do your tour, come back and get on with your life?

MD: Yes.

RV: And you had a year tour of duty, is that correct?

MD: Yes.

RV: Ok. Mike, let’s take a break for a moment.

MD: Ok.

RV: Ok Mike, let’s continue. Tell me about shipping out and the flight over to Vietnam.

MD: Well, we were in Baton Rouge and Judy and I planned to go down to New Orleans since I was flying out of New Orleans, going to San Francisco. Catch the airplane at Travis.

RV: Right.

MD: So we left and drove to New Orleans the day before I left. I was sitting in the living room of my parents’ home, holding my son. I didn’t want to let him go. And I finally handed him to my father and Judy and I left and drove down to New Orleans and got a motel room across from the airport. Then we went down to…oh, I can’t think of the name of it… Bourbon Street and went to Antoine’s Restaurant to have a going away meal. I can remember that I had Lobster Thermador. And we came back and got up the next morning and drove to the airport. And I swear, the song on the radio was “Leaving on a Jet Plane.”

RV: Really?

MD: Yeah.

RV: That’s kind of cruel.

MD: I know! That was the first thing that happened that morning that I thought was really strange. And then the next thing that happened was we got in the airport and it turned out my flight had been delayed an hour. So we went to a bar and had drinks even though it was in the morning. I thought the gods were trying to torture us by that hour wait. And then finally it came time and I walked down to the runway, and I shed a few tears and got on the airplane. I was wearing my uniform.

RV: This is a commercial flight?
MD: Yeah, this is a commercial flight.

RV: Any trouble on the airplane or in the airport?

MD: No, no. Back on the flight, I won a bottle of champagne by guessing what time we would be over a certain point in the United States, a landmark.

RV: Really?

MD: Yeah.

RV: Did you drink it on the plane?

MD: No. I didn’t. Then we got to San Francisco, and I gave the bottle of champagne to one of the stewardesses since I didn’t feel like I really wanted to drink it alone. And then I caught the bus and went to Travis and got a room. My flight was the next morning. And went out and got a steak at the officer’s club and went back to my room. I was determined not to call Judy because I felt that it would only make it worse, so I didn’t call her.

RV: Did she know that you would not be calling?

MD: No, I don’t think she knew one way or the other. I hadn’t told her I wasn’t going to call. I could’ve, but I just felt like it would make it worse.

RV: This was in June ’70?

MD: This is July the 20th.


MD: So the next morning, about 8:30 in the morning, I got on the airplane at Travis and started the flight across the Pacific.

RV: Was this a commercial flight?

MD: Contract flight, I think.

RV: Right. What was the mood on the airplane?

MD: Well, there were a lot of people going. It was very calm and somber. There were a lot of families on the airplane because it was stopping in Honolulu. So it was just a mixed flight with families and servicemen.

RV: How did you feel?

MD: Well, I felt kind of strange. I really did. Going to war is kind of a strange feeling. The flight seemed to be kind of cold, too. I mean the air conditioning was on and it was chilly, I remember that. And it was just…nobody talked much, there wasn’t
much conversation. So. It was just a cold flight to Honolulu. Which was about five
hours away.

RV: Then from there did you what, go to the Philippines first?

MD: We went to Guam. Landed on Guam on about July the 21st, I think. In the
early morning hours. I remember reading two books. I probably would complete another
one before I got to Saigon. I found that I just couldn’t sleep. I was excited about what
was happening and I just couldn’t sleep.

RV: In 1970, Nixon’s in office and negotiations are underway in Paris, they have
been. And the United States is really looking for a way to get out with honor in Vietnam.
Did you feel like you’re going on kind of the tail end of this thing? Or what was your
sense of the overall picture at this point?

MD: Well, I guess I thought about it. I was coming in at the ending, when it was
winding down. I don’t remember thinking too much about that, though. I wanted us to
succeed in Vietnam. I was willing to do my part to try to help us to achieve our goals
there.

RV: What did you see as our goals at this point there?

MD: To leave the South Vietnamese in a position to be able to withstand the
aggression from the north.

RV: Ok.

MD: I understood the Vietnamization program and the withdrawal program, and
the withdrawals had been going on for about, I guess about eighteen months now. I knew
that from just the news media, but I didn’t have any feel for what was going on in
country.

RV: Ok. Let me ask you a question about the American leadership. What did
you think first of Lyndon Johnson?

MD: Think of him now?

RV: What did you think of him then and now, looking back?

MD: I thought he was a poor war-time President, because my attitude then was,
we had gradually built up our forces and had given the enemy an opportunity to respond
to our buildup incrementally. I didn’t think much of Lyndon Johnson.

RV: Ok. What about Richard Nixon?
MD: I thought more of him. I felt like he had a plan to end the war. And he seemed to be implementing it, and to get us into a situation where we could withdraw and still achieve our objectives. I think that was apparent by then.

RV: So you landed in Saigon?

MD: Yes.

RV: What do you remember about that?

MD: Oh, gee.

RV: What were your first impressions?

MD: Well we landed at night. I thought we were going to be fighting from the time I landed, is what my impression was from the news media. Of course I was amazed that it wasn’t like that at all. And the barracks, the in country transit barracks I thought were in terrible shape. I thought it was almost like the Mexican Army, it was in such bad shape.

RV: Was this in Tan Son Nhut?

MD: Yes. Of course you had to start taking malaria pills, which made you sick at your stomach. I had to go through in country briefings.

RV: What did they tell you?

MD: Well, to get ready for a cultural shock. Which I certainly went through.

Then we got our assignments, and I was scheduled to be the IV Corps information officer in Can Tho.

RV: Mike, what were your first impressions of Vietnam? Do you remember the smells and sights? Once the sun came up and you were able to kind of look around?

MD: Yeah, well the first thing I saw, the first Vietnamese I saw were the maids in the hooches. You know, they were walking around, we’d walk around in our underwear or less and it didn’t seem to bother them. I didn’t notice any particular odor at the Tan Son Nhut transit barracks then, but boy when I got to Can Tho and smelled some of the garbage dumps, I thought it was terrible.

RV: How long did you stay there at Tan Son Nhut before you shipped out down south?

MD: Let’s see. I stayed there about two days.

RV: Ok. Were you excited about your assignment? Were you prepared for it?
MD: Well, I felt like I was going to work for some hard-ass general and be running my ass off, I thought. I was excited about being the IV Corps information officer. I didn’t know anything about the war. I didn’t know anything about Vietnam; I didn’t know anything about the various commands in Vietnam. So.

RV: Looking back, was that a problem? Could they have better informed you before you got there?

MD: No, I don’t think so. I think it was just…can we take about a two minute break? I’ll be right back.

RV: Absolutely.

MD: Ok, just a minute.

RV: Ok. Are you ready to go?

MD: Yeah, I’m ready.

RV: Ok Mike, let’s continue. So go ahead where you left off there.

MD: Well I don’t remember where.

RV: Ok, we were just talking about your assignment and what your expectations were and we talked about information that you received or did not receive, coming in country about the makeup of the command structure in Vietnam and whatnot. How did you get down to Can Tho?

MD: I flew in a helicopter.

RV: Ok.

MD: And I checked into the transit billets in Can Tho, which was just a hotel. And then I started processing my paperwork through Can Tho. And it was there they told me I was going onto the 9th ARVN division as an information advisor there. And I spent two days in Can Tho. Now that’s where I first actually saw a lot of Vietnamese, because our hotel, our billets, were right on the street in Can Tho, and Vietnamese were walking up and down the street.

RV: What’d you think?

MD: I thought it was an awfully strange place.

RV: How so?

MD: Of course, everything was new. People were so different from what I was used to in the United States. I didn’t walk around town very much. In fact, I didn’t walk
around town at all. I just stayed in the hotel because I was uncertain about the security
situation. And of course later I’d come to realize you can walk all around Can Tho
without any trouble. But I didn’t know that at the time. So.

RV: What were you armed with? Did you just have a sidearm?

MD: An M-16.

RV: You were assigned an M-16?

MD: Right.

RV: Ok. Well go ahead, you were there for two days and then you went out to
the 9th ARVN division?

MD: Right, I flew in a helicopter out there.

RV: Ok. Where were they located?

MD: In Sa Dec. I arrived; it was considered the best-kept secret of the Delta
because the compound was so nice. It was on a peninsula out in the middle of the Bassac
River. I remember not having much to do.

RV: Really?

MD: When I got there, I had to wait and meet the division senior advisor who I
was assigned as an information advisor. They Sa Dec compound was very secure. It had
been eighteen months since the place had been mortared and twelve months since any
sniping.

RV: Ok.

MD: The Sa Dec province was really the second most pacified province in
Vietnam.

RV: So you were in a very – well, I wouldn’t say safe place, but you were in as
safe a place as you could possibly be in Vietnam?

MD: Right, right.

RV: Can you describe what the Sa Dec base looked like? Like how large was it?

MD: About an acre.

RV: Ok. How many ARVN troops were there?

MD: Well, one infantry division, the 9th ARVN division was there.

RV: And were they running ops out of the base?
MD: Yes. The 9th ARVN division was actually on the peninsula we were on, the
9th ARVN division was in front of the American compound. So if there was any attack
on the American compound, they’d have to come through the 9th ARVN division
facilities first. So it was real secure.

RV: Yeah, that worked out well. What was your hooch like?

MD: Screens on the windows, wooden floors, they were made out of wood. We
slept in bunk beds, had bunk beds.

RV: Air conditioning or not?

MD: No air conditioning.

RV: Ok. How many men to a hooch?

MD: In mine, there were three. So.

RV: How did you find the morale of everyone there when you arrived? Starting
with the Americans.

MD: Well, nobody wants to be in a war zone. So I wouldn’t say that they were
bubbly and smiley. I would just say, they had a look like they were resigned. That
would be the best way to put it, they were resigned to doing their duty and.

RV: How were you accepted, Mike, with the Americans?

MD: Well, I was just considered, because everybody knew that I had a knee
problem, I was kind of considered to be the new green captain. You know? I was
supposed to be put in charge of the club, be the club officer, and the information advisor,
which really didn’t do very much. That didn’t. And there just wasn’t very much to do.

Just wasn’t very much to do at all.

RV: Can you describe a typical day that you had there early on?

MD: Yeah, I get up, go eat breakfast, come back, write letters, read letters. I
might go talk to the information officer for the 9th ARVN. They viewed their role more
as a propaganda officer than as an information officer. Then come back and go to the
club and have a drink about noon, sit in the club the rest of the afternoon.

RV: How long did that kind of routine last? Was that the norm?

MD: That was pretty much the norm.

RV: For your whole tour?

MD: Oh, no no no. Just for the five days or so that I was at Sa Dec.
RV: Ok, alright.

MD: Didn’t take long. I was reassigned back to Can Tho as the information officer.

RV: Right. So after five days you were sent back to Can Tho.

MD: Well, let’s see. The division senior advisor assigned me as information advisor and a system administrative officer. And then I moved into permanent quarters on Sa Dec. I found myself writing to Judy twice a day.

RV: Ok, so you all corresponded quite a bit.

MD: Yeah. Yeah, we did.

RV: Were you able to ever make any of the MARS telephone calls?

MD: Not in Sa Dec. But once I got to Can Tho, I figured out how to do that, I started calling when Judy was in Honolulu, it was just a local call. So I was able to call her about once or twice a week. Which I did.

RV: How often would you write each other?

MD: Once a day. I got mail regularly. So.

RV: Tell me what your daily duties were back in Can Tho, when you got back there.

MD: Oh, when I got back to Can Tho, first thing that happened was, I had to get a hooch to live in, and I found a place to live.

RV: Where did you live? What’d you find?

MD: On Eakin compound, there were these row hooches, and in one of the hooches I found a spare bed. It was part of the officer’s hooches, is where it was. The enlisted men lived across the parking lot on the other side. Then I went to the information office in Can Tho, and the first thing I noticed when I drove up was the information office was hanging at a crooked angle from the front post. I told somebody immediately to fix it. I felt like I was going into a job where the office needed some attention taken to it. So I went in with a view towards upgrading it. The guy I was replacing was a Navy lieutenant. He stayed for about another three weeks or so. I followed him around.

RV: What did he tell you about the job? What to expect?

MD: Watch out for newsmen.
RV: Oh really?
MD: Yeah. Don’t trust them. He was kind of an irreverent kind of guy. He was ready to go home. He was tired of Vietnam and tired of the information business.
RV: What did he tell you about the newsmen?
MD: Well, that they couldn’t be trusted. They’d try to hurt you any way they could.
RV: Meaning, they would skew whatever you reported to them?
MD: Yes.
RV: Ok. So tell me what your daily duties there were like.
MD: Well, first thing that happened was I made arrangements to start eating in the general’s mess since I was the information officer. My day would start in the general’s mess for coffee at about 7:15 in the morning. Then I would ride in our jeep and go to the office, which was about a mile away in downtown Sa Dec. I mean, downtown Can Tho. The office was three stories tall, a three-story building. On the ground floor was where most of the enlisted men worked and there were about eight enlisted men. On the second floor was where the bunk beds were, and that was available for the newsmen to sleep. It was called the press camp. Then on the third floor, we had a separate bedroom with a single bed in it for any female correspondents.
RV: And where did you work in the building?
MD: Oh, my office was on the second floor.
RV: Ok. What were your typical daily duties there at the office?
MD: I’d get to the office; I had a Navy lieutenant that worked for me. His name was Ed Groenerdt. I would check on the progress of the latest command newspaper. I mean we also published something known as the DMAC Facts, which is a weekly summary of the activities in the Delta of various units. I would read the latest DOD press clippings that came around regularly. I would attend briefings of the G2 G3 CORDS briefings and I would fly around with the general.
RV: What was that like?
MD: Well, that was really interesting, because I got the chance to see, go all over the Delta with him. And listen to him talk about pacification. And listen to him talk to
his advisors about pacification. If I could digress for a moment and talk about the
general, he was an LSU graduate, class of 1940.
RV: Wow, two LSU guys.
MD: Well, digressing one more time, there was an interesting thing. One of the
things I noticed about the Delta was, if you had been an LSU graduate that was where
you ended up. It seems almost like if you reported into the MACV headquarters at
MACV, if you graduated from LSU, you went to the Delta. His lawyer was a JAG
officer was a Delta. I mean, was from LSU. I was his information advisor, I was from
LSU, and he was from LSU.
RV: Hmm. Wow.
MD: He was about six foot, six foot one or so. Weighed about a hundred and
ninety pounds, gray hair. He spoke in a very profound way all the time. It was almost an
affectation.
RV: What was his name, Mike?
MD: What?
RV: What was his name?
MD: Hal D. McCown. But I later found out that he had worked as General
MacArthur’s secretary of the general’s staff during the occupation of Japan. And what he
was doing was mimicking MacArthur.
RV: Really?
MD: Yes. So that was common for officers to try to mimic MacArthur. He
seemed to create a lot of clones. So what I was observing was a mini-MacArthur in
action.
RV: Was it effective?
MD: Yes, I think it was. One of the things about him was, he always let his
subordinates do their jobs. He didn’t holler and scream. He was very firm and he was
very determined. I just thought he was a superb general. He represented all the best in
the US Army. I was really impressed with him. Of course his deputy was Brigadier
General John H. Cushman, who had been a brigade commander in the 101st during the
Battle of Hue. And Cushman just screamed all day long. I mean, he just constantly
screamed at people from the time he got up in the morning until the time he went to bed. I just thought it was really strange.

RV: Two very different personalities.

MD: Oh yeah. So.

RV: Tell me about what the general would say about pacification and the advisory effort and turning over the country to the Vietnamese?

MD: He used to say, make pacification move as fast as possible. We’re coming out. Make it move as fast as possible. Whatever you do, don’t take council of your fears.

RV: He was telling this to the Americans? Or the…

MD: The Americans.

RV: Ok.

MD: One of the things he would do is he would ask for kind of like an intelligence briefing when we would get to these districts, and oftentimes the district’s senior advisor would put up a chart or a map which would show the various Viet Cong units. Some areas showed Viet Cong units on the map, and I can remember him saying ‘go out and get those people.’ They don’t have any medical supplies, they’re on their last legs. Go get them. Don’t take counsel of your fears, go get them. Don’t let that map scare you. And by that he meant, people would draw maps with all these Viet Cong units on them, and it’d scare them to death. And he would say, you’re getting scared of your map. But there’s nothing to fear from those people. He was very forthright, very firm about going out to get them. So.

RV: And what was your job, traveling with him? To take notes and kind of keep up?

MD: Well, I didn’t take notes, I just observed, because I would be talking to newsmen about the pacification program, which is what we were all about. And it was just an introduction for me to learn about pacification for all over the Delta so that I could more knowledgeable talk to newsmen.

RV: Ok. And how often would you travel with him?

MD: About three times a week.

RV: Ok. This would be like an all day deal?
MD: Yes.
RV: All right. And when you weren’t traveling with the general, what did you do? You said you attended briefings and read the various things that came in and out. Tell me, did you brief the news media yourself?
MD: Yes.
RV: Tell me about that experience. What was that like?
MD: I didn’t do it more than two or three times because – well, three or four times. I found it difficult to do. One of the things I would do when they would first come in and say, “Do you want a G2 G3 CORDS briefing”? So I would schedule it then put them in a jeep then drive them over to the conference room and the operations officer and intelligence officer and the CORDS briefer would come in with their charts and basically give a history of where we were in the Delta and where we had been, which was a pretty optimistic presentation because it showed tremendous progress being made on the pacification front.
RV: Was it realistic, in your opinion?
MD: It was exactly the same information that General McCown was using to make his decisions. I know that because I heard General McCown talk about it. But the thing about it was, the newsmen were so cynical, I don’t think any of them believed it.
RV: How would they show their cynicism?
MD: Well, Peter Osnos of the *Washington Post* once told me that pacification stories don’t sell. So the news media wasn’t interested in pacification stories, but yet pacification was the primary objective of our activities in the Delta. That was what the war was all about for us. Whereas there were about three hundred and fifty newsmen in Saigon or in Can Tho. No, in Saigon. There were never more than two or three newsmen at one time in the Delta. And yet this pacification story completely missed them. Yet that was where we had such tremendous success.
RV: Can you describe that success? What do you mean by that?
MD: Well, the Viet Cong-controlled hamlets dropped dramatically in the eighteen months preceding March of 1971. It went from something like 21 percent of all hamlets to one or two percent.
RV: How did you all define how a hamlet was pacified? How could you consider it pacified? What were the definers on that?

MD: Well, that was the hamlet evaluation system. The senior advisor would get a series of questions to be answered every month on the status of pacification in his district. The questions concerned whether or not there had been elections, whether or not there had been any enemy activity, whether or not there were children in school, whether or not commerce was flowing. I mean, the whole series of questions, it was all computerized. Provided computer answers. And so that was the yardstick to measure pacification’s success. It was what the district senior advisors were reporting.

RV: Ok. So with these, the media did not really look into the pacification story, which you said was the biggest thing going on for you all. What were they writing about from the Delta region?

MD: The operation of the U Minh forest, they wrote some stories about that. Gee. I really can’t say much more than that.

RV: So I guess what I’m leading to, what was your evaluation of their coverage as the information officer for that area? What did you witness? How were they doing their jobs?

MD: Well, I didn’t you know, I got the monthly press clippings. Or maybe it was every two weeks, I got press clippings from MACV-01. And I would read what had been written. And there was almost nothing ever written about the Delta. There was one article by Sol Sanders in US News & World Report in September of 1970, which was real good, and then there was a Reader’s Digest I think wrote an article about pacification success in the Delta. And Time Magazine wrote an article about they called ABCD – ABCDEs of pacification, describing the hamlet evaluation system. But I don’t think that there was enough information about the pacification program ever written about by the American news media. I don’t think that they understood it. I don’t think they understood the process. Once an area became the focus of a pacification effort, the Vietnamese, a coordinated Vietnamese-American effort would be made to upgrade the schools, to upgrade to have elections in the villages, to spread the word that the GVN was there to bring the land to the tiller program to the village. The land to the tiller program was a program by which a Vietnamese tenant farmer could make application for a title to
the land he was farming, and if he had worked it for a certain number of years, then he
could get a title. Make them landowners. And then the People’s Self-Defense Force,
which was training Vietnamese farmers, really, in how to use small arms and giving them
M-1 rifles to be able to defend themselves against the Viet Cong.

RV: Mike, was Vietnamization working at this point?

MD: Well, there were no Vietnamese – I mean, no American combat units in the
Delta except for one infantry company, which was used to protect helicopters that were
shot down.

RV: So it was pretty Vietnamized, then.

MD: It was completely Vietnamized, with the exception of 164th Combat
Aviation Brigade, which provided the helicopter support to the Vietnamese units and
American advisors who were with the Vietnamese units. There was a hospital at Binh
Thuy Army Air Base. There was like radio research units, which listened to the Viet
Cong traffic and wrote reports about it. But in terms of American combat troops, there
were none in the Delta during the year I was there.

RV: Did you think the Vietnamization policy was a viable policy?

MD: Yes, I did.

RV: Why?

MD: The reason why I thought about it was, we had ARVN units that were very
good and that had a lot of success against the enemy. Like the 21st ARVN division
moving into the U Minh forest killed eight hundred and fifty Viet Cong and regulars.
Well, when I say Viet Cong, they were NVA fillers. The Viet Cong units in the Delta
were all filled by NVA fillers because they had all been killed in the Tet Offensive in
1968. And the only way the North Vietnamese kept the war going in the Delta was to
infiltrate soldiers in from North Vietnam into the Delta. The 9th ARVN division was
fighting in the Seven Mountains regions, which was on the Cambodian border, around
Chau Doc. And some of their units performed really spectacular feats in the mountains,
like climbing up cliffs to attack the enemy from behind in the middle of the night. So I
really thought that the Vietnamese units were coming along. One of the things that
General McCown used to say was, and you know he had served in Korea, was that the
Vietnamese were further along than the Koreans were at a comparable time with their arms.

RV: The ARVN, the South Vietnamese were farther along?
MD: Yes.
RV: Than the Republic of Korea Army?
MD: At the same time.
RV: Ok.
MD: So I felt like Vietnamization was a viable program. I felt it could work. I felt it was the only program. In fact the senior – the information officer for ARVN IV Corps once told me that you just give us the weapons and we’ll be able to fight for ourselves.

RV: Ok. How did you find the ARVN? What was your opinion of them, the individuals you came in contact with?
MD: Well, I’ll tell you, the first ARVN information officer I had to deal with, I was warned about him. That he was a do-nothing and he’d been there a couple years and he hadn’t done anything. I wasn’t able to get any assistance out of him, so I wasn’t really working as an advisor in my advisory capacity, doing anything. Then one day in early November in an afternoon briefing, General McCown said General Trung wants a good staff. If you see a staff officer that’s not doing his job, you report it to me and I’ll bring it to the attention of General Trung. And I thought to myself, this is my chance to get rid of that guy. So I’d had two incidents with newsmen, where I’d tried to work with him to handle two news media interviews, and he had completely let me down. So I wrote up those two incidents and I sent it on to General McCown, and lo and behold a week later that guy was relieved.
RV: Really?
MD: They brought in a new fellow, an older major. Major Nogt, now Major Nogt was interesting because he was actually from North Vietnam, and he had moved south and he had been a student of General Giap. When Giap was a history teacher. But he was a dedicated anti-communist, and we worked well together. I didn’t have any more trouble with the ARVN information program.
RV: Ok. So once there was a change in leadership, things were a lot better?
Right.

Ok. Mike, let me digress for a second and talk about just personal things. What did you wear every day? What was your uniform like?

I wore jungle fatigues and jungle boots and a boonie hat.

How about weapons?

Very early, within the first two weeks I was there, I got a .45 caliber pistol and I started carrying that when I would fly around with the general, instead of carrying my M-16. I never fired a shot in anger, however.

Ok. Did the bases and the places you traveled to ever come under fire or mortar fire or anything like that?

One time in – well, I can think of two incidents. One time we were in the Seven Mountains region and we flew to – this was in the spring of 1971, and we flew to a base that was right on top of a mountain. And there was another mountain co-located next to it, and there was a lot of sniper fire coming in. And the general’s aide and myself were standing right on top of the mound on the helipad, and a bullet whizzed between our ears.

Wow.

So we were just missed by a sniper.

How did you feel at that point?

Scared.

Yeah?

That’s as close as I came in Vietnam.

Did y’all take cover?

Yeah, we got down off the skyline. And then the other incident was when the ARVN first moved into the U Minh forest in November of 1970, the ARVN built a firebase right in the middle of VC country, NVA country, and the NVA attacked the firebase and we flew in at 8:30 in the morning after it had been an all night firefight. All night fight battle around the firebase, and every American advisor had been wounded at the firebase. That was as close as I came in, I guess to ever being under fire. Fire being a big battle. Oh and another incident I can think I’ve had in the Seven Mountains. In fact the same day we got nearly hit by a sniper, we flew to another mountain and landed on
the side of it, and the ARVN were holding the mountainsides as the NVA were down at
the base of the mountain. So there was a battle going on to try to drive the NVA out. We
were about seven hundred yards from the front line. So, that was the other incident.

RV: How did you react to being around that death?

MD: Well, I kind of thought it was an adrenaline high. I didn’t think too much
about it, really. Just I thought it was kind of exciting.

RV: Mike, did you ever go out at night, or were your travels mainly during the
day? Did you operate in Can Tho mainly during the day?

MD: I operated in Can Tho mainly during the day. One night to do a story about
the night gunship missions over the U Minh forest. I took a helicopter ride down to Ca
Mau and we were getting ready to go out – this was in November – and shoot up Viet
Cong. We happened to be around...build fires. But unfortunately the helicopters
developed engine problems. So we didn’t go.

RV: Ok. So you never did go out at night?

MD: No.

RV: Ok. Mike, what were your general impressions of the enemy? The NVA,
the VC. Can you comment on their strengths and weaknesses as you saw? What you
witnessed, what you heard about?

MD: Well, my information comes from the weekly – I mean, the daily Corps
briefing that I would attend every day. So other than visiting a POW camp down in Phu
Quoc Island one day and seeing the Viet Cong, I never saw the enemy up close. Their
strengths were, they were terribly tenacious. I mean, they just wouldn’t – it’s almost like
they just wouldn’t quit. They’d fight on and on and on. Their weaknesses were, they
didn’t have any logistical support into the Delta. So they had to steal rice to live, they
didn’t have any, they didn’t have much ammunition, arms, and they were generally in
bad shape in the Delta during that time.

RV: Ok. Did you ever come in contact or work with any other allied troops such
as the Aussies or New Zealanders or the Koreans? South Koreans?

MD: No, I didn’t.

RV: Ok. What was the quality of the intelligence there, Mike, do you think?

MD: It was real good.
RV: Yeah?
MD: We had excellent intelligence on the activities of the Viet Cong and the NVA.
RV: And that came from the district commanders and what they reported into you all?
MD: Well, it came from people known as Chieu Hois. Those that would rally to the government’s side were usually quite talkative.
RV: Did you talk to them?
MD: I didn’t personally talk to any of them. But I think we got an awful lot of intelligence from them. And it helped with the Phoenix effort. It also helped with the military effort.
RV: How often would the media there in Can Tho want to go out and visit the base camps and see firsthand what was going on?
MD: Very rarely. I cannot remember anybody asking me to. Well, there was one correspondent from the Baltimore Sun that came in May of 1971 who wanted to go to the U Minh forest. In fact, I’d even gotten a call from Colonel Leonard, MACV Chief, information about him. But you have to understand, by that time I was so cynical about the news media, I would always try to sabotage what they were trying to do.
RV: Oh really? How would you do it?
MD: By not arranging for helicopter flights. They’d have to get their own transportation down. I wouldn’t get helicopters for them. And that would increase the amount of hassle that they had to go through to try to get a story. And normally that was too much for them. As far as I know, that Baltimore Sun writer never did anything about the U Minh forest, although he flew down to Ca Mau and got to talk to some American advisors. I don’t think he ever did a story.
RV: Was there an adversarial relationship then between yourself and the other American people representing the – I guess your ARVN counterpart and those representing intelligence and information from the American side with the America media?
MD: Say that again please?
RV: Was there an adversarial relationship between you and the media and those who were working with you?

MD: Not that I tried to exhibit. I tried to portray a slightly disillusioned captain who’s getting out of the Army who’s just doing his duty. But then you know, covertly at the same time, I felt like I was fighting them to find a way to put road blocks in a way that they could get their story or if they would write a story, it would only be a story based upon the G2 G3 CORDS information, which was very optimistic about the Delta.

RV: Can I ask you why you would do that?

MD: Yeah, because I had read so much stuff in the Department of Defense press clipping service that was just pure garbage about Vietnam, that I felt like we couldn’t get a break from any of them. So.

RV: Ok. Was the general aware of this?

MD: No. It’s something I did on my own and in fact in May of 1971, when we were on the Cambodian border with the Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor, he introduced me to the Secretary of the Army, he said, “Mr. Secretary, I’d like you to meet the best information officer in Vietnam”.

RV: Hmm.

MD: I didn’t tell him what I was trying to do, I was just tried to keep the news media away from him, keep bad stories from being written.

RV: Were you able to keep up with what was going on back in the United States?

MD: Not really. In fact, I would say not at all.

RV: Really? And I wanted to ask you about the media coverage in a larger picture of the Vietnam War, back in the States, but you didn’t really have a sense of that while you were there?

MD: No. Like I know John Kerry was doing his testifying in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee in April of 1971, and I don’t have any recollection of that or anything. I don’t remember hearing about it.

RV: Right. Ok. Mike, was there any tension between officers and enlisted that you saw at Can Tho?

MD: No. No, I didn’t. We didn’t have it in my office.
RV: Ok. How about when you would fly out with the general to the bases, was there any tension between you and others who were located in the rear versus those who were out in the field?

MD: No.

RV: Ok. How would you characterize communication in Vietnam?

MD: Radio? Television?

RV: All of it. How were you able to communicate with your counterparts, with the general, from the general to the district commanders? Just in the IV Corps area, how would you characterize communication?

MD: Fair. I communicated by telephone. I didn’t have occasion to call district senior advisors or the province senior advisors. If I was calling anybody, I was dealing with the information advisor in the 7th or the 21st or the 9th ARVN division. Communication was fair. Now as for television, we did have some television in the Delta. In fact that the technician that maintained the television system came into the Delta and stayed at the press camp. And he worked there. Of course Walter Cronkite was on television some of the time, and I let the guy go home sixty days early. Although he wasn’t assigned to me, I let the guy go home sixty days early and when it happened, there wasn’t anybody to take care of the television system, and it went down in the Delta.

RV: Wow.

MD: But that way Walter Cronkite wasn’t proselytizing American soldiers.

RV: Did you do that on purpose?

MD: I let him go home on purpose.

RV: Ok. With the intention of making sure – or, for the result that Cronkite would not be voiced to the Delta?

MD: Right.

RV: Ok.

MD: Interesting tidbit, huh?

RV: Absolutely. Absolutely. What I’m gathering is that you controlling kind of the media access down there, and it was for the purpose of trying to support the American war effort and the Vietnamization policy and pacification. Would that be correct?

MD: Yes. Absolutely.
RV: Ok. And do you think this was common, Mike? Were you the only one kind of doing this, or do you think this was common throughout Vietnam that the American Army and information advisors and the information officers were trying to do kind of that protective stance with the media?

MD: I don’t have any idea about that. What was unique about the Delta and the organization of DMAC was the state department pacification programs under the CORDS program reported directly to General McCown. And that was unlike III Corps and II Corps and I Corps, where they had their own separate reporting chain and they didn’t report to the Corps senior advisor. So since I represented the commanding general, I was responsible for the CORDS information effort as well. And that was our big story. So. But as for other American advisors trying to do what I did, I never talked to anybody; I just waged my own little war.

RV: Do you feel like you were successful in that?

MD: Yeah, I think I fought them to a standstill. At least General McCown thought so without knowing exactly what I did.

RV: Right. Mike, what did you think of the overall media coverage of the Vietnam War? I guess before you went and after, when you came home?

MD: Oh, well. Before I went, I believed the news media. I thought we generally got an accurate picture of what was taking place. After Vietnam, I didn’t believe much of anything the news media ever said anymore, because I felt like they were wrong. Not only wrong, deliberately wrong. And they had misled, misinformed the American people terribly as an institution.

RV: Do you think that’s changed?

MD: No, I still think we have a – well, we have Fox News today, which is I think goes out of its way to present an accurate, objective picture about what’s going on in Iraq. But I don’t think the other news organizations do that, like CNN and ABC and CBS and NBC.

RV: Ok. Do you think the media has learned lessons from its experience in Vietnam?

MD: The lesson they learned was, they believe they told the American public the truth. And therefore, believe us and don’t believe the government. I think they learned a
bad lesson, one which gives them a lot of self-confidence when they make their claim of
being somehow omnipotent.

RV: Ok. Mike, why don’t we take a break?

MD: Ok.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Mike Davidson. Today is August 16, 2004. I am again in Lubbock, Texas in the Vietnam Archive interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It is about 9:04 AM Central Standard Time, and Mike, you are again in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Mike, we talked about a lot of the non-personal stuff of your tour. I’d like to talk about some of the more personal things that happened to you during your tour, and I have a number of questions for you with that. But first, can you talk to me about, tell me your daily life in Can Tho? This is where you spent the majority of your time, and what was it like there?

MD: Yes, well I got to the office at 7:30 in the morning. And I’d spend the day in the office and then I would come back to the main compound and have lunch, then go back to the office. If I was flying with the general, I would spend the day in the field, which happened about three times a week. Then I would come back at 5:30 for the evening briefing, the evening corps briefing, that’s where all the corps staff officers assembled with the commanding general and John Paul Vann and would discuss what had taken place in the corps operating area during the last twenty-four hours.

RV: Ok. Can you tell me your impressions of John Paul Vann? What was he like?

MD: Well, he was about five foot six. He was very dynamic. He was articulate and highly motivated and determined and knowledgeable. So in fact I think that his effort in the Delta to pacify the Delta was probably his greatest contribution to the war.

RV: Really? Why do you say that?

MD: Because that’s where most of the people lived, and after the Tet Offensive of ’68, and after General Creigton Abrams came in, the Delta needed to be pacified, and John Vann did that. Along with of course my corps commander, General McCown.
Then that eighteen-month period prior to March of ’71 was the Delta’s greatest success in pacification, which was led by John Paul Vann.

**RV:** Did you interact with him pretty much on a daily basis?

**MD:** No. I saw him nearly every day at the corps staff briefing, and I saw him at CORDS headquarters for briefings he would sometimes give to incoming officers on the status of pacification in the Delta. But I didn’t ever hold a private conversation with him.

**RV:** What would you say, well what is your opinion really of his legacy? You just touched on that briefly, but you know he is remembered as, a lot of people have mixed views of him, and if I’m hearing you right you interacted with him and you witnessed a very positive, dynamic force for the United States in Vietnam.

**MD:** Oh yeah, absolutely. Highly motivated person. He was a very positive force in the Delta. He really was.

**RV:** Do you remember how you felt when you heard about his death?

**MD:** Yeah, I felt that Vietnam was – I kind of had premonitions that it was going to have a tragic ending.

**RV:** Really? Why? Why’d you think that, Mike?

**MD:** Because John Paul Vann had been killed. I know this sounds strange, but John Vann was the one person I felt could explain to the American people what was going on in Vietnam when he came back from Vietnam. And with his death, that spokesman role was unfulfilled, and Vietnam ultimately had a tragic ending. I felt it was a tragedy when he died, but I felt it was a premonition for what was going to happen in Vietnam.

**RV:** That’s very interesting. Well tell me a little bit about just about yourself in Vietnam. How much did your religious views change while you were in country? Or did they change at all?

**MD:** No, I don’t think it had any impact on my religious views at all.

**RV:** Ok.

**MD:** I wasn’t – while I was a Christian, a Presbyterian, I didn’t attend church in Can Tho but once or twice during the entire year, even though the preacher, the chaplain wanted me to go more often. But I just wasn’t a very strong Christian at that time of my life, and Vietnam didn’t have any impact on my religious views one way or the other.
RV: Ok. Mike, what would you do for entertainment?
MD: Well, by the time I’d get out of the general’s mess after supper, it was about 7:30 at night, and either I’d go to the club and have a couple drinks or normally I would go and write a letter to Judy. I wrote to her nearly every day. Or, I would go swimming in the swimming pool and lift some weights after I’d written my daily letter to Judy. I did play a little bridge in the officer’s club, but not much. But basically, I was kept busy until 7:30, 8:00 at night with it. So it would move before I had any spare time.
RV: Right. Did you ever see any USO shows?
MD: Yeah. Yeah I did. Just one.
RV: Ok. Did you ever take R&R?
MD: Yes.
RV: Tell me about that.
MD: Well, we got two leaves in Vietnam. We got a fourteen-day leave and a seven-day leave. Seven day R&R. I took my first fourteen-day leave in January of 1971. As you know, Judy was living in Honolulu, so I went back to Honolulu. I didn’t have to pay for my flight, I got a Space A flight to Honolulu and a Space A flight back to Vietnam. We saved a lot of money.
RV: Do you want to explain what that is for people who are listening to this and don’t know what that is?
MD: Well, it just means that there was space available on the airplane for me to get a ride. So. That’s called a Space A flight.
RV: What was it like in Hawaii seeing Judy?
MD: Oh, it was wonderful. I had been away from her for six months, and it was just fabulous to be with her and my son Van again. So we didn’t do much, I mean we just kind of renewed acquaintances and we went out to eat some. But we didn’t do anything special other than just be together.
RV: Right. How was it when you had to leave and come back?
MD: Oh, leaving was just heart rendering. I mean, it’d just tear you up inside having to leave your family and go back to Vietnam. So, it was a very uncomfortable feeling.
RV: Yeah. Well what about the seven-day leave? What was that?
MD: Well, that was in May of ’71, and we went to – we flew to the big island of Honolulu and stayed at the Armed Forces Recreation Center at Kilauea. We toured the volcano and we just spent five or six days on the big island of Hawaii with Van.

RV: And how old, he was what, two at this point?

MD: Oh no, he was about thirteen months old when we were in Kilauea.

RV: Ok. I bet it was nice to see your son.

MD: Oh yeah it was. It was great.

RV: Tell me, Mike about the relationship that you had with the men that you had there in your unit there at Can Tho. How were you accepted and how’d you get along with everybody, and what was your opinion on them?

MD: Well first of all, I had a Navy lieutenant that worked for me who was sort of like the deputy or the XO of the office, and we had a wonderful relationship. His name was Ed Gruenert. And we really worked together well closely the whole year. So I mean, he was always there to be a big help and he made sure the newspaper got out every month. He had the best direct interaction with the men, and he sort of ran the office. As for the other ones, the other ones were enlisted men. I had a sergeant by the name of Sergeant Matt Glasgow who came in September of 1970, who had three years in country as a journalist. He was a wonderful writer, and he was the one that sort of took over editorial ship of the newspaper and did such a wonderful job with it. He left in I believe it was March of 1971, I don’t know where he went, I think he stayed in country somewhere. But he didn’t work after March of ’71 for us. Then I had a Sergeant First Class Bartley, I think was his name. He wasn’t very good. And I had a driver by the name of Sergeant John H. Winbush.

RV: How do you spell his last name?

MD: W-I-N-B-U-S-H.

RV: Ok.

MD: And he was my driver. Because the discipline standards were very low in Vietnam, one of the things I insisted upon since I was an officer was that I be driven around in a jeep. So I didn’t drive my jeep, I made somebody drive me. It was sort of like an officer’s perk that I just insisted upon. Anyway, John Winbush was my driver and
drove me everywhere around Can Tho and sometimes up to Binh Thuy Air Base, and
anyway, John Winbush was my escort, compatriot, and driver.

RV: You guys got along well?

MD: Yeah. Yeah, we did. We got along fine.

RV: Ok. How did you get along with all the other enlisted?

MD: Oh, I did fine. I didn’t have too much interaction with them. Ed Gruenert, my assistant, did. Early in, I believe it was November; we had a discipline problem with one of them. And we referred it for disciplinary action to the headquarters commandant, but not much happened. So we just…

RV: Well, what happened? What was the discipline incident?

MD: He was being insubordinate to Ed Gruenert. A lieutenant. So. I had a sergeant, an Air Force technical sergeant who was a photographer who ran the photo lab, the little photo lab that we had. He made pictures. And he was very good. The men just did their jobs. I just…they would go out and get their stories about pacification for the newspaper, and we pretty much let them have their head. So they did pretty good work.

RV: Ok. Did you ever experience or witness any race issues?

MD: Miss Black America came to the Delta, and we sent a photographer there to photograph her and the gathering that she had with some of the troops. Anyway, one of the troops stuck his fist up in the air, and my photographer made a picture of it, and that picture made it into the newspaper. And General Cushman didn’t like that at all, he thought it was a black power salute and I didn’t think much of it one way or the other, but when I came back and told my writers about is, they were all upset with him. So. In fact, General Cushman chewed me out about it.

RV: Really?

MD: Yeah.

RV: Was he upset because he thought it might insight some racial?

MD: Yeah, I think so. I think he thought it was insightful. But I didn’t think that at all. It was just a picture of what happened at the little ceremony that they had with Miss Black America, so I just didn’t think anything about it one way or the other.

RV: Ok. Were drugs or alcohol ever a problem in Vietnam that you witnessed?
MD: Not alcohol. We did have some people who were using drugs on the
compound, and every once in a while there would be a search to find out who, if
anybody, had any illegal drugs. But it was mostly confined to the enlisted men.
RV: What kind of drugs were they? Do you remember?
MD: Marijuana and heroin.
RV: Ok.
MD: About August of 1970, heroin came into the Delta, and it was being sold in
little glass vials with a black plastic top, and each vial was about as big and as long as
your little finger, and each one cost a dollar. So it was really cheap, pure heroin. And we
thought that the North Vietnamese were bringing this stuff in. It was being sold on the
streets by young Vietnamese boys. It was quite a problem.
RV: It did become a problem?
MD: Yes, it was.
RV: Were you – of course, your unit’s not in charge of getting rid of that
problem, but do you remember what was done about it?
MD: Well, not much was done that I saw directly. Not much was done.
RV: Ok. What kind of music did you listen to over there, Mike?
MD: Well, we listened to Armed Forces Network Radio and it played records
from the ‘50s and ‘60s. It was just a fabulous radio station because of the music that they
played. I really, really liked Armed Forces Network Radio.
RV: Do you remember any songs, anything in particular that comes to mind?
MD: I remember I used to sing John Denver’s “Country Road” all the time
because I was trying to think about going home.
RV: What do you hear on the radio today that takes you back there?
MD: “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” I think Peter, Paul and Mary is who sang that. I
guess that’s about all.
RV: Ok. Mike, did humor play a role in your daily life there in Can Tho? I’ve
heard that humor was so important to surviving that year in Vietnam. Was that a factor
with you?
MD: Not that I remember. I didn’t think anything was particularly funny.
Anyway, no, I don’t think so.
RV: Ok. Did you ever hear about or witness any homosexuality or anything like that?

MD: No. No, nothing. Didn’t hear about it, didn’t witness it, didn’t have anything like that. In fact, sex was available downtown. So readily that anybody could get anything they wanted downtown.

RV: Through the prostitution?

MD: Yes.

RV: Massage parlors? Things like that?

MD: Right.

RV: Ok. What – you said you didn’t interact a lot with the civilians, but tell me about the folks in Can Tho. The Vietnamese. Were they different from other places you visited in Vietnam?

MD: Well, the only other place I visited in Vietnam was Saigon. They didn’t seem to be big-city people. They seemed to be small-town people. I guess that’s the biggest difference I saw between Saigon and Can Tho.

RV: Ok. Did you form any relationships with the Vietnamese civilians or military?

MD: I did with my secretary, Miss Laron. She was pregnant at the time and I brought her back a big bottle of vitamins for her to take every day, which I had to talk her into taking, I had to convince her it was like food to get her to take them.

RV: You brought them back from Hawaii?

MD: Yeah.

RV: Ok.

MD: Then there was my – the maid, the cleanup lady at the press camp was named Bai Ut. She had a sister whose name was Co Ut who used to come to the press camp. Co Ut, her husband had been an ARVN captain who had been killed in combat, and she came to the press camp several times. I became pretty good friends with her and on Sunday afternoons sometimes I would go to her house and sit on the porch and just talk to her.

RV: She spoke pretty good English?

MD: Yeah, she did. So.
RV: What would you all talk about?
MD: Oh, family. And what was going to happen after the war. Things like that.
RV: Was she optimistic?
MD: Yeah, I think fatalistic was more a better term for it. I mean, she had suffered a tremendous loss with the death of her husband, and I think she was just fatalistic about her view about what was going to happen in the future.
RV: Right. Ok. Tell me about leaving Vietnam. When you were getting short, did you change your activities any?
MD: Well, once I started getting short, I didn’t fly in helicopters as much.
RV: On purpose?
MD: Yeah. Yeah, I just kind of felt like I had flown enough in them. So, I didn’t go around with the general as much as I had earlier in the year. Although it wasn’t because I was scared to go with him, I just – I didn’t have to go, and I didn’t take advantage of the opportunities a lot of times. Anyway.

RV: How did you leave Vietnam?
MD: I got a flight from Tan Son Nhut back to Honolulu.
RV: Ok. Was this commercial, or was it military?
MD: Military contract flight.
RV: Ok. What was it like on the plane, leaving? Flying out of there?
MD: Oh, it was really something. I felt like an adventure had come to an end. I can remember thinking that as the plane was taxiing down the runway. And I felt really good that I was out of a war zone. I just felt relieved, I guess, is the best way to put it.
RV: How about the flight back? What was the mood on the airplane?
MD: Somber. It’s a long flight between Honolulu and Vietnam, it’s about thirteen hours. Six hours – seven hours to Guam and six hours to Honolulu. So it’s a long flight. Anyway, it was just somber the whole way.
RV: And Judy and Van were waiting for you in Honolulu?
MD: Yes, yes they were.
RV: Ok. Did you ever have any – did you have trouble at the airport when you came in?
MD: Never did.
RV: How about when you came back into the states?

MD: Didn’t have any trouble at all. Nobody harassed me or anything like that.

RV: Ok. Did you have any difficulty transitioning back to life stateside?

MD: Yeah. Yeah, I did. I felt like when I got back, immediately got back to the United States, got back to Honolulu and picked up my family and we flew from Honolulu back to California.

RV: When was this, Mike, exactly?

MD: June of ’71. I started interacting with the American people again, and just people at the airport, people I was seeing on the street, I was really disgusted with the United States and the people in the United States because I felt like there was a struggle for freedom going on in Southeast Asia, and it didn’t have a – people didn’t have a clue what was going on because the news media reporting. I felt so many people were overweight and fat. You know the Vietnamese are very thin and skinny. So I felt sort of disgusted for quite some time.

RV: Really?

MD: Yeah, I read nearly every book that Eric Hoffer had written and it made me feel better about America. So that sort of faded, and that was the last of it, I mean it lasted about a month.

RV: Ok.

MD: Then it went away.

RV: What about Hoffer’s books appealed to you?

MD: His celebration of America as a good country to live in.

RV: What about the anti-war movement? What did you witness, and what was your opinion?

MD: I didn’t witness any anti-war demonstrations or any anti-war activity at the airport or anything like that. I felt they were terribly wrong and were helping the enemy. So I didn’t think much of them at all. Once I had been in Vietnam and come back from Vietnam, I realized that they were basing their opinions based upon what had been reported by the news media. And I realized that that didn’t reflect the reality of Vietnam at all, and I felt kind of strange being around them because I felt like I knew what was
going on in Vietnam and they didn’t and yet they had these lifetime opinions of anti-war activity, which only helped the enemy, and yet I felt they were terribly wrong.

RV: How much did you talk about your Vietnam experience? Did people ask you about it?

MD: Yeah, in a very cursory kind of way. I didn’t talk about it much around people other than family. So.

RV: Did Judy ask you a lot?

MD: No, not really. Not really. Not really.

RV: Ok. How much did you keep up with what was going on in Vietnam when you left?

MD: Oh, after that, when I came back, I tried to keep track of, I read the news articles again. But I was transitioning to law school, so we had to go up to Oxford, Mississippi and find a place to live and get our household goods. What remained of them and get some furniture. Because all our household goods had burned in a warehouse fire at Fort Bliss, Texas.

RV: Really?

MD: Yeah. We had to get some furniture to put into an apartment in Oxford, Mississippi. So we were busy during that summer.

RV: What was your – you stayed in the military, and what was your duty, what was your job?

MD: Oh, after Vietnam I had resigned my regular Army commission and I was in the Reserves.

RV: Right, right. And you went to law school, you went and fulfilled that, correct?

MD: What?

RV: You went to law school?

MD: Yes, then I went to law school at the University of Mississippi, which was a conservative school. And there were about five or six returning veterans in my law school class.

RV: Oh. Ok.
MD: The first semester there, it was three hundred and sixty freshman, and they flunked out about sixty percent of those the first semester.

RV: Wow. Did you and the other veterans discuss your experiences in Vietnam?

MD: No. No, not really.

RV: Why not?

MD: I felt like Judy and I had had three hard years, and law school was an opportunity to renew acquaintances, and to live a quiet life in Oxford just with law school studies and my little family, and that’s all I really wanted to do. So that’s all we did.

RV: Right. Well tell me what your opinion was in ’73 when the United States pulled out, and then leading to April ’75. What did you think about what was happening over there in Southeast Asia?

MD: Well, I can remember when the 1972 offensive started. It had an adverse impact on my grades, because I was really worried about the South Vietnamese and how they would do. So I was worried about the ’72 offensive. I kept my Viet Cong flag and I hung it up in my room where I studied, and when President Nixon authorized the bombing of Hai Phong and Hanoi with B-52’s. I cut out the headlines on the Memphis Commercial Appeal Newspaper and pinned them up on the Viet Cong flag. So yeah, I kept pretty close track of what was going on in Vietnam as best I could. Although I was always very skeptical about what the news media was reporting.

RV: Right. Because of your experiences.

MD: Yeah.

RV: Did you think the United States achieved peace with honor, as Kissinger said and Nixon said when we got out in ’73?

MD: I felt that we had done the best that we could do to give the Vietnamese a chance to survive. I didn’t feel like we needed to be there much longer. It was the Vietnamese’s fight, the South Vietnamese’s fight, and they had to fight it and win it. So I thought the government policy was correct which led to the withdrawal of American troops.

RV: Ok. Do you remember how you felt in April 1975 when Saigon fell?

MD: Say that again please?

RV: Do you remember how you felt in April ’75 when Saigon fell?
MD: I was absolutely sick. I was in Germany then, in Neu Ulm, Germany, serving as a prosecutor in the 1st Infantry Division, and I was absolutely sick when I got word that Saigon fell. I even shed some tears about it, so I mean it just…I felt terrible.

RV: Did you feel somehow personally responsible?

MD: What?

RV: Did you feel somehow personally responsible, or was it more of that the United States as a whole had failed?

MD: The United States as a whole had failed, and I was really disgusted with the United States for letting that happen.

RV: What do you think went wrong? What about US policy over there in Southeast Asia all those years, from ’54 all the way until ’75?

MD: Well, I think that…ok. I think first of all the decision to have a coup against President Diem in November 1963 was wrong. There was nobody else to take Diem’s place, and the internal cohesion of the Diem government and the South Vietnamese government came apart after Diem was killed, which led to our greater involvement in Vietnam. I felt like that was the first mistake. The second mistake was, once the war, once that had happened, was the decision to Americanize the war from 1964 to ’68 without encouraging the South Vietnamese to take over their own defense and arming the South Vietnamese with the latest weapons and all that. Which I mean just the idea of the Americans taking over the war for them to fight it was I thought, I think today was a terrible mistake, because we traded casualties with the North Vietnamese which we weren’t able to withstand for a very long time and we soured the American body politic on Vietnam during that period. And it was irretrievable after 1968 in American public opinion. So I think that was the biggest mistake. Then from ’73 to ’75, I think Congress’s efforts to cut off funds to support the South Vietnamese and military and to prohibit the use of B-52’s over North Vietnam – over Indochina took the underpinnings of the Paris Peace Accord of 1973 knocked the props that were holding up that peace agreement out from under it and it was inevitable that South Vietnam would fall after that.

RV: Ok. What do you think we could have done differently? Not get involved at all? Or if we did stay involved, what could we have done?
MD: I think it should have never been anything other than an advisory effort in Vietnam. I’m not even sure about bombing the north or manning the north or doing anything like that. I felt like we should have helped the South Vietnamese, but we shouldn’t have gotten involved to the depth that we did in Americanizing the war, because it was always the South Vietnamese’s war to win or lose. So I think what we should have done differently from that period – well first of all, I don’t think we should’ve had a coup against President Diem, and secondly, we shouldn’t have Americanized the war. So.

RV: Ok. Mike, looking back on your service in Vietnam, how do you feel about what you did there today?

MD: I’m very pleased with it, because I felt like number one, General McCown complimented me with Secretary of the Army in May of 1971. He told the secretary I was the best information officer in Vietnam, which made me feel good. It makes me feel like I had a good tour. Then I got a real good efficiency report from General McCown from our work that year, so I feel like I had a successful tour in a war for the United States, and I felt like I did my duty in a war zone about as good as it could be done.

RV: Ok. Is there anything you would change about your service, if you could?

MD: Say that again.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your service, if you could?

MD: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think I would have done anything any differently.

RV: Ok. What do you think was the most significant thing you learned while you were there?

MD: The most significant thing I learned was I think was to watch the American government in a war zone try to pacify the countryside. And I guess the most significant thing I learned was, I felt like the American government and the people who were in it have an awfully big and good heart to try to help the poor South Vietnamese people overcome the insurgency in their midst and lead them to a better life with schools, roads and dispensaries and things like that. So I really, I was duly impressed with the American government’s effort in South Vietnam.

RV: Ok. How do you think the war has most affected you personally?
MD: Oh, it profoundly affected me, it really did. I came back with a view of the news media that was just about unprintable. I felt like a stranger in my own country because I felt like I had seen the reality of Vietnam and it was entirely different from what the news media was reporting, and I felt like it just made me a stranger in my own country, that I couldn’t believe the news media anymore. And once we failed, I mean once Vietnam fell, I began a period of intense intellectual curiosity as to the reasons for the defeat, and I started reading just about everything I could find on Marxism and Leninism and military history and military theory. So to try to better understand what had happened and yet to do my part to see that it didn’t ever happen again.

RV: What did you learn from reading all of that about the enemy and about what had happened?

MD: Well, I felt like the North Vietnamese had successfully imposed their will and their version of history on the American intellectual class for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which was because of the mismanagement of the war between 1964-’68 and the Tet Offensive of ’68. And how that happened and the reasons for it, I felt deserved considerable historical study, because we went from when the war started you know, the New York Times supported it, but probably by 1967 they started backing away from their support of it, and then became an anti-war rag. Also, I learned a lot about Marxism, Leninism, and Communist theory, Communist systems. The terrorism that communist systems use against people. It made me a fierce anti-communist, my service in Vietnam did, because of being exposed to some of the terrorism that the North Vietnamese used against the South Vietnamese people and hearing about it on a daily basis. I’d begun to think that communists were just animals. Anyway, I was deeply worried about the ability of the American people to support a war effort because of the success the North Vietnamese had had against the United States.

RV: Mike, do you suffer any disabilities from your service in Vietnam? Any PTSD incidents? Anything like that?

MD: No. No, I sure don’t.

RV: Ok. Well what do you think the United States took away from Vietnam? Were there lessons learned?
MD: Yes. One is to use overwhelming force to achieve the military objective as soon as possible before the center of gravity of the struggle shifts from a military conflict in the theater to a political conflict in Washington, DC. That’s what I think I learned, that’s what I think the country learned. And we saw evidence of that in the first Gulf War, where we used overwhelming force to defeat the enemy in a hundred hours. So I think that was the big lesson of Vietnam for the American government and the way it wages war.

RV: Ok. Do you think the United States has put Vietnam to rest, or is it still with us?

MD: I think it’s still with us.

RV: How so?

MD: Well, you hear Democratic politicians criticizing President Bush and the situation in Iraq today as being a quagmire and like Vietnam, an endless war without any achievable objective or result. So I think that Vietnam still haunts our political discourse. And I think it will for another twenty-five years.

RV: Do you think that’s valid? Should it? Or should it be put to rest?

MD: Well, I think it ought to be put to rest, because I think that was a war of its time and it was unique and historical analogies don’t always – are not always the same, and I don’t think the Vietnam analogy applies to the war in Iraq at all.

RV: Mike, what do you think are the misconceptions or the myths of the American in Vietnam? Or the American soldier in Vietnam?

MD: Well, I think the myth that he was a drug-crazed baby killer is a complete fabrication spawned by Senator Kerry and others. I think that’s one of the big myths that came out of the Vietnam War. And the impact of that kind of news reporting and political discourse was very hurtful to the Vietnam veteran in the period after the war in this country and the reputation of Vietnam veterans in the aftermath of the war. This was discussed in a great book called Stolen Valor by B.G. Burkett. That phenomenon. But I think that that – what was the rest of the question now?

RV: Well, about the misconceptions and myths of the soldier. And you addressed that.

MD: Ok.
RV: You addressed that. And you touched on a book there. What books do you think are good books, and which ones are bad books if you read them, on the Vietnam War?

MD: Well, *The Big Story* by Peter Braestrup, I think is a good book. *Lost Victory* by William Colby, I think is a good book. *A Better War* by Lewis Sorley, I think is an excellent book. *Vietnam: the Necessary War*, by Michael Lind I think is an essential book on Vietnam. Books I don’t think much of are *A Bright Shining Lie* by Neil Sheehan, primarily because it doesn’t discuss John Vann’s pacification efforts in the Delta at all. And there are other books that are discussed in *A Better War* by Lewis Sorley that mention that don’t discuss the period late in the war from ’68 to ’73 and the success we had in Vietnam.

RV: What about Vietnam movies? Have you seen them, and which ones are good in that?

MD: Well, I saw *The Deer Hunter*. I did not see *Apocalypse Now*.

RV: Was that on purpose?

MD: What?

RV: Was that on purpose?

MD: Yeah, kind of. Yeah. Yeah, I just didn’t want to see it. *Gardens of Stone*, which I thought was a good movie. *Hamburger Hill*, which I thought was an excellent movie.

RV: What was so good about that one?

MD: Its realism. It portrayed infantry combat in the woods and mountainous woods of Vietnam about as well as could be portrayed. So. Anyway, I think that *Hamburger Hill* is about the best movie that’s been made about it.

RV: What about the more recent movie, *We Were Soldiers*?

MD: Oh. I forgot about that one. Yeah, I thought that was a good movie for the first eighty percent of it, but then I thought because of the last twenty minutes of it, I thought were kind of fakey. I thought they messed the movie up by what they did the last twenty minutes of it.

RV: Mm-hmm. Mike, what do you think about Vietnam today?

MD: Well, let me think for a second.
RV: Sure, take your time.

MD: It was a climactic event in my generation. Its effects live with us today and I think it profoundly affected my life. When I was in the law firm from 1981 to 1987, I was a Vietnam veteran and that wasn’t – most of the other lawyers in the firm had found some way to avoid service in the military at all, and I think they looked down on me because I was a Vietnam veteran.

RV: Do you think that still continues today with the veterans? Or has it changed?

With the Vietnam veterans.

MD: I think it’s changed a little bit with Vietnam veterans.

RV: Ok. Is it time that’s helping that out, do you think?

MD: Well, I think the passage of time has made the difference. And the realization in the country of how bad the Vietnam veterans were treated after the war.

So.

RV: Would you ever want to go back over there?

MD: I’ve thought about that, and I would be kind of curious to go back to Can Tho and see it, but then again, I don’t know that I’ll ever go.

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

MD: Yes. When I came – left Washington, DC and came to Louisiana to take the bar exam, I met the former chief justice of the South Vietnamese Supreme Court, Tran Van Linh, who was a comparative and foreign law librarian at LSU law school, and we became friends and we talked. I felt like we were both refugees at that time, I was a refugee from the military industrial complex, and he was a refugee from Vietnam.

RV: What did he tell you about his experiences?

MD: Well, his experience was as a judge. And…well, he…I’m trying to think of something I can say.

RV: Well overall, what was your impression? Was he bitter?

MD: No, I think he was more resigned about his state, about what had happened. He was able to get his wife out and his children out, so his children, one lives in Germany and a couple live in the United States. Now this information is ten or fifteen years old.

And we used to talk about what it was like in Vietnam and I can remember him talking about a Vietnam program that was on television by Stanley Curnow, and his saying that it
was communist propaganda. I don’t understand how you allowed people like that on
your television. And we talked about the terrorism in Vietnam and how there were
hundreds of terrorist incidents in South Vietnamese people by the Viet Cong and the
North Vietnamese.

RV: Mike, have you been to Washington, DC to the Vietnam Memorial?
MD: Well, I worked on the committee for a while when I was stationed in
Washington, DC. In fact, all the committee’s notes that I saved from that period are in
the Vietnam Archives. I thought that in one of the meetings where we were discussing
what the monument should look like, I made the comment that it ought to be like the ones
I’ve seen in Germany, with low black walls. That was about six months before the
selection committee. And that’s the way it turned out, which I was kind of glad it did.
Bob Dubeck called me and asked me, he was on the committee, called me and asked me
after they made the selection what I thought about it. And I said I told him, they got it
just right. So I don’t think a better representation of a political tragedy could possibly be
designed. I think it’s as good as could be designed. The only thing I would like to see
there is some sort of statement that the soldiers died obedient to our nation’s laws, which
is similar to what’s on the gravestone at Thermopylae, Greece, to celebrate the death of
the three hundred Spartans. And also to have Taps played every day there by an Army
bugler. And I wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper, the Washington Times, and it
was published, arguing that President Reagan ought to play Taps every day there. I wrote
the letter, but it was cosigned by Hugh Law, who was one of my friends from the
contracts appeals division. And the secretary of the Army liked it so much that he called
in Hugh and complimented him on the letter. Hugh took credit for it, I was in Lake
Charles by that time. Hugh told me about being invited by the secretary to come see him.
So.

RV: What have been your experiences there at the wall?
MD: Well, I had one close friend whose name is up there. Cliff Moak. I found
Cliff’s name on the wall. I haven’t shed any tears or anything like that, but it’s a
tremendously emotional place. It’s really something.

RV: Well Mike, is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we
have not touched upon in our conversations?
MD: Well, when I was stationed in Washington, I got mixed up in a big procurement scandal. And it involved some civilians. And I can remember my Vietnam experience, having a bad feeling about civilians and what they had done to the Army during the McNamara era and my reaction to the situation I was in was, well, I’m going to win this regardless of what the civilians want. So you might say I had a MacArthur complex.

RV: A MacArthur or McCarthy complex?

MD: No, MacArthur. The fight to win no matter what. And ultimately, we did.

RV: You were a prosecuting attorney at that point?

MD: No, I was a contract trial attorney. So.

RV: Ok. Anything else?

MD: No, I guess that’s about it.

RV: Ok. Well, this will end the interview with Mr. Mike Davidson. Thank you very much for your time, sir.

MD: Ok.