Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Lynn Steele, a veteran of the U.S. Army. Today’s date is the twenty-seventh of April 2004. Both Lynn and I are here in the Special Collections building interview room on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, although Lynn is a resident of Kansas City, Kansas. I assume that’s right? Okay. Lynn, if we could let’s just start off by talking a little bit about your background. Where were you born and when?

Lynn Steele: Okay. I was born in Kansas City, Kansas, on November the sixteenth, 1944. I lived in the Kansas City, Kansas, area almost all the time up until the time I graduated from high school.

Laura Calkins: Tell me a little bit about your folks.

Lynn Steele: My father was a veteran of World War II. He was born in 1923. He was also born in Kansas City, Kansas. He died of cancer in 1985. He and my mother were divorced whenever I was in high school. My mother was born in Arkansas in 1924. They met, her parents had moved to Kansas City and they met and graduated from the same high school I graduated from, Turner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. He graduated the year before Pearl Harbor, in the spring before Pearl Harbor and she graduated the spring after Pearl Harbor.
LC: Now tell me a little bit about your dad’s service. What branch of the service was he in and did you know much about what happened with him in the war?

LS: He was in the Army and he was a radio reconnaissance person. He was trained on the radio to do what we would call in our day, kind of forward observer for both artillery and infantry in the Army. Then he would radio back. He fought in the Italian front. When he first graduated from high school, he worked for about almost two years—for the railroad in Kansas City and that was one of the exempt categories for the draft.

LC: Because?

LS: Because it was an essential economic job. So he was not drafted initially, but he did not like the work. This is the oral history. He did not like the work and finally decided all of his buddies were in the war so he signed up with some fellow men his age who were tired of working and wanted to be part of the war effort. He was trained at—I don’t know where he did his basic, but his training, his AIT (advanced infantry training) training in radio, was in Florida. He shipped out in very early part of about February or March of 1944. My mother went down to see him right before he was shipped out and that’s when I was conceived. I was born in November of that year and he did not get back until late summer of ’45. So I was, what, nine months old or so before he saw me.

LC: Really?

LS: Uh-huh.

LC: Did they write back and forth during the war? Do you know?

LS: There wasn’t much correspondence. There wasn’t correspondence like there was in my era. The correspondence was bad. Mom had a couple letters she received from him. I don’t know what he heard from her except that I know I had seen later—all this is gone now, but I saw a letter he had written my mom that I was to be named Lynn because this was his best buddy’s name in the Army in Italy. This was his best buddy’s name and so he said, “If it’s a boy, name him Lynn.” So that’s where my name came from.

LC: That’s kind of nice.

LS: Right. I know he knew when I was born. So somehow the word got to him however way. He knew when I was born, but that’s the only parts that I know about communication in their day.
LC: Tell me about your mom. First of all, actually, first your father’s name was what?

LS: Charles Albert Steele.

LC: Okay. Your mom, what was her name and her maiden name?

LS: Her name is Chloe Bernice Kear, K-E-A-R, which is a Swedish name. She was Swedish.

LC: Did you know much about her family background?

LS: Yeah, I really do. I’ve done a little bit of genealogy and I knew her—actually, I knew my mother’s family more than I did my father’s family because we lived with my grandmother when I was growing up, my maternal grandmother. So she was born in Arkansas, in Mena, Arkansas. Then her family when she was still very young just after her younger brother was born, Uncle George Herald, who was also in World War II in the Navy in the Pacific front. George Herald Kear, anyway, right after he was born the family moved out to Kansas City, Kansas, because her father, my grandfather Kear, had gotten a job at Proctor and Gamble which had a big production plant in Kansas City, Kansas. So they lived first in the city itself and then moved out what was then, it was then the county, it’s now part of the city limits, where I lived with my grandparents after 1950, starting in the fall of 1952 we moved in with my grandmother after my grandfather died. My mother was very emotionally attached to my grandmother and she didn’t want her living alone. So we moved in as a family. We had been living separately until that time and we moved in. I was starting the [third] grade that year.

LC: Did that mean you had to go to a different school?

LS: Before that I had gone the [second] grade in Pittsburg, Kansas, which is down in the southern part of [Kansas], where my father had a job. He was a salesman for a construction company. He went door-to-door selling roofing jobs and siding. He was stationed down there for his company. Then he just got a transfer up to Kansas City so we could move in with my maternal grandmother, Grandma Kear. Essentially, my dad and my mother had a very bad relationship. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t till years and years later my father told me that when he first came back from the war he wanted to divorce my mother, but that he didn’t feel like he could do that because I was already on the scene.
LC: Yeah, a little toddler.

LS: So he tried to stick with it. My mother—it was onset really probably after they were married she began to have—she was bipolar. Of course, there wasn’t much they did for it like they do today. She would go in and out of episodes where she would get so depressed when she was down that she would not even get out of bed. It was just really hard. As a matter of fact, Mom was in and out of psychiatric care a couple times I remember when I was very young. She was in psychiatric hospitals for, oh, sometimes never more than a month.

LC: She had treatment. I mean, she was seeking treatment.

LS: Seeking treatment. She’d have such a bad episode that no one in the family—she would quit eating and they were scared for her health and various things. So I remember that by the time my sister was born, Debbie was born in ’51. After that we moved in with my grandma. I remember there was one episode right after we moved in. She’d gotten despondent like that and there was another one later. Anyway, she had all these mental health problems and my dad by about the mid-’50s, about ’55 or so, when my second sister was born, Claudia, he began drinking heavily. I think it was, part of it was a reaction. He felt like he was trapped in this relationship. I didn’t know all of that. I was too young at that point.

LC: Yes, this is thinking back.

LS: I just knew that he had these bouts. He was an episodic drunk. He would go on binges maybe one a month between or two months between. He would hide the bottles in the car or out in the garage and then drink to the point where he was just actually, just would pass out.

LC: Really? Did you see this when you were growing up?

LS: Yeah. Well, I did see some of it and the bad thing about it was that he was very violent—he was a sweet, wonderful, loving person, but when he got drunk he was just as mean as could be. When I got a little bit older, when I was old enough, I would get mad because he would yell at Mom. Then he got to where he would hit her when he was drunk. I would try to intervene. I was, like, about, oh, I was getting upper grade school age by that time. I would try to intervene. A couple of times he hit me and one time it scared me to death. He literally threw me across the living room. I actually landed on the
couch, but he picked me up and just threw me across the room to get me away from standing between him and my mother. So, yes, I do remember these episodes. He hated my grandmother, my maternal grandmother. We were living there. There was a lot of tension there. She was always taking my mother’s side. So there was a lot of tension there. So it got to where he was having episodes where he would be gone. He was a traveling salesman anyway, so he would be gone anyway, but he was supposed to come back on certain days and he wouldn’t show up ‘til two or three days later. Then he’d be accused of philandering and doing all these things. I don’t know.

LC: Sure. It sounds very fraught.

LS: It was very tense. So whenever I was in the eighth grade in—in those days we went through full eight grades and then went to high school. We didn’t have junior high then. When I was in the eighth grade he was in a terrible car accident during one of these drunken episodes. It was a terrible accident. Had to have his face reconstructed, back before seat belts. He hit the steering wheel and then partly hit the windshield. He left then. He just left.

LC: Did you go to see him in the hospital? Do you remember any of that?

LS: Yeah. He came to my graduation with a contraption on his head that was holding his cheekbones out so they would heal. He did come to my graduation, but he was living with his parents, my paternal grandparents, Grandma and Grandpa Steele, who lived just across the river, still in kind of the same—it was in the same school district, the Turner School District, but they lived over in Turner. We lived in a little community called Muncie, like Muncie, Indiana, except Muncie, Kansas.

LC: So he wasn’t at home after that?

LS: Right. Well, there was one episode in ’59, well, probably in ’58, late ’58, where they tried to reconcile a little bit, but Grandmother was very much against it. That’s when my brother was conceived. My youngest brother Kevin was born in March of 1959. So that year I turned fifteen. I was fourteen when he was born. So there’s quite a distance in age there. I really was kind of a parental person for my younger brother.

LC: I can believe that. Your sister was how much younger than you?
LS: Well, let’s see. It was six years before Debbie was born, so I was really kind of an only child until about the time we moved in with Grandma. She was born in ’51 and we moved in in ’52. She was real little when we moved in with Grandma.

LC: Did she see what was going on in the household?

LS: She was old enough by the time some of the violence was going on toward the end. She got caught up with it. Dad never hit Debbie, but Mom did. When Mom would get all upset, when she’d have these—she would kind of go off the handle, too, on her own. It had nothing to do with drinking. She would just have a violent temper because of her ups and downs. She never did anything to me, but she would slap Debbie to the point where Debbie would get bruises on her face and stuff. Nowadays we would call it child abuse. She’d probably turn in to child services. In those days, there weren’t those kinds of things. You just were hush-hush about it. Debbie, I think, has some emotional scars from Mom, more than Dad. She remembers when Dad left and she’s always had that kind of abandoning. Now my next sister, Claudia, was born in ’55 and she doesn’t remember any of this. The only thing she knows is what we’ve told her after all this was over. Then Kevin, of course, knows—actually, the rest of us have always kind of babied Kevin. He’s known bits and pieces, but they’ve been very digested, these bits and pieces. Even today, we don’t—

LC: Are you kids still kind of—are you still a family unit?

LS: Yeah. We’ve had our ups and downs. Every family does. I’ve always been the one—I’ve always been very family oriented. So I’ve been the one that kind of—once Dad and Mom were gone, Grandma died, we’ll get to that in my Vietnam history. Grandma died while I was in Vietnam. I got to come home for, it was almost a month. They usually would only do that for parents, but we had a lawyer write, the family had a lawyer write saying this is the one who really raised him. So they let me come home for her funeral, but in the middle of my tour. What was I saying about Grandma? I’m sorry. I lost my—

LC: That’s okay. That’s a lot to think about.

LS: Right. Well, I was just trying to remember what we were talking about before this.

LC: We were talking about the family unit.
LS: Oh, and trying to keep the family together. So Grandma died in ’69 and Mom did okay. She still had Claudia and Kevin at home, but then she got really bad again. By that time I was working for Social Services in Kansas. We’ll get to that in a little bit, too. We took Kevin, my wife and I. He was just starting high school. So he did his entire high school years with us in Salina, Kansas, where we were living.

LC: Now by “us” you mean your—

LS: My wife and I. We had just had our first child, but we took Kevin and he finished his high school years living with us. Claudia had just turned eighteen and they made her conservator of the property. She sold the house and divided up the remainder of the money from the house between herself and Kevin so we could take care of his needs. Dad was paying child support. I was kind of the center. My sister Debbie was kind of the black sheep of the family. Every family has got one that’s just a little bit, likes to be a little bit further away from the family. She was always the one that’s kind of on her own. She was living out in Salina with us, but she didn’t want to have anything to do with all these obligations. So Llona, my wife, and I took on Kevin. Claudia took care of the financial part, ‘cause she was living in Kansas City still. My dad was paying child support. By that time I was trying real hard to reconcile with my father because I thought that we needed to get back together.

LC: You were initiating this?

LS: Well, yeah. With the help of his new wife, my stepmother—for me she was extremely helpful because she wanted this to happen. I think if it were just Dad and me, there was too much water under the bridge and he would’ve been a lot more reticent, but my wife and my stepmother kind of worked together, the women thing, and helped us get started. We really in the later years, we had a fairly stable relationship. I was very happy about that. I was also able to reunite with the Steele side of the family. While we were living with my grandmother, once the divorce occurred in ’60, it was final in ’60. My grandmother forbade any of us from seeing the other side. I had an aunt that lived across the street and three houses down and we were not allowed to talk with her, my dad’s only sister. We were not allowed to see her.

LC: Was your grandmother trying to protect you or was it coming from somewhere else?
LS: Yeah, she just hated him. It was more that she was trying to protect us because she hated him so much. She thought they were truly, not just Dad, but the entire family, had been wrong on all the issues and had abandoned Mom. She had this medical problem and he had gone off and left us. They, [Grandpa/ma Steele], should have made him do this. So they were all at fault, too. So we were not allowed—one time my aunt called. She had heard something in the paper about a relative from our side, our side, maternal side that had died and she had known. She wanted to ask. I happened to answer the phone. When I hung up the phone I said it was Auntie. I always called her Auntie. My grandmother said, “You know you’re not supposed to talk to her.” I said, “Well, but she just wanted to know about so and so.” I paid hell for that actually.

LC: You were in the middle.

LS: Yeah, I was. I always thought that was kind of a strange relationship that they couldn’t all be that bad. I can remember my Grandma and Grandpa Steele when I was younger when they’d baby-sit for me and they were so wonderful. They were wonderful people. I just couldn’t believe they were really the devil like she kept telling me.

LC: You got them back, though, at some point?

LS: Well, right before Grandpa died, thank goodness. This is when we were doing this reconciliation thing. I got to see Grandpa Steele in the nursing home right before he died. He was so pleased. He held my hand. They had not been allowed to come to my wedding to Llona. This really hurt them because it was in Kansas City. This really hurt them, but they were not invited and they were told they were not invited. He wanted to meet Llona and we went [there at] the same [time]. Then he died about two weeks later. Then after that first time we reconciled. Then I didn’t see my dad until at [my grandpa’s] funeral. That was the first time I met my stepmother and saw my father was at Grandpa’s funeral. Then after the reconciliation, we had probably over about a year or two period before we really got, really going on, a strong relationship back with Dad.

Then I got to have a long relationship with Grandma Steele before she died. I will always appreciate that because I was one person in the family who would let her tell the old stories about where her family came from, the old oral family history. I loved to hear her tell these things. Everybody else would just say, “Oh, shut up. We’ve heard all this
before.” I was the one who would listen to her. So she came out to see us a couple times in Salina and would go over all these old stories about where everybody came from and all the tribulations they went through. I ate all that up. She just thought that was just so great.

LC: Do you remember some of those stories?
LS: Yeah, I really do. It was very interesting because—see, I wish now I had actually recorded them. I had a recorder. I don’t know why I didn’t even think of that. She’s gone now, but their family came from what is now West Virginia, although it didn’t split off till the Civil War. They settled in out in the center part of northern—the north central part of Kansas. We knew it very well from Salina ‘cause it was a city called Beloit, which was north of Salina.

LC: Is that B-E-L-O-I-T?
LS: B-E-L-O-I-T. They had homesteaded there. During the droughts in the late 1880s and early [1890s] there was a dustbowl then, but of course it reoccurred in the ’30s, in the 1930s. They lost everything. They lost their crops. They couldn’t make the payments. So they moved back to Missouri—they had relatives living in the southern part of Missouri, around Joplin, Missouri. So they moved down there and moved in with that family for a while. When they finally had enough put back together they could move again, they moved to a southern, southeastern Kansas town called Buffalo, Kansas. It’s down near Chanute, Kansas, which people know better than Buffalo. Buffalo’s still a very small town.

LC: What brought them there?
LS: They just started people—out to try farming again. They had started a cattle herd. The family let them have some of the calves and stuff and they started a new herd. They moved to Buffalo, Kansas, and they did that. Then my great-grandpa, Hester, that was her maiden, my grandmother’s maiden name, he worked at a glass factory there for a while. So he’d have a steady income. So she told about working there. He injured himself on the job. He fell backwards. He was standing in a window blowing a piece of glass, with, like, blowing a jar or a bottle or something, and he slipped and fell back into a bunch of broken glass where they break it if it wasn’t good. It cut the back of his head
and he had to have an operation. He just wasn’t quite the same. It must’ve done some
nerve damage ‘cause he didn’t have a grip—he couldn’t do this physical work anymore.
LC: And very fine work, as well.
LS: Right. Right. Yeah. So they moved. He got a job with the railroad in Kansas
City. That’s when they moved to Kansas City. So my dad—then she met my Grandpa
Steele when she was in her teens. She didn’t even finish high school. I think she only
went to sixteen, ‘til she was sixteen. So that’d be about her sophomore year. Grandma,
well, she was a Hester then, Grandma Steele went to work at a mustard factory in the
bottoms in the industrial part of Kansas City, Kansas. My Grandfather Steele lived on the
next street around the block from them. He had seen her and fell in love with her at first
sight type of thing. They dated a little bit. In those days, I guess, there’s a lot more group
dating. They dated with friends around. They did things as a group. He was really kind of
keen on her, but she wasn’t as keen on him. He had even said that he wanted to do a real
one-on-one type of dating.
LC: Just them.
LS: Yeah, just them. That was kind of the next step in courting. She wasn’t sure,
but one day she was riding the streetcar to work. The streetcar—she had to go over to his
street to get the streetcar. As it went by his house, she noticed that his house was draped
in black. She had heard through a friend that he was so despondent she wouldn’t date him
that he was so upset he thought he’d just kill himself. So she was afraid he had done
himself in. As soon as she got off work that night, she went by and wanted to know what
had happened. What happened was his grandfather, who lived with them and he slept in
his bed ‘cause you know family all slept together. He slept with my great great-grandpa
in his bed. He had died. That’s who had died. He had woken up that morning and [my
great-great-grandpa] was dead. So they draped the house in black.
LC: But it got her to come over.
LS: But it made her—they started dating and the rest is the rest of us.
LC: I love these stories.
LS: That’s the type of stories she would tell. Oh, they were just wonderful. Now
my grandma Kear, from my maternal side, she would tell such wonderful stories about
how her family, her—so it would be my great-great-great-grandpa was in the War of
1812. As a veteran’s benefit in the War of 1812, he was given property in Alabama. They
would give veterans parcels of land as a veteran’s benefit. So they got in the northern part
of Alabama, they have a farm in Alabama. This would be her grandfather. Then her
father—you know, there’s only so much land. If you have a whole bunch of children you
can’t divide that land back down. So the only way the children could have a life was to
either to get another kind of job or to move to a farm someplace else as they began to get
married and have their families. So her parents moved from this part of Alabama to
Arkansas. They were right on the Arkansas-Oklahoma border near Mena, Arkansas. They
had a farm there. That’s where my grandmother Kear, who was a Davis at that—that was
Grandma Davis. It was Grandma Kear, but her maiden name was Davis. They had a farm
there. That wasn’t a homestead. They bought the farm. They farmed there all of her life
until she—I mean all of her life until she became marrying age. She met my Grandpa
Kear who had grown up in Illinois. He was down doing forestry work. They were
foresting in Arkansas in those days.

LC: That’s amazing to think of.
LS: Yeah. There were still fresh trees to cut there. He was forestry and they met.
Where their farm was, was right next to the Ouachita Mountains and that’s where they
were forestry. The men lived in town and the town was right, oh, less than a mile from
where their farm was. So they met, but then he wasn’t making enough money forestry.
He got a chance to get this job at Proctor and Gamble, I was telling you about, and that’s
where they ended up moving. My mother, though, was born before they moved from
Arkansas. My mom was born in Mena, Arkansas. So she was born in town.

LC: So would she have been the oldest child?
LS: She was the oldest child and then Uncle George, George Herald, was born
after that.

LC: He was the one who served in the Pacific?
LS: He’s the one who served in the Pacific and in the Navy.

LC: Do you know about his service?
LS: Just a little bit because there was an estrangement in the family on that.
There was a fight. Anyway, they moved to Florida when I was fairly young, so there
wasn’t a lot of contact with him. He was in—really, I don’t know much about his service.
I know a lot more about Dad’s, but I don’t know. I just know he was in the Navy. He was on a ship and he was in the Pacific and that’s really basically all I know.

LC: But he survived the war?

LS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He survived the war.

LC: Okay. I like these stories. It sort of gives us a great sense of—my grandmother did the same with me. So I appreciate it very much. We have a little bit of sense of what was going on in your home. How were you doing in school?

LS: School for me was a refuge. So I was very good at it—kids react—a couple of, three different, four different ways followed. My reaction was it was a safe, clean place. I was fairly bright. So it was a place for me to succeed. Things were not going well at home, but things could go well at school. I didn’t want any problems. I didn’t want to be a discipline problem because—at home we didn’t know, it was volatile at home. I didn’t want any volatility at—so I could control my environment at school by being a good student and not being a discipline problem. I’ve talked to my colleagues since then when we’ve gone for reunions. I said, “I was always such a goody-two-shoes in school.” I said, “Part of that was just,” I said, “It wasn’t because I was so perfect in what I wanted to do, it’s just that I didn’t want anymore turmoil in my life.” I was successful. I was bright enough that it was fairly easy for me to pick up things, too. So I was successful academically, as well. So it gave me some successes in my life.

LC: Right. A place where you got some kudos.

LS: I always looked up to the teachers and the administration because they seemed so stable. See? They cared for me and they were trying to help me and all this. I wasn’t getting that at home. So that was also nourishing, too.

LC: Absolutely, and I’m sure you wanted more.

LS: Yeah. I wanted more of that. So I wanted to be good. I tried to explain to them. Here they were all getting in trouble all the time and doing all these ornery things that most kids get into. I don’t have any wonderful stories to tell. I have some wild stories about home, but not about getting in trouble on my own.

LC: What subjects did you particularly like? Were there things that appealed to you?
LS: Well, it was very interesting because I always like history and learning about
discovery and stuff, but when I was in third grade I started having trouble with math.
Looking back on it, from this side, it’s kind of funny. I started having trouble with math.
Part of that was because I needed to get glasses and nobody noticed that for a while. So
for a while I wasn’t seeing the board. I could read a book, but I couldn’t see the board
very well. So I was starting to fall behind in math. At the end of my third grade year that
spring, I remember getting my first glasses. So that helped that a little bit. When I hit the
fourth grade I was behind in math then. I was still trying to catch up. My fourth grade
teacher was just wonderful. She did the exactly the right thing for me. At the time I
thought she was being mean, but I was doing a math thing and I just messed up an entire
worksheet that she had given. I just did the whole thing wrong. She said, “I don’t think
you’re ever going to be able to learn math. I just don’t understand why.” She said,
“You’re so good at everything else you do. Why can’t you get this math? I just don’t
think you’re ever gonna get it.” She said it, I remember she said it in kind of a joking
laughing way, but it still, it was that [challenge], and I was just bound and determined I
was gonna do this. So I went home. Mom and Grandma could help me a little bit ‘cause it
was still pretty simple math. So they didn’t have a lot of education, but they could help
me with that level. I just worked on it. Boy, I learned all those tables and all the stuff I
had gotten behind on, learned some of the functions of division and all this and how to do
the long division and this stuff. Within about a month or two I was the best math student
she had in class. I remember she gave me a little card that said, “I’m so proud of you for
all the progress you’ve made,” or whatever and that meant so much to me. You know, by
the time I went to college I was going to be a math major. Everybody at high school
remembers, when I go to my reunions, they always say, “Well, here comes the math
wizard.” I was the one that took the most advanced math and I was up to pre-calculus and
I was the only one in the room that seemed to be able to get it sometimes. The teacher
would be up there going through some new procedure and I’d be the only one in the room
that—I’d have to help everybody else. So, “See what he’s really doing is this,” kind of
break it down. They always remember me as being the math wizard and that’s really
funny that here I’d—I made this as a goal.

LC: What was that teacher’s name? Do you remember?
LS: Mrs. Hayden. Oh, I remember her very well.

LC: Do you think she had kind of psyched you out such that she knew that—?

LS: I think she knew that I had to be capable of doing it because I was so good at everything else I did. She just knew I had to be able to do this.

LC: She’s probably a very smart lady.

LS: I think she thought I would take the challenge. She stated it in such a way it was a joke, but there was a kernel of truth in it. She was trying to egg me on, is what she’s trying to do. Oh, come on.


LS: That’s what she was trying to do.

LC: She sounds very clever.

LS: She did it. So when I first went to college I was going to be a math major. It turned out I went into something else with a lot of math in it. So that’s a very interesting story.

LC: Well, I want to ask you about college, but first, tell me about high school. How did you do?

LS: Well, that’s interesting.

LC: High school’s always rough.

LS: It is rough, but, you know, for me I think now, some people have a rougher time because in high school you’re in that hybrid period of your life where a lot of things are you, but there’s still a lot of structure around you. So you’re expected to act mature, but you have to do it within this parental and institutional structure. There’s a lot of tension there between being me and I’m [mature], but the decisions you make are very, very truncated. I didn’t have a lot of trouble with that because I liked the structure. I was good academically and I kind of found my niches. I was not athletic. I tried that in—now remember, we went eight grades to grade school. When I was in the seventh grade I tried basketball ‘cause my dad had been very good at basketball. We’re in the same high school now, you gotta remember, that both my mother and my dad were in. I tried basketball. I just didn’t have it. I just didn’t have the coordination. By the time I got to high school I played the piano already. So I took up a band instrument. I took up clarinet. I already knew how to play the piano. I knew how to read music. So I took up the clarinet.
so I could be in the marching band. Then I began to
join organizations. I joined Future Teachers of America. I was in—it was kind of like a
debate team although I didn’t take debate *per se*. It was kind of like a place where you
got together and talked about current events with other students. It was supposed to be for
debaters, but it was kind of open to anybody in school that liked to do that. So I got
involved in that club. I can’t remember what the name of the club was. Then in those
days we were into tracking students. So you had students that were in the kind of a
vocational track and a lot of women were in this, were in the business track or going to be
a secretary or an assistant or whatever. Then you had the college-bound track. Well, I was
definitely in the college-bound track. This was one goal I had in high school because I
thought the only out for my situation at home, no one else in my family had gone on to
college. I thought if I could get to college and I could get a degree, I can get away from
this morass I have at home. I wanted to be able to get away from it. I was worried about,
since I wasn’t very athletic, I wasn’t sure I was gonna be able to do a physical type of job
the rest of my life. So I was thinking more—I was good at academics so I thought well,
maybe I can take this more intellectual track. I said, well, I’m trying to think of some
other clubs. Oh, I was in French Club. I love French, French class. I love Miss
Leatherberry was, oh she was—I married a French teacher—so she had a [gift], my [love]
for French teacher. So she had a long-term effect on me. What she did was she opened up
the world to me. I’ll always remember Miss Leatherberry spending all the time talking
about Europe and especially, of course, France and opening up this whole other culture
and world to me that was different than Kansas City. I’ll always thank her for that, for
giving me that gift. Anyway, my social—to get back to this tracking, there were so many
of us that had the same class all day long, we were in the advanced English and the
advanced math and the super-duper history classes. There was a class of about twenty-
five of us that took all the same classes together for the most part. So we had this same
kind of a social group. I have long-term friendships from just those classes. We were
together so much. I wasn’t able—we were relatively poor because Dad was on-again-off-
again paying child support and we were living with my grandmother. So we didn’t have a
lot of money. So I didn’t get to live really a full middle class life. It wasn’t like welfare
poor, but it was just like on the bottom end of middle class, kind of working class type
income. So I didn’t have a lot of money to do a lot of social things, but Grandma would let me use the car, by the time I was able to drive. Grandma would—she would drive me to group activities. She’d let me use the car when it was available. I got to go on dates. I got to go to both proms and all that sort of thing. I had a social life, too. I loved to dance. I went to all the sock hops. Back in those days we had the sock hop. So I’d stay after the game and we’d have a sock hop and I loved to dance. I really fit in. I felt like I had a really—I liked my high school. I mean, I had ups and downs. Everybody has the relationship that fell apart and somebody that didn’t like you and you didn’t know why and whatever. I didn’t feel picked on at school. I felt like I was respected because everybody thought I was—a lot of people thought I was the smart one. Then I got to do some fun things. So I feel like I had a fairly good high school.

LC: School was still sort of functioning as an oasis for you, it seemed like.

LS: It really was because a lot of stuff going on at home, terrible things going on at home. Mom got sick again after, right after the divorce. She was in the hospital. That was one thing I can still remember. That was terrible. I had Debbie. I was driving then. So that had to be after I was sixteen. Mom had one of her episodes and was in a psychiatric hospital for two weeks that time. I took Debbie and Claudia with me and we were supposed to be able to see her for the first time in about ten days. We were standing down in a lobby area where we were going for visitors, but she wasn’t allowed to see us before then. She wanted to see us and we wanted to see Mommy. We were standing, waiting for her. [They said she] would come down these stairs and this young man, he must have been schizophrenic or something, I don’t know what his illness was, came running down the stairs. He was wanting to get out of the hospital for some reason. There were glass doors as you walked—not the kind now that were all glass. They were wood with a great big glass inset in them. He came bounding down the stairs and didn’t even open the door. He ran through the glass door and cut himself up and then fell forward and had these cuts all over. Well, we kids were just standing there waiting for Mom to come downstairs and we witnessed this crazy person doing this stuff. It really scared my sisters. I was shocked by it, but my initial reaction was I wanted to protect them. I said, “Now Mommy’s not like that. Don’t worry. She’s not like”—’cause I thought they would get this idea that everybody here looks like this. Mom was gonna come down—’cause at
home she had been violent. She had slapped Debbie and done some of the—I was especially worried about Debbie cause I didn’t want Debbie to think that when Mommy came down the stairs that she was gonna get mad or something. You know what I mean? We’d witnessed violence, I didn’t want her—and as it turned out Mom did come down and it was a good visit and everything. Isn’t that funny how something like that just sticks in your memory?

LC: Yes.

LS: There were these tumultuous things happening at home. Grandma was working at a bank.

LC: Okay. I was gonna ask whether she was working.

LS: She worked in a bank after Grandpa died. She had been left quite a bit of Proctor and Gamble stock that he had gotten as profit sharing. So she had money put away and was getting dividends off of that. She got a job at a bank and was working full time. Then we had the child support coming in from Dad, but Mom couldn’t hold a job. She’d get a job for a while and then she’d have one of her episodes and she’d lose her job. So we really were relying mostly on child support and Grandma’s income to stay together. When I came home from high school, when I got off the bus, I had to go in. The youngest kids, Claudia and Kevin, were at a babysitter, a woman across the street was retired and she babysat for money. I’d pick them up. We’d come home. I’d make sure that laundry was being worked on. I would always fix supper. I always fixed supper. I would clean the house. My wife thinks I’m wonderful because I do all these things just naturally. Matter of fact, she gets mad because sometimes I get after her about being too messy. It’s kind of a role reversal, but I’m used to being the head of the household. I would run the household. Grandma would come home. She was tired anyway. Mom was basically worthless about a lot—unless she was in a good mood. Sometimes she’d be very helpful, but you couldn’t rely on it. You just kind of did these things, but even if she was feeling good you kind of did them because she would, you just never knew.

LC: That’s a lot of responsibility for you.

LS: So I basically, starting at about fourteen years of age, I remember being, I was basically—I had a parental role starting at about fourteen when Kevin was born.
LC: Now did you sit with your sisters, at least initially, and do their homework
with them?
LS: Yeah.
LC: Did you do that kind of thing?
LS: Yeah. Of course, I was good. I was also—I was in Future Teachers of
America Club at school. I kind of wanted to try this out on the kids. So we did some
things that were kind of educational. My sisters have done very well. My sister Debbie is
a nurse. My sister Claudia was head of information technology department of Shell Oil
Company in Houston. My brother Kevin is—now he didn’t get a degree in electronics.
We went to a vo-tech and did electrical work, but he is a foreman at a cable TV company
and has worked—he actually made better money than I did by the time I retired. So
they’ve all done very well. They’ve all—
LC: Well, that’s a great credit to you.
LS: Yeah. I don’t know whether I can take all the credit, but I think I gave—I
tried to give them an atmosphere at home where this was important that they learn these
things. It wasn’t that hard. They could really do it.
LC: Did they feel in the same way that you did that school was a safe place
where they could perform well or—
LS: Yes. I think that’s true of Kevin and of Claudia. Debbie, as I told you before,
is the black sheep, but she was scarred. Not scarred physically, but I think she was
scarred emotionally by what she witnessed and what she went through with Mom and
Grandma. Grandma got to where, by the time Debbie reached high school age and
remember that she’s six years younger than I am. So I was already in college. By the time
Debbie started high school, Grandma hated Debbie and told her to her face, “You’re
never gonna be worth anything. You’re the worthless one in this family. You’re never
gonna be”—it was a constant barrage verbally. Never hit her, never did anything
physical. Mom hit her. Grandma, it was just constant—she did not like Debbie and let her
know it. She was worthless. She’s never gonna amount to anything. Debbie was
rebellious in high school and she had a child out of wedlock that she decided not to do an
abortion. She wanted to have [it]. So she chose to have the baby and put it up for
adoption. The boy would not marry her. [He] was a coed at high school among one of our
friends at high school got her pregnant. She was the one in the family that tried drugs and
all kinds of things. She’s a nurse now. She’s nice middle class, settled down, but she went
through a very tumultuous period, but she was always good academically. It was easy for
her, though, so she got in trouble because she did another route than I did. School was
easy for her like it was basically for me, but instead of trying to keep things stable, she
would act out her anger at school and she didn’t especially like her female teachers. Well,
see, Mom beat her and Grandma abused her verbally. She didn’t like women in her life.
She had a terrible time with women, still does really. She had a different reaction. Now,
Claudia and Kevin were much more stable. They had much better school and growing up
years. Kevin may have been going in the wrong direction by the time we got him. He was
kind of hanging out with kind of the wrong crowd at junior high. So by the time we got
him and moved him out to Salina, Llona and I straightened some of that out. He was
already before he was even a freshman, trying to, smoking and doing some of these
things. I think we were really good at intervening in his life.

LC: At a good time.
LS: At a good time, right when he needed to have a stable home and some
direction.

LC: How old was he when he came to live with you?
LS: Fourteen. Yeah. He had just started his freshman year.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about college. You had been making your own
decisions that that was something you wanted to do. How did it come about and where
did you go to college?
LS: Okay. I was fixated on going to KU, University of Kansas. Lawrence isn’t
that far from where I grew up. I thought that I was calculating, too, somewhat here, was
that I probably would never be able to go to a competitive school because we didn’t have
any money to be able to pay a private school, a really competitive school, but if I went to
KU, I thought if I played my cards right. We were relatively poor, so I might be able to
amass various kinds of scholarships and pretty well pay my way if I played my cards
right. Actually that’s what happened because of our economic condition and also because
of my academic success, when I graduated I was not valedictorian in my class, but I
graduated having amassed the most numbers, the most dollars. I had the most dollars [in
scholarship money] and I got my way out. So I went on to KU. That was my goal, to go
to KU. I’m very pleased about my experience at KU because part of the package I was
offered at KU was I was allowed to live in a scholarship hall. KU has a system. They
have four for women and they have five for men. Smaller, they’re almost about the size
of a fraternity or a sorority, but they’re scholarship halls. They are a scholarship in and of
their self. You do some of the work in the hall for your room and board, but it’s about
half what it costs to live in a big dorm or out on your own. So it is a real scholarship in
and of itself, but the thing that was wonderful about it, besides being able to meet my
wife who was in the scholarship hall right next to me, that came later, was the fact there
was just a group of fifty men there. It was a small group. So I got really close to some
men there. As a matter of fact, the one reason why I have this Lubbock connection, is one
of my best friends teaches at Texas Tech here in the psychology department, Jim
Clopton. His wife teaches physical therapy here. That’s why they’re here. That’s why we
get down to see them quite often.

LC: Now did he live in your house, in your same house?
LS: He lived in our house and then whenever he was dating Nancy, he and Nancy
and Llona and I did things together. So we go way, way back. Anyway, then I have a
number of other friends that I’ve kept all these years in close contact with them. Three in
particular, Jim and Mark and then there’s [John] that I’ve really stayed really close to.
Then there’s Dan, who I haven’t stayed as close to. He’s in Washington, D.C. We’ll get
to his connection, too. I stay with them when I go to Washington, D.C. when we get to
this point, I stayed with them whenever I went to the Wall, to see the Wall for the first
time which is very—we’ll get to that later. I liked the living arrangement because it was
good for me. It also gave—I think I would’ve had more trouble adjusting to a big dorm
like anybody probably would have, but it was good. Very fairly early on, I would say by
the end of my freshman year, I was close enough to some of the guys that I shared with
them some of the difficulties I was having because I would have to explain to them. I get
these telephone calls and Grandma would say, “We can’t put up with this anymore.
You’ve got to come home.” So she would drive to Lawrence, pick me up in her car, take
me home, and I’d have to go home and solve some major [problem]—it usually was
Debbie and Grandma or Debbie and Mom is who it was cause she was in high school
then. I’d have to lay down the law and make sure everybody—’cause I was the “male image.” I was supposed to come in and soothe everything out and then she’d [bring me back to KU]. Well, after a while some of the guys would ask, “Why are you having to go? What’s your family? I don’t understand.” So finally I’d open up a little bit about, a little bit about my history. That was helpful ‘cause it gave me sometimes—I don’t understand the psychology of it all, but I do think it was helpful for me to able to have some confidence, some confidants that I could talk to and explain these things to. They would give me some support. They’d say, “Wow. We didn’t know you were having to do that.” They might even make some suggestions although it wouldn’t be something they were used to, but they’d say, “Well, have you tried to do this? Will your Grandma listen to you if you say that?” ‘Cause sometimes Grandma herself was the problem. She was the one stirring the pot. How do you get around that? Anyway.

LC: But you had to go back a couple times during the year?
LS: Oh, it was quite a few times.
LC: Really?
LS: It was enough that people began—it was probably at least once a month.
LC: Wow.
LS: That I’d have to go in and set everybody straight. I hated going home for break, for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and stuff because I would be back in that—that’s what I was trying to get away from. I wanted to grow up and have my own life and get away from that.
LC: Were holidays especially hard?
LS: Yeah. They really were. Then at Christmas, and then Thanksgiving was the day that Dad left. He had gotten up that morning and left on a Thanksgiving Day. So when Thanksgiving came around that was always the anniversary that Dad abandoned us. Grandma would make this big thing about it. So the whole family would remember that Dad went out on us and he was the devil and da-da-da-da. Then Christmas was always hard for me. We’ll get to that. It got much harder in Vietnam. Christmas was already hard for me because the family would go all out for trying to buy gifts and everything and I’d always say, “We have trouble paying the gas bill this month. Why are we doing all this?” It just didn’t make sense to me. I always thought, “Well, can’t we go a little easier on that
and get the first things first?” My mom especially was always pie-in-the-sky we can
afford this and we can do this and then we’d always run out of money. Anyway.

LC: So that was stressful?
LS: There were just financial stresses and there was a lot of this emotional stress
from wondering when the phone was gonna ring.

LC: Now in college when you were there and studying, you thought you might
do something in math, but that changed?
LS: Right. I started off—yeah. I stuck with that my freshman year. I was taking
all the distribution courses and everything. It would kind of fit into being a math major.
You don’t have to declare it ‘til later, but I was pretty well on that track. I was good at
math and I was gonna do this. Well, my sophomore year I got up to the next level. I can’t
remember where I was getting up to. It was getting up to the really advanced calculus
stuff and to me it was getting so nebulous, it was getting almost beyond anything that was
practical. Mathematicians really like it, almost becomes philosophy. It almost becomes
philosophical. You’re doing these things. You change what the functions of math are so
you see how that would come out if you would change—if this really were the reverse of
what you’d do, and all these happenstance things that would happen. It began to lose me.
I just kind of lost interest in it. My sophomore year academically, not so much socially or
in any other way, ‘cause I was fitting into the scholarship hall and I was doing fine. I was
just beginning to wonder if this was really what I wanted to do. My second semester of
my sophomore year, I had a good friend at the hall. This is where our scholarship hall
was just a wonderful thing for me. We were just sitting around talking and saying, “I’m
still good at this. I’m doing fine, but I’m just beginning to lose the fire in my belly about
it.” He said, “Well, you know, I’m really enjoying my economics.” He said, “It’s got a lot
of math in it, but it’s very specific. It has a reason. You’re talking about something that’s
out there and it kind of just”—so I said, “Well, I need some distribution classes.” So I
signed up my second semester for Econ I. It was just sort of like love, more so than math
had ever been. Math had been something I just literally programmed myself way back
through grade school. I was the one that was good at math and I had heard it from
everybody. Well, I got in there, but this really just got me. I was good at it. I was better at
it than even some of the others—I wanted to know more. It was one of those things where
you find a subject and you’re a chapter ahead and then they refer to something and so you
go get the other book. Well, most people don’t even—they can’t even get through the
regular book and here I found—I said, “Well, this must be something I really like.” So
the next year I really did by my junior year, I just shifted my whole—I started taking a
couple of different economic courses and I just took off. This was it. I mean, it really—

LC: You found your place.

LS: I found it ‘cause it had enough math in it, but it had this other interest that I
was developing that was all brand [new]. It came back to this history, this idea of history
or the social sciences that I also had always had an interest in. So it kind of blended the
two together and it was just exactly what I needed.

LC: Were you thinking that you were going to be an economist, like work at a
bank or did you still think about teaching?

LS: Now that didn’t happen. I was pretty well decided that if I were to teach, I
wasn’t sure I wanted to teach at any—I was in love with this subject, I really was. So I
had decided I needed to go on to graduate school. If I were going to teach, I think I
wanted to teach at the college level. I admired my college professors. I admired—I was
almost envious of the fact that they could delve so deeply into this subject that I was kind
of being drawn to. I was envious of that. I thought well that would—I would do both. I’d
be able to do economic research and delve more deeply into it, but I’d also be able to do
this lifelong dream of wanting to teach. So I thought well—what I should do is go to
graduate school. Well, Vietnam was beginning to breathe down our necks then.

LC: About what years was this?

LS: That was in—I graduated in ’66, but I was making this decision at about ’65.
So, see, Vietnam was beginning to heat up. Those draft deferments were looking awful
good. So by my senior year, most definitely I was bound and determined. I was staying in
a graduate school ‘cause I was already thinking, “No, I don’t think I want to get involved
in this Vietnam conflict.” I would’ve been drafted almost immediately if I quit school.
The only two schools I applied to were Purdue and KU. KU usually, they had a policy.
They didn’t like to take their undergraduates there. They liked them to go off someplace
else. I was accepted at Purdue with a very good graduate package. I was also accepted to
KU with a very good graduate package. The craziest thing happened, I fell in love with
Llona. That happened, actually it happened [to me]. That happened after ’65, fall of ’65.
By my senior year, Llona and I were dating all the time. We were pretty sure this was serious stuff. So I decided that of the two universities, I really should stay at KU. She had one more—she was one year behind me. Actually, she was two years behind me, but she was probably gonna graduate early. She was gonna have at least one more year. So I accepted the KU offer and went to graduate school at KU. That’s when we get into trouble. We’re almost up to the Vietnam story now. So my first year, I graduated in ’66 with my undergraduate degree and I started in the fall of ’67 with my graduate work.
Two men from the scholarship hall were staying at KU for the graduate program, as well. So we three got an apartment together and went to graduate school. Started right at school and Llona was still in the scholarship hall she was in, in Watkins. I was in Battenfeld and she was in Watkins. So it was great because I had my own apartment. Llona and I were dating and she was finishing—actually turned out she went a year and a semester more.

Anyway, she was—

LC: What was she studying?
LS: She was taking both Spanish and French, but French was her first love. So she’s certified to teach both Spanish and French, but French is what her degree was in. She was gonna go ahead and get her teaching, she did the teaching segment of it so that she could get her license. Then she wanted to go ahead though and get her master’s before she quit. She was already talking about graduate school, which was fine because the program I entered into was one that you go straight through for a PhD. You go through some of the process of like a master’s level, but you don’t do a thesis and all that. It’s a non-thesis master’s and you just go straight on through. So that first year I had the apartment and she was still in Watkins working on her undergraduate. So in the summer of [‘67]—so that got us that first year. It went very well. I was very successful at graduate school and Llona was loving [it] more and more. She was getting more deep into her French stuff and loving it more and more. We were having a great time academically along with enjoying each other’s company. So that summer of ’67 we decided we were gonna get married in the summer of ’67 because she had one more semester to do and then she wanted to do her graduate work at KU, too. She thought she could piece together—she still had her scholarships and I had my—the TAs (teaching assistant)
actually in those days, this may surprise you, I made enough money that we could both
live on my TA salary. Plus side benefits there. They were much nicer than they are now.
We really could swing it. It was tight. We had to be very careful with our money, but we
could do it. So we decided to get married. We knew this was it. So we wanted to get
married. My second year was being married. We obviously moved to our own little
apartment after the wedding. The second year she finished first semester her
undergraduate and then started her first semester of graduate work that spring semester.
We’re getting almost up to the Vietnam story.

LC: That’s fine.
LS: Now we’re up to 1968.
LC: Spring.
LS: Spring semester of 1968, Johnson—the Tet Offensive occurs and Johnson
announced that it was up to locals—they were needing more—the troop level had really
raised and we had lost troops. So he announced some of the draft boards were really
having trouble meeting their quotas. He announced it was up to local draft boards on
whether or not they would continue to give graduate deferments. It turns out there’s about
five or six in my graduating class at Turner, at high school level, who got caught up, a
bunch of us got caught up in this. My draft board in Wyandotte County in Kansas, my
draft board was still back where I came from high school so it was from Turner which is
Wyandotte County, Kansas City, Kansas. They notified me that they were going to
discontinue graduate deferments. I was drafted in September, right before school. I got
my letter right before school started that fall, which would be—actually, that spring I did
my orals for my master’s and I was granted—I wasn’t actually given a piece of paper, but
I was granted that I had passed my master’s level and I was officially going on to my
PhD and I had a few courses to do before I started on my dissertation. By that time,
getting back to my math connection, by that time I was very interested in econometrics,
which is mathematical economic predictions where you take past history—now, of
course, it’s done with a lot of computers available. Then there weren’t as many
computers available. We were developing formulas—which, by the way, my son is a
meteorologist and I found out they use kind of the same type of formulas trying to predict
the weather. It’s interesting to talk to him now at this age—I was interested in that. I was
very interested in economic predictions. If you’re talking about career goals, I was
getting further and further away from whether I wanted to stay in academia and thinking
more in terms of working for the Federal Reserve Bank or working for the Office of
Management and Budget in Washington, D.C., something more governmental.
LC: Something more policy related.
LS: More policy oriented, I was kind of going more that direction. I hadn’t
decided yet. I was concentrating mostly on when I was gonna get my degree done.
LC: Is it fair to say that the draft notice that you received was a shock?
LS: I thought it might happen. They warned me. I got a notification first. They
were gonna change my rating from, I can’t remember what it—it went to an A, but
whatever—they were gonna change me from my deferment to draftable, whatever the
classification was. I got that notification that they were considering doing that. So I
started looking. I was gonna try to think—I knew some people who were in the
Wyandotte County area National Guard. My uncle had been in the Navy and there were a
few openings in Navy. They were trying to get—there weren’t very many openings in
anything, but they were trying to get people in Navy missile work is what it was,
something to do with missiles. That’s all I can remember. I went and talked to some of
the recruiters and I talked to some people back at home trying to get into the National
Guard. I did try to see if there was something I could get into that would take care of my
duty. There were these long lists of people waiting to do [it too]. See everybody was
jumping at the same time. There was a lot of pressure in ’68. That’s why the campuses
were all exploding ‘cause we all felt this pressure. All of a sudden the Vietnam War was
coming home to us, the educated classes. Before it had been mostly the working classes,
the people who didn’t go on to school, but it was starting to affect us. So, yes, I knew it
was coming, but when I actually got it, it’s just one of those things whenever you actually
see it, it says, “Greetings,” at the top. It’s just sort of like it’s real. It’s no longer some
hypothetical thing. It’s real. So I had to show up. It was the end of September. I didn’t
start school, of course. Llona did. Llona did go ahead and, of course, school started. She
went ahead and started. She drove me that morning to the induction center.
LC: Well, Lynn before we go there let me ask you a couple of other pieces. I
want to hear that story, but I just wonder if there are a couple of things that you might
comment on. In the years that you were at KU, on the campus, did you see any anti-war activity there?

LS: There was just beginning to be. I had been involved personally in the Civil Rights Movement.

LC: Can you talk about that? That’s very interesting.

LS: Oh, yes. I guess we should go back and do that.

LC: Please do.

LS: That was back in my undergraduate years. The Selma March, gosh, I’m trying to remember what year that was.

LC: ‘65?

LS: Was it my sophomore year or my junior year? Let’s see. I graduated in ’66. It must’ve been in ’64. No, ‘cause ’64 was—yeah, because it was after Kennedy was assassinated and that was ’63, so I think it was in the summer of ’64.

LC: Yeah, I think that might be right.

LS: I was already—I don’t know what was drawing me to this. When I was in high school, my sophomore year in high school, a black family bought a house in our school district and there’s a district in Kansas City, Kansas, that was the black district and they had their black high school even though Brown vs. Board of Education had occurred. They kind of had their own school. Now there were a few, especially professional blacks that were moving out, but not very many, but none were in our school district yet. We were out in the county and three families, and everybody said they were backed by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to do this, bought some houses in our school district. So I was in band. I wasn’t in any of their classes, but I was in band when Audrey, I remember Audrey. She played the clarinet, sat right next to me, and she was one of three black students in our high school. This caused quite a stir. Now it wasn’t like in the South when they barred them at the door, but people were not happy about this. We had always been a white high school.

LC: What was her last name? Do you remember?

LS: Oh, I don’t remember her last name. It’s in my yearbook. I could look it up.

[Johnson was her surname.]

LC: No, it’s okay.
LS: Anyway, her name was Audrey. She and I were good friends. I didn’t understand this falderal.

LC: But you were aware of it on some level?

LS: I knew it. I heard it, but I just didn’t understand it all. Audrey was just another person to me. I just didn’t understand it. Well, Grandma set me straight. I began to question it and Grandma set me straight. She was from Arkansas and she said, “In the county I came from they weren’t even allowed to spend the night.” She said, “Those kind of people are very nice and we like to have them. We can work with them and we can have them in to help us and do things, but we do not fraternize with these people. They’re different than we are.” So she was very racist on that. It didn’t stick on me. I don’t know why. It just didn’t. Well, getting back to my college years, I began to follow, and it just interested me, the Civil Rights Movement, what was going on in the papers and, of course, by then it was in the magazines as well and all this stuff. My family, with a Methodist background, but at that particular time in my life and during the last two years of my high school years and it continued while I was still in college, my mother decided she was gonna go to a different church than my grandma. They were having a fight. They always were Methodist. They had been Methodist all—I had a great great-grandfather that came from Wales and he’s a Methodist minister. So we were Methodist to the core. Mom decided she was gonna go to the Christian church, Disciples of Christ, down the street. Well, they were a lot the same. There’s just not a lot of difference. So we all switched and that’s where I did—my high school years I was in the YF there, CYF (Christian Youth Fellowship) instead of MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship) and all this and met people there. It was great ‘cause they were great people to be around. Anyway, when I go back on these weekends, especially when I got these telephone calls [from grandma to fix a problem back at home], if the family went to church I would go with Mom to the Christian church. Grandma would go to the Methodist and we’d go to the Christian church. Well, I knew the minister there and that’s where I normally go. The Sunday of the march, it was one of the Sunday’s I got called home. So I was home. The preacher got up and started giving a sermon about the fact that he did not support what Martin Luther King was doing in Selma that the people were pushing this too hard. We needed to do this much more slowly and this was gonna bring on violence. He said “He’s
nonviolent, but he’s bringing this on himself;” and started this whole sermon. Well, I was just shocked ‘cause I thought a man of the cloth would support another man of the cloth in this movement. It just threw me. It truly did. I literally got up and walked out. I didn’t make a big deal—I didn’t hoo-hoo. I just walked out the side, but I did leave the church and sat out in the car until church was over. I told Mom. I said, “I can’t go back.” I said, “I just don’t believe what he was saying and if his theology leads him that way I just can’t. I can’t ‘cause I really support this.” I said, “If I could, I’d be down there with them.” Mom was shocked when she heard this ‘cause she had never seen this side of me. I was exposed to other ideas at KU than my family was. I didn’t talk about it much at home ‘cause I knew Grandma had real strong feelings. So I just didn’t bring it up. Well, anyway, so that winter, during that winter after Selma at KU, there was a group formed and they were started by white people at KU who were mad because the KU had put out a registry of private apartments in Lawrence that were officially approved by the university where you could live. At least half of them would not allow black people to rent from them. There were some black people within the core group, but it was started by a group of whites, two white men, as a matter of fact, on campus who started this group to get those particular ones [approved apartment rentals] off the list. The university should not be having anything on the list that discriminates against black people.

LC:  What was the name of the group?
LS:  Oh, golly.
LC:  Did they have a name?
LS:  They had a name and I’d have to look that up too. It’s just gone.
LS:  Anyway, I was not an organizer of this or anything else, but when they started having their marches I decided well, I can’t be—it was one of these things, well, I can’t go to the South, but I can be this. So this is the way for me to stand up for this issue. We had a couple of candlelight—‘cause it was wintertime, so the sun goes down really, really early. We had candlelight marches around. We would surround—we weren’t breaking the law. We didn’t try to get on property. We weren’t supposed to, but we would surround the chancellor’s house, his mansion was on one part of the campus. We would just sing. We would sing *We Shall Overcome* and some of the good ol’ freedom
songs and we would do that around. Then we’d also have, we’d just have rallies. We’d have rallies at certain places. We’d come together and talk about we’ve got pressure for this. By early spring semester, the group decided that we weren’t getting anywhere. They wouldn’t even let anybody from the group talk to the chancellor. They wouldn’t let them in his office. He wasn’t recognizing them. Who are these people? So we decided we were gonna have a sit-in. That’s what was happening all over the nation. So we decided we were just gonna go and sit in the chancellor’s office. We weren’t gonna leave. They were gonna have to come, just like they do in the South. The police are gonna have to come and carry us bodily—there was a huge—there were probably over two hundred students. It filled up the entire—his floor, his office was at one level and almost filled up the entire floor, the hallway was bodies. We all just sat there. We had certain people who were designated to go buy us food and bring it in so we could eat and drink in there. We’d take potty breaks when they’d save our spot, we’d come back. They threatened to bring the police in and finally it wasn’t the chancellor himself, it was the vice chancellor let us into the office to discuss the list.

LC: Now how many people came into the office? Was there a group that was designated to meet with him?

LS: I think they let the two ringleaders and two black people come into the office and talk to them that day. It was getting toward dark and they had told us that if it got dark when it’s time to lock the doors, we were physically going to be taken out by the authorities and they were gonna call the authorities. It was right before then. I think it was still light, though, so they weren’t quite ready to lock it. It was before it really got down to a showdown, but they called them in. The vice chancellor came out and announced that we have come to an agreement. He said, “We have decided that we are no longer going to list, we are going to require—this is gonna take a process, but we’re gonna require everyone who’s on this list to fill out a form and declare that they will allow people of color to live in their apartments before we will allow them. They have to sign it and allow them to be on the list.” So really we won. It wasn’t like—they weren’t gonna change the list that day, but they were gonna do something about it.

LC: What was the mood when that announcement—?
LS: Oh. Oh, it was wonderful. We all shouted and everything. I’ll never forget this, the sun was just going down. The sun was setting. It was really pretty. It was cold. We all had coats on, but we went out in front of where the flag pole is and they had just taken down the flag ‘cause it was sunset. We all ran out in front of the administration building on the campus and we all sang We Shall Overcome and that still means a lot to me on Martin Luther King Day when we have our celebrations. I was there. I was part of that. It was our little version of it. It wasn’t down there where the real action was occurring, but we did our bit for the cause.

LC: And changed something at KU, if for nothing else, you changed something.

LS: Yeah, we did and we did it. Eventually, now, that just seems like almost that was just a piddly little thing, but at the time it was really, it was a very emotional topic. It was really emotional. Who are these students to make us do something?

LC: Housing has always been a very important indicator of where a university is with regard to its policies.

LS: That’s right. That’s exactly right.

LC: So I think you actually struck at the core and in some way that was reflected in their inability or unwillingness to respond at first.

LS: Of course, in Washington at this very same time, supposedly in memory of JFK (John F. Kennedy), all the new legislation was being passed to open the housing and everything. All that was happening under LBJ (Lyndon B. Johnson).

LC: So let me ask you, Lynn, do you remember the assassination of Kennedy?

LS: Oh, my, definitely.

LC: Of John Kennedy, I mean.

LS: John Kennedy, yes, uh-huh. This is a very ironic story and I love telling this because I like sharing it with people. It’s one of those things you always remember where you were and when.

LC: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

LS: I was taking a—this was in 1963, and I was taking one of my distribution courses. I had taken an American History course on the mid-1800s. It was basically a Civil War class, but it was also the building up to the Civil War, the Civil War, and the immediate Reconstruction. It was that time period. It was an American History course. I
was taking a test that day. That morning, see, it was in the morning ‘cause he was shot in
the morning. I went into the test. I was taking an essay test and the last question—well, it
was short answer questions and then there [were] two essays. The last essay question
was, “From what you have read in this class and what we have discussed, how would the
Reconstruction have been handled differently had Lincoln not been assassinated?” That
was my question and I had just finished writing that [essay] and I walked outside of the
building and I noticed that the flag was at half-staff. I thought, “Well, that’s strange. It
wasn’t at half staff when”—then I walked past, the campus had these little kiosks all over
campus. Somebody had taken a piece of white paper and just scribbled on it, “The
president was shot.” Well, I thought, “Oh, my goodness, the president of the university
was shot.” That’s what I thought. JFK didn’t even come in my mind. It was really like—I
thought somebody had said instead of saying dean, they had said president. That’s what I
really thought. I really did. I said, “Oh, my God. There’s so much violence in the world
today,” and dah-da-da-dah. I got back to the house and everybody that was there, a lot of
us were in school. It was a school day. The ones who had already gotten back were all
glued to the television. I walked in and Ron, one of my friends I just mentioned, was
sitting there and I said, “Ron, what’s going.” He turned to me and there were tears and I
said, “Ron, what’s wrong?” He said, “It’s Kennedy.” I said, “What do you mean its
Kennedy?” He said, “He was shot and they just said on TV he’s dead.” I said—see all
this, the announcement of the shooting and all this had happened while I was in class. So
that’s how I do remember, but it’s ironic that I had just written that.

LC: Very strange. Very strange. Did the kids all stay glued to the tube for the rest
of the weekend?

LS: Yes. Of course. Then, of course, things sort of just stopped after that. They
went ahead and had classes. Then, of course, they cancelled classes for the funeral and
everything. I just remember seeing—I was watching that Sunday morning whenever
Oswald was shot. I had come down and we knew he was gonna be transferred, so we all
were down. Some people were sleeping in ‘cause they’d had a party the night before. We
came down. There were some of us who were very interested and we wanted to see what
he looked like.

LC: Who is this guy? Yeah.
LS: Yeah. So we were all standing and we saw him shot. I did see that. I remember seeing Oswald shot by Ruby.

LC: Do you remember what you felt when you saw that happen?

LS: Everybody had the same reaction as when will the violence end. It was just sort of like more and more—if you kill him, then you kill him, and it was just sort of—you gotta remember in those days we weren’t exposed to as much violence in the popular culture as we are, graphic violence. There was always suggested violence with cowboys and Indians and stuff, but it was never graphic. To see someone shot was just, that was just horrendous. I mean, you just didn’t even see this because papers wouldn’t even run pictures of a body that had been shot. There were certain things that were just not done and so it was just so shocking to see, actually see the violence. So, yes, I do remember.

LC: Lynn I wonder if, sort of in this same vein, if you remember when King was shot.

LS: Oh, yes I do.

LC: I know that you would’ve been in graduate school.

LS: I was in graduate school and I was on my way to the stacks. I was gonna do some research on a project I was doing for my economic history class, economic history class, on the slave trade. Isn’t this ironic?

LC: It is.

LS: I mean this is really strange.

LC: It is.

LS: I was doing a project for the history—it was part of my TA. Well, that semester I had a quarter TA and a quarter research RA (research assistantship). They pieced together this thing and the RA that I was doing research on the slave trade, the triangle between rum and the slaves and America. [The professor] was getting data. His thesis was going to be that eventually economically slavery would probably have ended anyway without the Civil War because it was gonna become economically untenable because—

LC: The profits were dropping.
LS: And because of the mechanical revolution of the Industrial Revolution. Anyway, it was part of that and I was doing this study on the slave trade for him, getting data.

LC: Now who was this you were doing this for?
LS: This was for, oh, I can’t remember his name. Isn’t that awful?
LC: Was he on the faculty?
LS: One of the professors. He was one of the professors. He wasn’t the one that I—it wasn’t my major area, but it was where my RA was. He was a wonderful [mentor]. He was from England. I was getting up. You had to check in before you were allowed in. You had to show who you were before you were allowed in the stacks. I had to show my graduate student card and somebody standing there said, “Oh, Martin Luther King’s just been shot.” Well, they had just heard it. It happened probably in the afternoon, but I hadn’t heard it yet. Llona and I had to have supper and I had just gone right up there. The other person said, “Well, it’s about time.”

LC: No.
LS: It was just sort of a slap to me. I was thinking—it was trying to soak in. I had to go back home and tell Llona. I said, “I can’t do any work tonight.” I said, “They’ve killed Martin.” So we both cried a little bit, but yeah I do remember that.

LC: That spring and the rest of that summer were of course extremely tumultuous for the country. Do you remember hearing about the Tet Offensive? That would’ve been a couple of months before the assassination of King. I just wonder if you were watching television and—

LS: I was very worried. It was funny because it was prophetic because this started the dominoes that got me drafted by September of that year. I just remember we had watched the war on the television. It was there in our living rooms. You watched. There was a segment on it every night on the 5:30 news, the evening news. That was especially horrendous. Seeing our guys—it looked like they were under siege. Now it turned out that we know now that militarily we basically won the Tet Offensive, but it looks so horrible on TV because the guys were pinned down and they were being fired on. They showed people being taken away in stretchers. Then that picture from Khe San with the guys on the back of the truck, oh my, that was just something else, with them
pulling people on the back of the—that was just horrible. So I just remember just
seeing—I did not get to see Walter Cronkite give his famous—we watched the other
channel so I didn’t get to see the night that he made his comment that he thought that the
war was fruitless. We all were kind of having the same reaction to it, “Oh dear, this is a
lot worse than we ever thought.” Everybody kept saying we were turning the corner and
we were pacifying the people and this was exactly the opposite. So even if we were
winning militarily the important message from Tet Offensive to everyone was but we’re
losing it politically. We’re losing the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and we
can never possibly win without them.

LC: Did you listen to the Democratic candidates in the primaries that spring?
LS: Oh, most definitely. Now, I was not one of the supporters of McCarthy
because by the time I really—I was just so upset with Johnson because there were so
many social policies that I was strongly supportive of Johnson on. I just couldn’t
understand why he had this blind spot about Vietnam. It just didn’t make sense to me
because he seemed so right on every other issue, but he was so terribly wrong on the war
and I just couldn’t understand it. So when Bobby Kennedy announced, I was a strong
supporter of Bobby because, more so than Humphrey, I had a been a long admirer of
Hubert Humphrey, but of course this wasn’t until—he didn’t announce till after Johnson
said he wouldn’t run again. As soon as Bobby jumped in, I was a strong supporter of
Bobby. Bobby came to KU. I will always remember that. He was there less than a month
before he was shot in California. Maybe a little bit more than a month ‘cause it was in the
spring. He gave a riveting address. Of course, it was a stump speech so I mean I’m sure it
was the same thing he said everywhere else. They all had their stump speeches, but he
made it very clear that as far as he was concerned it was very obvious that we were not
going to win in South Vietnam and the very best we could do is try to get the South
Vietnamese to protect their country. Basically it was an early version of the
Vietnamization, what we did later under Nixon, was that we should make sure they’re
trained the best we can, but we need to get out. He made it very clear that this is what he
wanted.

LC: Where was that speech given? Do you remember?
LS: Yes. It was in the Allen Fieldhouse where we played basketball.
LC: Still?
LS: We still play basketball in the Allen Fieldhouse. Yes. Uh-huh. It was in the Allen Fieldhouse and he sat down in the middle of court and the place was just, I mean, it was jammed. Of course, we come from a very Republican state, but even Republicans—I mean, Bobby was a celebrity in and of, on his own no matter what your politics were, everybody wanted to see him, but his message was extremely popular because people wanted something done about this war. There was still an argument about whether it took more or less, but everybody was, at that point, everybody had kind of solidified that what Johnson was doing, well, whatever he was doing was the wrong thing. It was just packed.

LC: Where did you sit relative to—?
LS: I was right in front. I could see him face on, but I was probably about half way up the bleachers. There’s seats and then upper level seats, but I was in the lower level. I could see him very well.

LC: Was he charismatic?
LS: Very. Very. There was just something about his smile. The whole time you just got this idea that he was a man who talked about very serious things very seriously, but he had some joy inside of him, sort of that dual thing. He took serious things seriously, but he had this joy about him. He was a good-looking man. I mean, you take pictures of him. That whole family is very photogenic, so that was also a big sell for a celebrity. What impressed me more, was he—that was just a break. That was just a break from the Democratic line. Even Humphrey was going along with whatever Johnson was doing. [Bobby Kennedy] wasn’t quite as strong as McCarthy, which is pull them out no mater what. He had kind of this hybrid version. We owed it to the South Vietnamese to try to protect them for a while, but we’ve got to have a plan. He just wanted to have—he was basically saying we’ve gotta have a plan and an end date to get out. We had to have an exit plan. Johnson really didn’t have an exit plan. So that was new. That was new, see?
That was hopeful.

LC: Lynn, can I ask you if you remember thinking back to that day, he was standing in the middle of the court basically.
LS: Right. Right.
LC: Were there people around him? Was there security?
There was some security up in front. You could definitely see they were the black suit people. So you knew the men in black were up there, but there were only a couple. There must’ve been more—I was standing up, so there may have been more down working right in front of the crowd. I don’t know. I do know they were very careful. No one was allowed up there near him. We were all—he was deliberately situated so he was away from the people themselves physically. Now if somebody had a gun they could’ve shot, but that, he was that far away.

LC: That’s what I was gonna ask you. Nowadays we’ve gotten so used to being frisked and all kinds of control and open your bag. Anything like that then?

LS: Oh, nothing like that. We were still really innocent. We really were. He was gonna be shot—he was going to be shot in just a month and a half or so in California, but I just noticed that people weren’t gonna—you could tell people weren’t gonna let them physically get near him like to shake his hand or anything unless you were allowed by the entourage to do so.

LC: At this point, I don’t know if you can remember, had Dr. King already been killed?

LS: Let’s see.

LC: That was in early April.

LS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah it was right after that, as a matter of fact. He did it—he said in—I remember somewhere in the speech and he said, “In the name of Martin Luther King.” Something about, there was a question in the audience about the future of Civil Rights and some more things down the road. He said something about we needed to do more. I can’t remember specifically, but I remember it was in—he said, “In the honor of Martin Luther King we need to be doing more of his agenda.” So anyway, yes.

LC: That’s amazing. Let’s take a break for a minute.

LS: Okay. Let’s do that.

LC: Lynn, you’ve told about receiving the draft notice. How long did you have between receiving the notice and your report date?

LS: If I recall this correctly, I received it right around Labor Day in September and I had to report, I think, the last week of September. So it wasn’t long. Of course, the
induction center was right there in Kansas City, Kansas, very close to where Grandma lives. So there wasn’t any real preparation to get there.

LC: When you arrived there, what happened? What did you see?
LS: Llona drove me to the center or the reporting center. They immediately go through all this physical. If you pass the physical, the initial physical examination, you’re placed on a bus and they drove us all the way down to Ft. Leonard Wood in Missouri.
LC: Really?
LS: Mm-hmm.
LC: About how many buses?
LS: Oh, golly. I remember two, but there may have been more. They drove us down to Ft. Leonard Wood for my basic.
LC: Tell me about arriving at basic. What happened to you the first couple days?
LS: Well, right off the bat, I think they keep you busy and make you tired so you’re no trouble, more than anything.
LC: Yes. I think that’s probably right.
LS: I just remember a lot of physical activity that made you tired. I was kind of expecting having to stand in lines and do this and do that, but once you’re issued your stuff you are immediately out. It seemed like the very next day, we were out already doing calisthenics and being told what the rules were gonna be and we had to do this and that and the other. Very, very structured. Very structured. I did not like basic. I just, I was already, let’s see it was ’68. That fall I turned twenty-four. So I was twenty-three. I was just almost twenty-four when I started. It’d been a long time since I had somebody order me around like that. I wasn’t impressionable like a younger man would’ve been. It just seemed like a lot of people yelling at me, but again with my personality and my background I tend to not want to be stand out or be a problem, a discipline problem. So I was going right along with it even though I was rumbling in head I didn’t make anybody [mad]. As a matter of fact, I initially became a platoon leader. What I was surprised in basic—I was expecting to be there with a whole bunch of men who had either dropped out of high school or just graduated from high school or maybe had one year of working some labor job or pumping gas somewhere. There were a number of men who were like that, but there were a number of us with education. There were quite a few of us with
degrees because we had all gotten caught up in this switch of policy. It was just that little
blip of time, but there were a whole bunch of us who—when I finally, it took a while
before you get to know people well enough you hear some of their background, almost
fifty percent of us had some college education. That was just amazing to me.

LC: That is.

LS: So I just remember, basic is really a blur to me because it’s just like day after
day of the same routine, a lot of physical activity. There was a little bit of training they
do. You have to read some manuals about, like for example, taking care of your weapon
and doing things like that. Of course, that was a breeze for me. Actually doing the
physical thing was probably more difficult because I had not worked like that before, but
you do it enough times you finally—as they say you can almost do it in your sleep. So
that’s the whole idea anyway. I was afraid I wouldn’t like the food and the food really
wasn’t bad. For mass food, it really wasn’t too bad. It wasn’t as bad as I’d always heard it
was. The only trouble I got into was I was my platoon leader and the sergeant that was
immediately above me, and I do not remember his name, did not really like me very well.

Looking back on it now, I think he probably knew because of the way I talked or
whatever he knew I had some education and I think it intimidated him a little bit. He
probably wasn’t used to it up until now. He probably hadn’t been exposed to very many
people who were so articulate ‘cause when he’d asked, he’d say something and he’d want
me to do something for my platoon I’d have a list of questions. We probably gone for—
most of them didn’t think of any questions until maybe they were going to sleep that
night and I immediately I said, “Well, what about this? What about this?” He just acted
like he was not at ease with me. I just remember one time I was having trouble, this is
just a physical thing, I was having trouble. We were learning to march. Of course, we
marched and marched and marched. We marched to someplace. We marched from. We
did all the cadence and all those cadences and all the things you do and all the rhymes
over and all that. I was supposed to be at the end because I was supposed to make sure
my line stayed in line. This was one of my duties ‘cause I was the platoon leader. I could
not get turning a corner correctly with my feet. For some reason they just, my body just
wasn’t doing it. I wasn’t turning the corner real sharply like I was supposed to. To make
an example of it, I did it sloppily every time. So finally he just got really mad at me and
he pulled me into a, it was like a storage shed, but it had a couple windows in it. It was like a storage shed and he pulled me into the shed and he said, “You’re gonna learn how to do this or I’m gonna be in trouble, so you’re gonna learn how to do this.” Somebody must’ve commented that I looked sloppy. So he showed me how to do it and then I did it and I stumbled. Then he showed me how to do it. He turned around to me and he got his fist and he almost, he really did almost hit me. He swung toward me and then stopped himself. I remember covering my head like this, kind of protect my face, put my hand on my head and cover my face like you do if somebody’s gonna hit you, but he stopped and he said, “No. We’re gonna try this one more time and this time you are gonna do it right.” Lo and behold, I don’t know whether my body just got scared into it, but I learned how to do that and I can still do it today. I know how to do it, both right and left. I can do it correctly. I guess maybe that’s what I needed. I’m getting back to my fourth grade teacher. Maybe I needed to have a challenge. He really did almost hit me. I don’t know what to this day what kept him from actually completing that swing. He probably wouldn’t have gotten in trouble if he did hit me because I wouldn’t have told anybody he hit me. The only time I was worried was when I was in grade school and I can’t remember exactly what age, I fell down the front steps at home and I broke my left elbow. It was a bad enough brake they had to put a pin in it and had to do a little bit of surgery. I have a scar there on my left elbow. My arm doesn’t quite—as a matter of fact, the doctor wasn’t sure I would have complete use, complete motion in my left arm, but I really do except I can’t quite make it perfectly straight out. It’s just a little bit bent in. I remember doing calisthenics one day and we were supposed to put our hands out and hold them out for a long time. They were going around and if a guy didn’t have his arm completely straight they would come under the elbow and hit the elbow and make it go up. So if you’re not holding your hand—one of the sergeants was walking out and he did this to somebody right next to me to my left and he was up to my arm. I said, “I’ve broken that arm.” You’re not supposed to say—I did say, “sir.” “Sir, I’ve broken my arm,” but I didn’t want him to do that to this. He was reaching out and he just looked at me and he didn’t say a word to me. He just kind of blinked and then walked on. He didn’t say, “What did you say?” He just walked right on.

LC: So it was close?
LS: He was very close. It’s funny that I have those two memories of maybe being physically hurt. Those I can remember. Now the other stuff is just really a blur.

LC: Okay. Well at some point you got your orders for advanced.

LS: Yes. Right toward the end and I was told that I would be going to Ft. Sill to train for the artillery.

LC: This was the first time that you knew about the artillery assignment?

LS: That’s right, and I had no—you really have no idea. Guys were going into different, all kinds of AITs and who knew what. I remember somebody comment—all I remember was I turned to one of my buddies and said, “Well, mine’s for Ft. Sill in the artillery,” and he said, “Well, that’s supposed to be a good gig.” That’s what he said. I had no clue. I had no clue. I do remember a little bit more about AIT. I remember more about it. It seemed to be a little less physical training and a lot more of this actually training to do what you were gonna do, which is what AIT is supposed to be. I was trained at AIT. This is what’s very interesting. I was trained to be a gun bunny.

LC: Now what do you mean by that phrase for somebody—?

LS: Oh, excuse me. I’m sorry. I’m using Army terms.

LC: For somebody who doesn’t understand that.

LS: A gun bunny is anyone who actually trains to be part of firing a cannon, any part of it. Cranking it for setting the direction or putting the shell in. I think there were six men to a team and somebody’s cranking it, somebody’s getting the shell ready, somebody’s swathing the inside to make sure it’s clear, somebody’s actually putting the shell in and somebody closes it and somebody else actually fires it. So you have these men, each taking a turn doing something. We all learned all the positions, but I was taught to be a gun bunny. Here I am with a master’s degree in economics and I was taught to fire a cannon. The one thing I remember was how loud they were and, of course, we were not given any sound abatement equipment at all.

LC: Really?

LS: We had our two fingers, which, of course, if you were working the cannon you didn’t even have your two fingers to put in your ears. There was no keeping you from—I just remember my ears ringing all the time. It turned out, what the guy had said, my buddy had said in basic training turned out to be true. I thought it was a pretty good—
I though, “Well, if I’m gonna go to Vietnam at least I’m not gonna be a leg,” which is a foot soldier. “I’m not gonna be doing that.” Artillery’s always gonna be kind of in a, probably in a base somewhere and protected by people on the outside. So it’s probably a little safer no matter where I am. There was a chance that—there was still a chance all the way through AIT, and this was the constant talk of everyone. Oh, the other thing I want to say is when I got the AIT at least half of us in AIT had degrees. So I think the lower echelon, a lot of the lowest, lowest echelon went on to infantry or you know. We were just a little bit better going into artillery. I would say at least, if not, maybe even a majority of my particular group that I was in had degrees at AIT.

LC: Were you doing a lot of bookwork during the days? Were you out in the field, outside training?

LS: We did have to learn these rules and had to learn how to do stuff, but I always remember physically working with cannons. I just remember—there had to have been and there was also, they still did the calisthenics, but there wasn’t as much emphasis on that. I just remember spending a lot of time either firing the cannon or learning all the different things about how to keep the different, we could do that without actually—they had little firebases built out into the brush and we’d march out there and fire the cannons. A lot of the stuff we would learn to do, we could learn to do near the [base], the actual places, the barracks where we were learning our book learning. We’d go into these rooms and you’d learn how to keep everything clean and how to store the shells and all that. We could do that inside. So I remember doing a lot, just a lot of physical hands-on things. Learning how to do physical and just getting to the point where you just knew, you knew the drill, literally the drill. You knew somebody said this, somebody said this, and then toward the end I remember being timed. They wanted you to be able to do it within a certain—very efficiently with no mistakes, within a certain period of time. Then they would come and check to make sure you had really set your—you’d be graded. Did you really get the cannon set correctly? The person observing you would check off to make sure you really did swath the inside correctly and they’d actually handed the, in the correct way, the shell over and done everything exactly as it was just supposed to be so mechanical, you literally could do it in your sleep. It would also, I’m sure, they had devised it in a way that we had fewer injuries. So this was all—I just remember doing it
over and over and over and people being yelled at whenever they just missed some little
minute thing that they turned a shell when they were supposed to hold it absolutely
steady or whatever. All the time, you are not allowed to do those things.

LC: No variation.
LS: You just learned that there’s just one way to do it. That’s what I remember of
AIT.

LC: How long did it last?
LS: Ugh. Now that I don’t remember because I got my orders, it was during the
winter. It was cold. I’m sorry. It must’ve been about eight weeks.

LC: Do you remember leaving? Was there a ceremony, a graduation ceremony or
something?
LS: Yeah there was just a little thing where they say right before then—the real
ting thing I remember, I do remember our little ceremony where they did do a little thing
when you passed or whatever. I do remember the big thing was where you were getting
orders to go to next. As you’re going through AIT they just have them timed. There was
always a unit that was graduating one week before you and one that was gonna, there’s
like one week behind you, but you kinda knew some of these people. You kinda get at a
process where some of the time you would mix with some of these people. The people,
the men who were being trained that were one week ahead of our unit were all National
Guard people. I remember them taunting us constantly. “You’re going to Nam. We’re
not. You’re going to Nam. We’re not. You’re going to Nam. We’re not.” I remember
they got out the week before we did. The day that they were finally given their papers and
they were supposed to leave base and go be met by their relatives or get on a plane and
fly back home whenever they were getting ready to leave. A few of them deliberately
saw, they saw us out by our barracks outside and I remember one guy coming over and
saying, “We know where you’re going and you know where we’re going and we’re a lot
better off.” I mean, they really rubbed it in. So I have some feelings. I know we’re
supposed to respect everybody’s tour and I really do intellectually, but I have some
emotional feelings about the guys who did not go and knew that they had made this
choice deliberately because they didn’t want to go to Vietnam. It was a way to get out of
going to war. Now there’s no way to paper over that. I’m not trying to get away from the
way we should do the National Guard today, which was being used differently today than
it was then, but it was being used much differently then. It was a way to get out of the
war the people didn’t want to be involved in, but you didn’t have to go to Canada. You
didn’t have to burn your draft card. You were legitimized in doing it this way, [going into
the Guard]. You see what I’m saying?

LC: Absolutely.

LS: It was awful when they were holding it over our heads. I mean really, it
wasn’t just a casual remark here and there. This is not something that’s very subtle. This
was major harassment.

LC: And over and over.

LS: Over and over. Over and over. I remember that very distinctly. Then there
was always the hope. They were still sending people to Germany. They were still sending
people to Korea. So there’s always the hope. The unit that had gone two weeks before us
had gotten orders for Korea. So there was always this hope that maybe it wouldn’t be
Nam, but then I remember distinctly the day that the—what level would he have been? It
wasn’t our sergeant so it was the next one up. Lieutenant, probably, that came up to us
and said, “Men we’ve heard”—he said, “We don’t know where. You’ll see that in your
individual orders, but you’re all going to Vietnam.”

LC: Lynn, how did you feel when you heard that?

LS: Well, I was upset. I tried to be very poker faced about it the whole time. The
first thing that went through my mind though was not me. I didn’t know how I was gonna
tell this to Llona. I was married already and I knew how the family was gonna take this
and Llona particularly. I remember calling her and saying, “I don’t know exactly where
I’ll be, but I’m going to Nam.” She said, I just remember her saying, “Well, that’s what
we thought.” It was sort of just inevitable type of reaction.

LC: It was all expected on some level, but—

LS: Well, you have a hope that maybe not, but then—

LC: Then the hope kind of—

LS: It’s for sure now.

LC: Now did you get some time off between completion?
LS: Yes. We were given, if I remember, we were given two weeks, was it two
weeks or three weeks home before we had to go? I remember two weeks, but it could
have been as long as three weeks, home. Then we had to get on the plane. I had to fly to
San Francisco to be processed in San Francisco. That’s a very interesting story.
LC: Tell me.
LS: Okay. I flew out early. Ron and Mel, another one of my good friends at
Battenfeld, were both going to Stanford University in San Francisco, well, south of San
Francisco. They wanted me to come out early. I had never seen the ocean in my whole
life. They wanted to show me a little bit of California and they knew I was going to Nam,
but they wanted me to come out. So I remember going. That may be why I’m confused
about the three weeks or two weeks cause I did go out early, a few days early. Mel and
Ron were rooming together. So I stayed with them. They showed me all around San
Francisco. So I met some of their new friends at college there and everybody all gave—it
was really funny. It was almost like a pity party because they were all saying, “Oh, no
you’re not going to Vietnam,” da dah da dah, but then we didn’t care. I got to see the
ocean for the first time. We had a good time. They even took me out of the city a little bit
to the south and I got to see a little bit of the countryside. That was fun, but I was having
so much fun I did one thing that I have never probably ever done before that. I decided
that I wasn’t ready to show up yet. I stayed an extra day. I showed up exactly one day
after I was supposed to be processed. I called Llona and told her I was gonna do this. She
said, “Well, you know, who knows what they’ll do to you if you don’t show up.” I said,
“They can’t say they’re gonna send me to Vietnam ‘cause they’re gonna send me to
Vietnam.” That was always kind of the joke. “Well, they could always send you to
Vietnam.” I showed up exactly twenty-four hours late for—
LC: What happened?
LS: I just took this chance, but I just wanted one more—I don’t know. It was one
of those impulsive things. I wanted one more night. I showed up and they said, “Soldier,
you were supposed to be her yesterday.” I said, “Yes, sir, I know, but there was a big
snowstorm in Kansas.” Oh, I lied. “There was a big snowstorm in Kansas and my plane
was delayed. So I wasn’t able to get out ‘til today and that’s why I couldn’t make it.”
They said, “Well, soldier, we’re gonna have to dock you a day of your leave.” Well,
where was I gonna go anyway? What was I gonna use my leave for? And so I thought,
“Boy, I sure got off of that.”

LC: That was sweet.

LS: That was smooth. So all they did was dock me a day of leave.

LC: Wow, that’s actually incredible.

LS: I mean, I really did—and nothing else ever was ever said about that. They processed me. I remember not sleeping well that night getting ready for the flight the next day. I just remember not being able to sleep and worrying about it. I remember the flight over distinctly, like it would never end. I’d been on an airplane before, but never for that long.

LC: What was your route? Do you remember?

LS: We went up through Alaska. We went through Alaska. We landed in Alaska. We were there for about—we had to change planes. We were there on the ground for about two or three hours and then switched to a plane that flew to Japan. I saw Mount Fuji and I bought a couple of Japanese souvenirs ’cause I was so excited I was in Japan. I was on the ground in Japan. Then we flew on to Cam Ranh Bay and then I had to take—I don’t know why I was taken by—I don’t know why I didn’t fly into Phu Cat, but I came into Cam Ranh Bay. Then they—it wasn’t really a bus. They took me by jeep up to Phu Cat. That really bothered me because I got there and they said, “You’ve got to get to your unit,” and they showed me where I was supposed to be at, but the headquarters battery for 13th Artillery and it was right at the side of the base of Phu Cat Air Force base, the United States Air Force base. They said, “You’ve just got to find out if any of these people out here are going up there.” I thought, “Is this the way you run this war? You kind of figure out your own way to get to your next assignment?” But there were some guys. They were sitting out there and I asked a couple of them and they said, “They over there, I think they’re going to Phu Cat.” They were making the connection that they were doing a run. I guess the bases did different runs, so they drove me out to Phu Cat. I got to the headquarters.

LC: You were kind of completely on your own in between—

LS: Yeah. It was just the weirdest thing. I remember being in Vietnam and being processed. They process you in with certain paperwork and stuff. They have told me I
was supposed to go to this, I was assigned to that artillery unit. Then I was just supposed
to find—I don’t know why. It’s just the weirdest thing that you just kind of found your
own way up there. I had so much time that I was supposed to be—I didn’t have to be
there until tomorrow they said, but I was probably—what was I gonna do? I’m on a base.
I got up there and then they didn’t know what to do with me. I got up there and they said,
“Well, we weren’t supposed to get a bunch”—see, I think now looking back on it, it’s
‘cause I was this day off, see. They thought—they said, “Well, we don’t get another
group until next week.” So they didn’t really know where to assign me. So when I first
got to headquarters based at Phu Cat Air Force base for the first week I didn’t do
anything. They didn’t have anything for me to do. Oh, they assigned me some duties that
we were cleaning the latrines. There were about four of us that came in and they didn’t
have firebases for us to go to yet so they just assigned us duties around there and it was
really just piddly duties. It was boring because—

LC: Just like general—

LS: It was just clean up stuff and you’d get done in a half and hour or so and then
there was nothing to do. I really didn’t care for it because it was very boring, but I
thought, “Boy this is sure a strange way to run a war.” Everybody was just so casual
about it. I thought, well, it’s so different than what my experience in the Army so far had
been so structured and every minute was orders laid out for you. Then all of a sudden I
get there and everything is just so laid back. It was just so different.

LC: Did you have a feeling that your imminent duties would be sort of structure-
less in that same way? Did you kind of get the feeling, “Well, this is how it is to be in
Vietnam”?

LS: No. My first reaction was I just thought that they didn’t know what to do
with me and I said, “Surely when I get to a firebase it’ll be a lot more structured and
there’ll be a lot more things to do.” It turns out that was true, although it was much
different than being in basic and AIT because after about a week—the week turned into
almost two weeks and they finally said, “We want you up at this C Battery,” because I
ended up being B Battery later, but C Battery. I was up there north of Qui Nhon and they
took me up there by jeep. It wasn’t that far, but I just remember the roads were just not
very well kept up. You felt like you were in the wild. I kept wondering about what
happens if somebody shoots at me ‘cause I was just sitting in the back of this jeep and it
was warm weather and they had the top down. I thought somebody could just pick me
off.

LC: So you had those ideas as you were—?

LS: I did think about that. I didn’t think about it on the bases. I felt like I was
protected on the bases, but we were out in the country. I’d seen all these pictures and I
was thinking, “Well, you know, you could die here.” Then we got to the C Battery and
they have been in this position, wherever this was. It was right up against the Central
Highlands. The mountains were to our west and to our east there was another bunch of
foothills. We knew over the foothills was the sea, but we couldn’t see the sea from there.

We were kind of up in the foothills. This unit had been in this position for a long time. It
was a firebase, but they had a Medevac unit there with a helicopter that took off. We
were surrounded by two or three different divisions of infantry around. They would come
and go. They would have to go out on missions. So occasionally what they would do was
when they assigned us guard duty, we would guard on the side where maybe an infantry
was low on numbers or were out on a—we would be given that quadrant. When we were
on night duty, we had to be guard on that perimeter ‘cause they were out on duty. They
were gone that time. Well, when they were back we might be assigned on another side of
the camp, but we were mostly—you felt safer there because we were surrounded by
infantry. So we were on the inside of the circle that was surrounded on the periphery by
infantry. We had them on the outside so you felt more safe. We were in the center. I got
there and the first thing the man said to me was, “Well, your records show that you have
a degree.” I said, “Yes, sir. I have a degree. I was working on my PhD in economics and
I’ve had a lot of mathematics.” He said, “We don’t want you on a weapon.” I said, “What
do you mean by that?” He said, “Well, we really need somebody in the fire direction
control room.” That hadn’t been my AIT. I hadn’t been trained anything about the radio
or how to do charts or anything. He said, “Have you ever worked a computer?” I said,
“We have great big ones”—‘cause this is a long time ago. “We have great big computers
at the university,” but I said, “I’ve helped with enrollment and I’ve helped do the cards
through the computer. I know a little bit about how the machine runs.” He said, “We
have,”—they had the very beginnings of what would be called today a portable computer.
They were these green boxes that did basic computing. What it did, it did just
calculations for what you could also do on the map for how you were to set the cannon to
shoot in a certain direction at a certain distance. So he said, “Well, you probably could
really help us out. We’ll train you here,” is what he said. So the next thing he said,
“Tonight we’ll start you”—they had twelve-hour shifts and we switched every two
weeks. For two weeks you’d have a day twelve-hour shift and then you’d switch over and
then you’d have two weeks of a night twelve-hour shift. You worked twelve hours a day,
twelve hours off and you’d switch back and forth these days and nights. It was really a
cushy job and it was also safer because not only was I in the center of this circle, but I
was in the center of the center of the circle because that’s where fire direction control was
and it was in a bunker completely covered by sandbags. You couldn’t even see it was a
building from the outside. It just looked like a pile of sandbags, but it’s all kind of
underground and that’s where all the brains of the operation is all down in there. So that’s
where I was. So I thought, “Well, you know, this is not gonna be so bad,” except that
starting with the very first night we get mortar shells coming in and you know every
single night, sometime in the night, we got mortared. They always came from a direction
that we called a no-fire zone. There was a direction to our, it would be to our south,
where we were not allowed to fire in that direction ‘cause there was a village there.
Invariably the mortars would come from that direction. So we could not fire back. Now
occasionally it came from other directions and we would rev up the cannons and fire in
that direction where they were coming from, but mostly these night things. It got to be a
joke at the—probably had been for quite some time before even I was there, that some
farmers daughter had gotten pregnant by a GI and so he was mad and was cranking up
the old mortar machine.

LC: What was it like to have that kind of random assault weapon being used
against the firebase every night? I mean, can you describe?

LS: It was nerve wracking. When I told this to my dad much later, that can be
another story, and when he traded his stories about World War II when he was—we
didn’t do this until he was dying of cancer. He said his experience was so different
because they would plan an attack for like a week and then they would attack in World
War II. They’d do this line attack and try to push the line back. He didn’t experience this
constant—as a matter of fact, he said most of his tour was really dull that day after day
they did nothing, literally nothing ‘cause they didn’t even have stuff to take care of ‘cause
they were sleeping out in tents anyway. There wasn’t the buildings to take care of and
clean out to all this. That was one thing that was really different in our experience was
that there’s something psychological about knowing that sometime during the night—
also it was disturbing when you were trying to—if I were on the day shift it seemed to be
more, you got more normal sleep when you’re on the day shift and sleep at your normal
time at night, when your body normally wants to sleep, but of course sometime in our
night we usually revved up the cannons and the cannons would go off. So you woke up.
You never really got used to it because the cannons were so close and they were so loud.
You felt the concussion in your barracks. You could feel the concussion of those cannons
going off. You’re always kind of in this disturbed state. The only time I was really scared
was, and it was right before I came home for Grandma’s funeral, we had one week that,
for some reason, it was hell. We got fired on. That would’ve been at the very end of
August of 1969. There was some sort of an assault going on. I’d probably have to read a
history book to know exactly. We were never told, but for some reason we had about a
week where we had stuff going on almost all night long, every night. I was on night shift
that week. We had a generator that’s just outside the front. There was a door to the fire
direction control. To our south there was a little, it looked like a little hut with sandbags
around it and that’s where our generator was. I don’t know whether it was the
concussions of the mortars—and the mortars were actually coming in to where they were
hitting—they were getting enough lift on them they were coming into our part. Usually
they were hitting out in the infantry part, but they were coming into the central part of the
compound. It was really dangerous out there. Our generator, we were having trouble with
our generator. We had to take turns. If the generator went off, one of us would have to
crawl out there with the bombs bursting in air and crawl out there on our bellies to stay
down because we were also getting rifle fire coming through. We were supposed to crawl
out, this is the way we were trained to do it, and then go out there and restart this
generator. We had to restart up this generator and find out if there was a bubble in the
line for fuel or whatever it was. I had to do that, I think, a couple of times two nights in a
row. I was really just all messed up. I remember Llona and I had those little tape
recorders. We had bought them. They were from Japan. I had ordered one for her and had
it shipped to her and then I had one. We could send—this was before cassettes, but they
were miniature reel-to-reel. We would do these electronic letters back and forth. I
remember I made one for her and I made one during one of the attacks. That was after,
though, so that would’ve been right before Grandma died. The next week when I was on
night shift and the attacks were going on and I was telling her this is really shaking me up
‘cause I was on night shift so I wasn’t having to be the one, I mean I was on day shift that
week so I was in my bunker, in the sleeping barracks, but I was recording to her and I
said, “This really shakes me up ‘cause,” I said, “I know there are guys probably having to
crawl out there right now and I’m sure I can see some of our buddies hurt,” and da dah da
dah da dah. I beat that tape home. When I came home for Grandma’s funeral, when I got
there I actually—this all happened right before Grandma—I mailed it right before
Grandma died and then I beat it home. I remember taking that tape and I remember
telling Llona I don’t want you to listen to this tape ‘cause I was kinda—I wasn’t crying,
but I just didn’t want her to hear it ‘cause I thought, well, I said, “I’m sorry I did that
‘cause I shouldn’t have done that,” ‘cause it was gonna worry her and she knew I was
gonna go back. So I thought that really wasn’t very wise. So what I did was I took it. I
said, “You don’t want to hear this.” She said, “Well, why?” I said, “I’ll just tell you.”
What I did was I said, “I’ll tell you now and we’ll just record over this one.”

LC: Is that what happened?

LS: Yeah.

LC: Did you record over it?

LS: I made sure that she didn’t hear it ‘cause I decided that she wouldn’t want to
hear that.

LC: Did anyone get hurt during that week that was so difficult?

LS: Yeah, but they were almost all infantry. That was another thing. This only
happened during that period. They called us over to help them. I remember they were
flying in helicopters and they were bringing in more stretchers. They had run out of
medical material and those of us who were on night shift that were free during the day
when the helicopter was coming in, they called us over just to help unload the stuff over
at the medical unit. That was the only time I was actually around casualties. I saw some
of the guys. They were pretty messed up and getting ready. A helicopter would bring in
material. Then if some guys were really bad off they would take them, they would
medevac them back to a bigger hospital.
LC: How big was the medical facility there?
LS: It really looked like one of those MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital)
things.
LC: Really? Tents?
LS: Yeah, except they had one where they had—if they had to do any emergency
surgery or something, they had one building that was—we called them hooches. That was
a word we used. They had one that was a permanent hooch. That’s where they actually
did real medical stuff. They also just had tents out there. I think some of them—I may be
wrong on that, but it looked to me like they wanted to keep it mobile for some reason.
Maybe they took some of the people along with them when they went out on forays. I
don’t know.
LC: How big was this base? Can you give a sense?
LS: Oh, man. I can’t even think of how—
LC: How many people?
LS: Its acres.
LC: Really? Okay.
LS: Yeah. It was a large base.
LC: What was the name of it?
LS: Because you had—we had the center area that had the latrines and had all of
our barracks and had the fire direction control and special barracks for, of course, the
officers and all them. They were by themselves. They had nicer facilities. They had been
there long enough they had built these. They were wood and then sandbags and all this.
So you had all that in the center and then around that you had the actual cannons. You
had the cannons, the firebase itself and then beyond that you had the infantry and it was
really interesting. The way they had built our area, we were kind of down on a little bowl,
the center part. Then you actually had the—so you could actually see the infantry ‘cause
they were kind of, just a little bit of a ridge above us. So they were above the rooftop or
the tent line of everything around us. So you could see whether the infantry was there or
not ‘cause they threw up tents. Then if they were gone there would be fewer tents over
there. So you could tell whether they were there or not. It covered acres. I’m real bad
about counting that off, but I would say maybe three-square blocks, not square blocks,
but three blocks, one street thick would probably be about it. It was pretty good sized.

LC: Did it have a name?

LS: Yeah. That’s what I can’t remember.

LC: Really?

LS: I was just talking, just talking earlier today to Steve that—

LC: We can look it up.

LS: I remember we were south of Landing Zone English cause I flew up there a
couple times in a helicopter. That’s where some of my slides come from. I’ve got some
great slides of the Central Highlands in that area from the air. There were a couple times
in the daytime if you were free and they needed an extra guy on the copter they’d let you
fly up. We’d fly up and we would bring back goodies. We’d bring back the films for the
week. They would show films. We had a tent for showing movies. We’d bring back the
films and we’d have to go up to Landing Zone English, which is even a bigger place, this
landing zone. So it was a bigger, bigger field. That was a big deal to be able to go up to
Landing—that was north of us. To the west of us was [where] Phu Cat Air Force Base
was. It was to the west of us and to the south of us was Qui Nhon City, which is where I
ended up after Grandma’s funeral. It was a fairly—it was just called a firebase, though. It
was an FB so it was a firebase, but I don’t know. I’m sorry.

LC: That’s okay. I’m sure we could find out. We could look it up.

LS: I knew I was gonna—I tell you why I knew why—I knew I was gonna have
trouble. I spent the first ten years after coming back from Vietnam trying to forget
everything about Vietnam. I did a pretty good job on some issues, but I tell ya’ there’s
some things I will never forget.

LC: Well, were there particular incidents that you do recall about that time, this is
before you went back to the States for the funeral? Were there things that you remember
that we should include in the record?

LS: Yeah. Let’s see. I’m trying to think. Well, I really liked the work. It was real
interesting because they would have us—it ended up, what they needed me most for was
they liked me to chart—I didn’t actually use this little green computer we had. They had a man who had been trained already and he did that all—they had obviously more than one because they had the two shifts, but they had men that covered that. What they wanted me to do was, they would have the computer compute. A forward observer would call in and say “We’ve got fire.” They would give us the grids. I would put it on the map, but the guy would put it in the computer, too. Then he would run numbers through the computer on how we would set the cannons to hit that particular grid, okay, and give us the information. I was always doing it by hand. I was doing the charting on the chart and doing it the old-fashioned way, doing the formulas and all that to see how we should set the settings for the cannon. Then we would compare them to see if they were the same ‘cause they didn’t really trust the computer, but they liked the computer, but if it verified it, it was one more verification that we had it right. Then, of course, from then they would fire. If [the cannon fire] was short or long or to the left or right then we would adjust it again and we’d try another shot and we’d shoot and all this. It was always a process. So when we were actually firing we were very, very busy, but they would circulate me off of the chart over to the radio. Sometimes there was always two and sometimes three of us on each shift that knew how to do the charting. We would take turns. So we didn’t chart all the time. Some of the times we ran on the radio. I remember one of my impressions was that they would call in. I would take reports in about like body count and things like that. They would call these things in and I was keeping all [on] this list. I remember at the time that they would say, well, and we would ask questions. We were supposed to put down whether we thought the body was civilian or whether it was military or VC (Viet Cong) or what it was. We were [tracking it]. I remember time after time they’d just say, “Oh, just put it down as a kill. Just put it down as a kill.” It was just so interesting because I thought, “Well, these are probably not very accurate figures,” because we would just kind of lump them all together and some of them probably did include innocent bystanders and other people than combatants. Those are things I can remember. I can remember very clearly how it looked. I can remember that when we did have some time off, if we were off in the day shift, there was a ladder that went up to the roof of our barracks, the barracks, the sleeping area. We would sunbathe up there. We’d read up there. We’d listen to music. We couldn’t play it too loud. We were all conscious on
sound. We’d play basketball. Occasionally there’d be a little basketball game going. We
did a few, but we rarely got to leave the base. The only times I got to leave the base, there
were two different times that I got to fly up with the helicopter. One time they went up to
the LZ (Landing Zone) English to get the film and the other day we were picking up
some guys who had gotten some in-country leave. There was a beach just toward the sea
from where we were. There was a beach that was set off for American GIs on the coast. I
didn’t get to stay there for my—these guys had gotten like a day off and got to stay there
overnight. It was real nice and I’ve got in my slides are pictures of this. They had little
huts where you could sit and trash barrels. You had a picnic [area by] a trash barrel. It
looked like a regular beach. It was really very nice, beautiful sand, but it was all cordoned
off and it was only for GIs.

LC: Were those infantry?
LS: I just got to see it. I didn’t get to do anything ‘cause I had to go back up in
the plane. I remember we were picking—the only reason why we went there, we were
picking some guys that were gonna come back and they let me ride ‘cause there was
gonna be room for somebody and I told them I wanted to take some pictures. So I took
some pictures there.

LC: Were those infantrymen who had been—
LS: Those were mostly infantrymen.
LC: Who had been given a break?
LS: Given a break, yeah. See, we never got that kind of break. This happened
later and we’ll get to that later. At the other base occasionally we got the day to take a
short trip to somewhere down to Qui Nhon, to the city of Qui Nhon, and we’ll get to that
later. We didn’t really have breaks. It was twelve hours on and twelve hours off all
around the clock.

LC: Describe the inside of the FDC (fire direction center) if you can.
LS: Okay. I had a clandestine picture of that.
LS: I wasn’t supposed to take a picture, but one night everybody was kind of, it
was a real quiet night. It was early morning hours and I took a non-flash picture. So
there’s one picture. There’s one slide picture I have of the inside. It was an office room
probably about twenty feet by ten feet. On the wall that faced, that was on the same wall as the door, there were radios. Where you came in the door was, because there was more room there, because on the other end they had the computer and everything else, was the big chart where we did the charting. Then on the opposite wall from the chart and the door was another, a couple of other radios and the computer where the guy would do the computations along with the charting to double check it. Then there was a table between the ones that are, the couple of radios and the other radio in the center of the room where the lieutenant would sit. We always had a lieutenant on duty, either shift. He would make sure that everything was running well. He would sit at that table and do some paperwork and monitor what was going on if there was some action.

LC: When there was action, can you describe the mood when you got a call?

LS: Very professional. We were all very serious, very professional. I didn’t mind working with the men that I worked with because we all knew exactly what to do. I felt like we did a very good job. I never felt like we did anything that was—we were always very careful. Of course, we were supposedly, when you got to the charts—I did a lot of charting. It was very important ‘cause the computer couldn’t see this. We would put on the chart where we thought the infantry people were and we would try to keep that up to date constantly hour by hour. That’s where this radio contact was very important. So we would keep charting and recharting and recharting and recharting where they were. So we were firing. We want to make sure we’re not gonna—to me it was almost the kind of pressure you would have, you would feel like if you were a doctor or a nurse. Somebody’s life is on the line here if you don’t shoot that shell well in the right direction. We were very professional about it, very methodical.

LC: You guys were aware, you were aware of the presence of friendly troops and the potential for an accident?

LS: Of course, and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), the South Vietnamese and Korean—we had Korean soldiers out, too. In that particular area we had Korean soldiers around. So we had those all—to me I was personally very aware of the fact that we had men’s lives on the line here and it was one thing for them to run into some problems with the enemy, but we weren’t gonna add to their problems with artillery. Artillery was supposed to be so much more accurate than aerial bombing. So we
wanted to keep that reputation up, too, that we were really supporting these guys. What
got through my mind was this philosophical tit-for-tat because they were protecting me
out there because they were out there on the perimeter doing guard duty all the time and I
was protecting them to make sure they weren’t gonna get killed by friendly fire. It was
very professional. I remember that, very professional. I do not think we did a sloppy job
whether or not the war was right or wrong or what we did there was right or wrong. In the
big picture it had nothing to do with how I think we administered what we were supposed
to do.

LC: How long did it take you, Lynn, to get to the point where you were operating
in the moment when there was action on and you had to perform? How long was your
training up period?

LS: I would say within the first two or three—they made sure when I first got
there and, of course, I hadn’t had AIT in this, they made sure someone was on with me
all the time for the first two full weeks. I remember about the third week I finally got one
night when I was on by myself. I was very aware that I just had a lot of information I had
to keep in my head when the action started. I think it wasn’t until the second or third
night that I actually had to do—we had done one firing the first night I was there, but it
was just they thought they saw something and it wasn’t anywhere near where our troops
were. It was more like four mortars were coming from. So we weren’t in any danger. I
felt more comfortable then ‘cause we weren’t in any danger of doing friendly fire or
anything like that, but about the third night we really got—there was a firefight going on.
We were supposed to give support. Well, that’s a lot more tricky and we were relying on
this forward observer calling in the thing. I remember, I just remember just, I’m new at
this. Am I doing this right? Double-checking myself, but I would say within a month that
was becoming really second nature. I felt confident with myself and I felt like I just knew
what to do. It was almost like you were on autopilot. It’s not in your mind that, “Oh, my
gosh, what am I doing”—you think you are doing the right thing. If there were mistakes
made it might be that the—any machine might not quite do exactly what it’s supposed to
do, but it was hard for us to figure out the weather. If the wind was blowing or something
it might throw something off a little bit. Those are chances you just take, but as far as
feeling like we were doing everything we could possibly do with the technology we had, I was getting very comfortable.

LC: What about the technology issue being one thing, what about the restrictions on firing? For example you mentioned this no fire zone.

LS: Oh, yeah no-fire zones.

LC: Yeah. What was the background to that?

LS: We were very bitter about that because when you’re constantly getting hit from that—people would always say, “Well, we know the village isn’t”—I mean we could see it on the map. It was there on the map and we’d say, “Well, we know the village is only there. Why can’t we at least fire here, [an area away from the village, like in a field near the village]?” It was probably out in a field anyway. They probably weren’t literally shooting from their rooftops. They’re probably out in a field somewhere. Why couldn’t we at least—there was just this argument—now the only thing I heard, I never heard much above the lieutenant level, but I would even hear a lieutenant say, “We don’t understand why we cannot do this, but we’re told we cannot do this. So it’s the Army and this is the system. You don’t question, you just do it.” It seemed odd to me that we had to put up with this night after night after night. There was bitterness about that.

So, yeah, I did feel that.

LC: Let’s take a break.

LS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with U.S. Army veteran Lynn Steele. Today’s date is the twenty-eighth of April 2004. Both Lynn and I are here in the Special Collections building’s interview room on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock. Although Lynn lives in Kansas City, Kansas, he’s visiting us today. Hi, Lynn.

Lynn Steele: Hi.

LC: There were a couple of things from yesterday, the time period that we were discussing that you wanted to include today.

LS: Well, I just wanted to make a comment about things we did as recreation that I just happened to remember that we didn’t cover. We did have movies and mainstream movies that were shown in a tent area. Well, if it was good weather we didn’t even have a tent over us. It was just an outdoor theater area just north of where our bunkers, our barracks were. We saw some fairly mainstream, they were fairly recent releases that they would show. What that reminded me of, adding that, was that our master sergeant who—there was always a second lieutenant and a master sergeant who was in fire direction control while we were doing our work. The master sergeant at that battery in my unit had a fondness to the blue films. I don’t know how he got it. We never knew how, but occasionally he would get a hold of a good pornographic film. This would not be shown to the battery in general. He would show it only in fire direction control for our edification. The first couple of times I was either not [on that duty period]—I was on duty doing something else, I couldn’t watch them. So they finally convinced me that I should come in and watch the blue film. I had the funniest reaction to that. You gotta remember I was already married, but I just thought it was the oddest thing to sit in that room and watch a pornographic film and then you get aroused and there’s not a woman within miles. I’m just thinking, “What is this?” This is some sort of a painful thing to have to go through. To me it just wasn’t logical so I discontinued going to blue films.

LC: How often did that happen?
LS: Oh, maybe about once a month. It wasn’t very often. It was supposed to be a big, big treat that he was treating the troops, but for me I just decided that I would just pass.

LC: Just pass. In the other films that you saw, do you remember any of those titles?

LS: I don’t remember. I do remember having that at one point we got *The Graduate*. It was a fairly new release and we got *The Graduate*. Since we had, we kept the camera in the fire direction control building when it wasn’t being used for the general, we would watch it if we had—the night shift, if we did have a firefight and we had to rev up the cannons to help some of the troops cover what they were doing or firing back to the enemy fire, it would usually happen in the early, by midnight. By the time you got to two or three in the morning on the shift, not very much ever happened. It did occasionally, but very rarely. So when we would gear down and not be doing much, we had the camera so we would go ahead and watch it. I remember memorizing the dialogue to the movie *The Graduate* because we watched it so many times because we had no TV. We had radio, as I told you before. We had radio, but we didn’t have any television. The other thing I remember because of that was that the day that Armstrong walked on the moon I was on night shift that night and I have in my slides. There’s one picture that I call it the joke picture because I went out and took a picture of the moon when Armstrong was walking. Now when you see the slide it’s this black slide with this little white dot in the middle, but I have to tell people that is the moon and Armstrong was walking at that very moment.

LC: If you really blow it up really good.

LS: Really big, but the slide, it’s real little. As a matter of fact, when I sent it home, Llona wrote to me later that she had thrown the slide away. She said it was ruined. She had gone through my slides and I told her, “Please retrieve that because that’s my moon picture.” So that was kind of a joke. The other thing I wanted to remember that I started a process while I was first in Vietnam. We had free franking privileges anywhere in the world. So I wrote very often. Llona and I recorded back and forth on tape machines, but I also wrote to her and I also wrote to especially Grandma and to other family members. We have good friends that live in France and I don’t even know where I
kyped it from, but I found a French-English dictionary. So I would sit down and my French wasn’t good enough to remember everything I wanted to say. So I would compose letters to them and write them. To this day, we were just in Paris this spring for spring break. They talked about how they really enjoyed getting those letters from Vietnam when I was in Vietnam. Those were two things I just happened to remember.

LC: The friends of yours in France, did they have an opinion about the war?

LS: If they did they didn’t share it with me at the time. Later they thought it was really—they didn’t think it was going to work out. They, of course, they had failed and they thought that we didn’t really have much of a chance there. That’s all they’ve ever mentioned ever about it. They’ve been very interested in some of the things I’ve said about Vietnam and my experience, but they never gave much of a political opinion about it.

LC: That’s interesting. That’s interesting. Do you think it’s because they don’t have an opinion or they’re being very diplomatic?

LS: No. I just think Vietnam was a bad situation for them, too. They really thought that we were gonna have the same experience and it turned out it was different, but the end result was the same. You know? In the end they were afraid that this is what was gonna happen and it happened.

LC: Those are both good stories. Do you remember the day? Do you remember that night hearing the news about the moon landing?

LS: Yes. I was listening to the radio broadcast and I remember that very clearly. Of course, I had to wait until later to see taped film when I came home to see all the stuff that everyone else in America was seeing on television at the time, but it was very exciting, a very exciting time. Here we were in this very sad, horrible situation and to me it was kind of almost a little bit of a glimmer of hope. Mankind is still doing these glorious things even though we’re still at war here on Earth. I thought—

LC: Did it make your proud of the United States?

LS: Yeah. Of course, I was very proud of the country. This was something that Kennedy had hoped that we would get it done by the end of the decade and we had done it. You’re very proud of that.
LC: Lynn, your time with C Battery came to an end, although you didn’t actually
know that at the time that it happened.

LS: That’s right. It was quite a shock. I’ve gotta tell you this story. I don’t tell it
to everybody, but I want to have it in recording. Two nights before I got the news about
Grandma I had had a dream. Somebody had come in the room at fire direction, I was on
duty in fire direction control and they said, “Someone in your family has died.” I said,
“Who was it?” I woke up from this dream. Two nights later I was on duty and a person I
did not know, he may have been from Headquarters Battery or something, walked in the
room and said, “We have news for a specialist Lynn Steele. Is he here?” I turned around
and I said, “Yes.” He said, “Your grandmother has died.” I said, “Which one?” He said
“Your Grandma Kear.” Well, it was a real shock. Grandma was only [sixty-three] and she
had died of a massive heart attack getting ready for work that morning and had died
before they got her to the hospital. In that sense, looking back on it it’s easier for me to
take ‘cause she didn’t suffer in any way whatsoever, but she was young to be dying of a
massive heart attack. He said, “You’ll be hearing from headquarters by tomorrow
morning.” This was in the—I was working an evening and night shift. This was early in
the evening. So the next morning I was called into the office there in our battery and I
was told that normally soldiers were not allowed to go home for anything except a parent
or sibling’s or a child’s—if they have a child—death. It had to be an immediate
connection. They said they had received a letter from a lawyer, an attorney in
representing the family explaining that this grandmother had been the one that you had
lived with and had actually been your parent de facto. The family was pleading for you to
be able to come home. They had granted it. So I was whisked off. I didn’t have hardly
any time at all to get my stuff together and I was whisked down to Headquarters Battery
and told that I would be shipping out. It was the next day. I had spent one night there. I
flew out the next day from Cam Ranh Bay. It was really a shock when I saw the piece of
paper because they gave me a month to go home. This was not counted against my leave
time. This was still counting. The clock was still counting on my tour of duty time. So it
was just like getting this free time right in the middle of my tour of duty to go home and
take care of this. It wasn’t counting against me in any way whatsoever.

LC: That’s really incredible.
LS: It was incredibly generous, I thought. I thought at the time, I thought this is absolutely generous. I would never have expected this. I was treated very well on the way back. People knew. It was sort of like people knew in the process. They must’ve had all my paperwork going home. They called it—it was a certain kind of leave it was called and I wish I could remember the name, but anyway it was all on my papers, [compassionate leave]. Everyone was very sympathetic that I was going home for this reason. On the way home on the plane, though, I got my first real shock about Vietnam. My tour of duty up to that time except for that one period when we were under heavy attack and I had to crawl out to the generators, had really gone very smoothly. I hadn’t had anything bad happen to me or I just felt like maybe I’d been lucky, but nothing terrible had happened at our battery except the fact that we were firing all the time. It just was not that awful, but on the way back on the plane, the soldier I was sitting next to was a leg, infantry person. He was all excited about showing me some pictures of some Vietnamese they had captured. So I said, well, whatever. We were just talking and he was on his way home because his family had had their house wiped out in Hurricane Camille, as it happened about the same period. Anyone who knows anything about weather history, it was a major hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast and he was from Mississippi. Their house was ruined. He was going—as a matter of fact, they were letting him out. He was gonna have to report to a—but they weren’t gonna send him back to Vietnam. His family, he had gotten a leave where they needed to have him home to help the family rebuild all this. Anyway, he was all excited about showing me these pictures. So he got out these pictures and he had pictures of bodies being—they were tied on to the back of jeep and being dragged along the ground. I thought, “Oh, my goodness.” At first I didn’t even realize what I was looking at. I said, “Well, what is this?” I thought maybe they were doing a prank and they had like a, it was an effigy or something. He said, “Oh, no. That’s what we do to the Cong after we kill them.” I said, “These are people?” He said, “Yeah.” I mean it took a minute for me to even comprehend what I was looking at. He had pictures of—the one that really, I just asked him to put it away. He had a picture of a head, a severed head, and I just said, “What is this?” He said, “Well, this is what we’ve done.” He was just really all animated about this and I just didn’t understand this. Of course, since then I’ve read stories about stuff like that happening, but I had no—it was
just so alien to me. This is nothing I was exposed to where I was or I’d even heard about
thorough the grapevine. Sometimes you’d hear about atrocities, maybe. Nothing like this.
I was just in total shock. Actually, I guess [in a] way, it was kind of a coping mechanism,
I thought, “Oh, he had to have been trying to trick me.” I just remember in my mind
thinking, “Oh, he’s just trying to trick me. He’s just over the top.” He was all animated
anyway. Of course, he was going home and his family was probably in dire straits and he
was all messed up because of the switchover from wartime to going home and all this. I
just thought it was all part of it. I thought he was pulling a prank on me actually. Now
looking back on it, it might’ve been real. I’m not gonna say it was real. This is second
third hand here, but, boy, it has haunted me since. The only person I’ve ever told about
that, I’ve told my wife that I saw those pictures. I told Llona that, but I’ve never told
anybody else. It’s always kind of stuck in the back of my mind wondering what that
really was that I saw, but I did see the pictures. I saw pictures. I kept thinking, “I wonder
if he went home and showed those to his family?” They would have been terribly
shocked by that.

LC:  Oh, yeah. I mean you were.
LS:  I was. It was a coping mechanism for me to just assume it was a prank or this
really wasn’t what was going on.
LC:  Did he show them to anyone else on the flight?
LS:  No. He was sitting right next to me and he had the window seat. I don’t
remember our passing them on to anybody else in the plane.
LC:  What was his manner? You said he was quite excited, but—
LS:  He thought it was kind of a like a trophy. It’d be like somebody showing you
something they were really proud of. They had shot a deer or caught a big fish or
something. His manner was like showing it off. That’s why I was thinking, “Oh, he’s just
passing it off.” It was just an experience that was just over the top for me so I just

LC:  But it’s very disturbing?
LS:  Oh, it was disturbing. I remember having some dreams later where I
remembered what I’d seen in those pictures and when I woke up, “Oh, it’s just a dream.”
Anyway, looking back on it though I’ve read things since where some atrocities occurred
LC: I’m glad that you did mention it.

LS: Anyway, I wanted to mention that, but of course getting home Llona met me at the plane in Kansas City. I flew into Kansas City. By this time Llona had finished her master’s degree at KU and accepted a job in Salina, Kansas. Salina’s right in the middle of the state. One reason why I had told her to look further from Kansas City was one of our goals in our married life was that we were gonna get further away from my family so I would not be doing this going at home and solving problems.

LC: Lynn, was that something that you were pushing or was she kind of—?

LS: She was in that, too. When Llona and I got married, Llona’s definitely the love of my life. I fell head over heels, but I did explain to her before I even proposed to her that you’ve gotta understand I’m a person that has connections that I can’t get out of. I said, “I have a family, that is they’re very needy and it’s not going to change.” I said, “Some of the reactions I have to family might change as I get older and I start my own family, but I’m probably always gonna have this burden in one way or another. There’s gonna be some obligations here and you’ve gotta understand if they really need me my heart is there.” I disagree with the way Grandma handled the family sometimes and especially the way she treated Debbie, my sister Debbie, but that she had given us a home when we hadn’t gotten split up by child services when Mom was in the hospital and that sort of thing. She had provided for us and she loved me dearly. She loved males better than females anyway just in general, but she loved me dearly. I was obligated to my siblings that if there was any need for me to intervene I was going to have to do that. She had to understand that this is what she was getting into ‘cause she’d be involved in it, too. She did understand. Her family’s situation was much more stable, but she understood upfront. On the other hand, she thought that if we were just a little further away where we could still have quite a bit of contact with the family, but we wouldn’t do immediate intervention type of things that maybe we would have a happier life together. I agreed with that. She got this job offer in Salina to start teaching French there. So she took the job. She had just started the school year when Grandma died. Grandma died about the eighth of September and I flew home on the tenth. Llona had just started the school year.
Here she is a brand new teacher, first year teaching, and having to drop everything and go to Kansas City and do the funeral. But she met me at the plane. We went home. I was just so pleased to see her and the family and everything. I was just so glad to be home, but when we went to the visitation, which was the next night after I came home, we had one night together and then the next night was the visitation night. When people started coming to the funeral home to view Grandma’s casket, I fell apart. I was just not like that. I’m not saying I’ve never cried in my life and Llona had seen me cry a couple times before just by ourselves, when we were by ourselves. I’m not one to be very emotional in public, but people started coming and I just couldn’t hold back the tears. I was really, at one point, I was really just sobbing. I didn’t know where it was coming from. It was just the weirdest thing. It was just sort of like this emotion and it was beyond grief about Grandma being gone. It was just all these emotions were inside and I couldn’t even put my thumb on what they were and where they were coming from. It really bothered me. Llona calmed me down later and I kind of get back to my senses. I acted more my normal stiff upper-lip self. Then the actual funeral the next day and going to the gravesite to bury her was much better. I was much more in control and much more dignified. It really bothered me that night. I was always wondering what people thought of me that night because it just wasn’t like me. We got through the funeral. I love Grandma dearly even though there were times whenever she really made me mad, but I knew she loved me and I loved her.

LC: Sure, of course. Let’s take a break for a minute. Okay. Go ahead, Lynn.

LS: Llona and I could not stay in the city long. She had to get back to her class, which was probably a good excuse. I was trying to help Mom with some paperwork. Mom now with—my only worry was that Mom was now gonna be taking care of the remainder of the kids at home. She was in a good period, but I wasn’t sure she was gonna be able to handle it. I just cut that out of my mind. We went back home. I remember at the dinner we had after we buried Grandma at the cemetery and we had the traditional lunch at the church. There were a couple people who wanted to ask me about how it was in Vietnam. I was really very open about it. It was going okay and everything. They would make comments like, “Well, we hear over here it’s not going very well and you guys aren’t doing a very good job,” or that sort of thing. At least that was the gist of what
they were saying. They were saying things like, “Well, we hear people go on a week’s
R&R (rest and recuperation). When we fought our war we didn’t have a week R&R,” and
just comments about they weren’t sure we were really doing the job itself very well. It
wasn’t a criticism of the war totally. It was wondering what they were hearing about the
soldiers were doing. That bothered me a little bit because as far as my experience I could
just say, “Well, it looked to me like everybody was doing there,” I said, “Whether we win
in the war or not is probably not gonna be dependent on whether or not the soldiers are
doing their job correctly. It may be the decisions that are made much higher up,” but I
said—I just let everyone know that that was not my experience. The rest of the time, I
was home for a whole month, but actually it was just sort of like Llona and I went back.
She had rented a small apartment. We were there. It was almost like, we’d already been
married a year, but it was like our honeymoon again because we hadn’t seen each other
for so long. We lived our own little life and I got to meet some of her new cohorts at the
school there in Salina. Ran into a friend of mine that I had—had lived in Battenfeld—that
was living in Salina. [John Black] and I hooked up and did some things together.
Actually, that time period I just remember it just being very pleasant. Then, at the end of
my time at home, I have an absolute blank and I remember this right after I got back from
Vietnam, I do not remember Llona taking me to the airport. I do not remember the flight
back. I could not tell you. I’m sure I went back to San Francisco and then almost did
exactly the same route I did to begin with. I know I didn’t go through Hawaii ‘cause I
remember saying, “I wish going back I’d go through Hawaii so I could say I’d been on
Hawaii,” but I know I didn’t do that. I don’t remember anything. I remember only in my
memory today all I can remember is being back in Vietnam at the headquarters. I don’t
even remember coming into the airport in Vietnam, how they transferred me back and got
me back to headquarters. I remember absolutely nothing. The only reason I can think that
I have a blank there is that I was terribly depressed because now I was going over to
Vietnam and I knew what I was going to be facing. It was no longer just something I’d
seen on TV or an idea of what I was gonna do. I had experienced it and I just didn’t want
to go back. That was just it, but of course I had to go back and I did it, but it’s just
blanked out.
LC: What’s, if I can ask, what’s the last thing you remember? Do you remember having dinner? Do you remember having a nice day, a nice afternoon?

LS: I remember spending the last day before we left. Llona did not teach. We had the day off and we just did, we just drove around town and we went out and had a nice lunch. Then I don’t even remember that last—I just sort of have a blank from that point on. It’s just sort of like there’s nothing there. I really cannot remember it. I’ve asked Llona and she’s kind of told me about when she drove me to the airport and stuff. She doesn’t remember my trip back in the plane and everything, but I told her. I said, “It’s just the weirdest thing. There’s just a blank there, a black hole.” I’m not like that. I remember a lot about my life and it’s just gone. Anyway, I got back to Headquarters Battery and they told me that my position at C Battery had already been, someone had been cycled into it. I was gone a whole month, but they really need somebody over at B Battery in fire direction control. They thought I was perfect because it wouldn’t have to be a green person. I knew what to do. So they sent me immediately over to B Battery. People who would look at my slides would see that it’s an entire different terrain. B Battery was located—the city of Qui Nhon is at the bottom end at the opening of a bay called Qui Nhon Bay. Okay. The bay then goes north from the city and there’s a peninsula that juts down toward the south that’s actually before you get to the sea. There’s the bay and then the peninsula and the sea. We were on the land side, not on the peninsula side, but the land side of the bay at the very north end of the bay. We were right at the very north part of the bay. So we were directly north of Qui Nhon City at the top of the bay.

LC: This is where B Battery was located?

LS: B Battery. This is a new location for me. I don’t know the history of B Battery, but when I got there it must’ve been—at least where they were located when I got there, must’ve been a new location. They did not have hooches completely finished yet. Everything looked like it had just been freshly graded for dirt roads and for the firebases themselves where the cannons were, were all in the fairly newly dug earth.

LC: Was this a big area?

LS: It’s, again, we’re talking about probably at least two city blocks. It went up from—there was the bay and then there was a whole plateau where there was rice fields
and then we were first hill that went up on the land side of Vietnam and we were the first—it was the beginning of a foothill and we were on the sea side, the east side, of this foothill. There was a slight incline all the way up through the battery up to—fire direction control was in the back of the battery, [was at the rear on the hill]. At this location we were not surrounded by legs all the time. We were occasionally, but most of the time there were not legs situated right next to our firebase. That meant that there was a lot more guard duty pulled there. Fire direction control usually didn’t have to do guard duty unless we had some very—if there was a special alert or something and they needed more men. Usually it was the gun bunnies that did it.

LC: Did that ever happen? Did you ever?

LS: One or two times I was called on, but we never got fired upon as badly as we were in C Battery. I didn’t have the same kind of experience. We fired our cannons almost every single night, but we were not fired upon within the battery itself. Maybe a couple of times we had some [artillery shells] fall outside of our perimeter, but never, nothing ever fell within the perimeter like it did at the other firebase. There was a lot less action as far as that’s concerned. When I got there, the hooch that would become the barracks for the fire direction control people was not finished yet. As a matter of fact, we ourselves had to work on it during part of our work hours. We hired some Vietnamese locals that were working almost twenty four hours, except for the deepest night, but even in twilight in the morning and dusk at night they would work long, long days. When I first got there, we slept in culvert halves. We had half of a metal culvert, large culvert that was covered with sandbags. We could put mosquito netting on each opening of the round, of the back and the front of it. Just after I got there we started the rainy season and we also could put a tarp down if it was actually raining to be closed off, but you wanted to keep some air flowing through there because even during rainy season it would get very close, being enclosed in there. You wanted a little bit of light, too, cause it was just—I had a flashlight, but there was no light. There was no electricity.


LS: There was just room enough. We had to stoop down to get into this. There was just room for a cot and my box with my clothes in it, my wooden box with my clothes in it. I had a little, it was a crate that I put some things like some books on and
some writing materials on and that’s all the room there was in it. That’s where I stayed for the first two [months]—October and November and that was also the rainy season. It was so cold. We would try to make trenches so that the water would go around these culverts and go around, but on a very rainy day the water would find some way. Sometimes I had a stream running right beside my cot, right through that culvert. So it was wet. Your feet were always wet. You were just wet all the time.

LC: Did you get sick, Lynn?
LC: Did other guys get sick?
LS: I remember maybe having a cold, but I never was sick. I don’t remember anybody getting terribly sick.
LC: Were you taking malaria pills and all of that?
LS: Yes. We always took malaria pills.
LC: Was there anybody who said, “I’m not taking these”?
LS: The only time I went to the medic was and that’s an unusual story. We called them, I’ll use the term, we called them “piss tubes.” They were urinals that had a metal tube that went down in the ground. There was also partial cup metal thing around it. So you had a little bit of privacy when you were going to the restroom. One night I slipped. It was during the rainy season. I slipped in the mud near the, right next to the piss tube and I fell against it. It cut my left shin. I had a great big gash in my left shin. It wasn’t a gash that would—it was just skin deep so it wasn’t like cuts so I’d have to have stitches, but I needed to have it treated. I went to the medic and I’ll never forget this. It was at night. I had to get him. They had to go get him. I didn’t know where he was. He came and he was high.

LC: Really?
LS: He was high and he looked at my leg and he said, “Red. Oh, it’s so red.” I’ve told that story. I’ve told this story to a lot of people and I just think, it was really like, “Wow, man, it’s really red.” I was going, “Yes. It’s called blood.”

LC: What was the outcome? Was he able to help you?
LS: He did what he was supposed to do. He put an antibiotic on it and we wrapped it up. He gave me some stuff to keep on it and to keep changing the bandages
and it did heal up real well. I had no problem with it at all, but it was just that experience. He was high. He really was.

LC: Tell me a little bit about drug use. Was that the only time you ever saw that?

LS: We’re gonna get into more of this in just minute, but I already knew of, there was a group we just called them the “heads” meaning “potheads.” There was a group of them and they were identified as the heads. We knew they would get together. There was this unspoken—there was a lot of drinking of alcohol and beer. There were rules against it, period, but there were unspoken rules that “Okay, if you do this stuff you have to make sure this stuff is not tolerated even by your peers, not by the upper ups, but by your peers. You don’t do this when you’re on duty. You definitely don’t do it when you’re on guard duty, but you don’t do it when you’re on duty and you don’t do it when you think you might be on duty.” If we were on a certain alert level where we thought we might be called on at any minute, if you did [smoke pot] your own peers would get after you. There was always this threat of being turned in. I don’t remember anyone ever being turned in, ever. We knew it went on and we even knew where they were going, what they were going to smoke and where they were doing this. We knew all this, but it’s like the rules were there, but I know the upper ups have to have—it was too generally known that they had to have heard this. So they must’ve just turned away from it and not pressed it. That’s what I knew about drugs at that point. Getting back to my culvert half. I fit right in with the new crew at the [new Battery C]—I remember I even hit it off personally better with some of the guys there. Every single one of us in fire direction control at Battery B, my new place, all of us had degrees.

LC: Oh, really?

LS: Not only had we had some college, every single one of us had degrees, but we were only E4s. I think one of our men made it to E5 right before he came home. I was about two weeks of being—I would’ve been up for E5 two more weeks, but I wasn’t gonna stay two more weeks in Nam to get my next rating up. We were all college graduates. We all kind of knew our situations. Half of us were married. We were an older group, knew each other, kind of knew each other’s ways, very articulate. So we got along very well. Had a lot of other interests that lesser educated people might not have.

LC: Like what?
LS: Well, you know, we’d sit around and we’d talk about philosophy. I mean not real deep philosophy, but something we read. We would make suggestions about books and I can’t even remember. That’s one thing I do not remember is how we got a hold of books. I know people mailed me books, but I don’t remember—some guys would be able to get a hold of books and I don’t know whether we had a lending library or something. I never made use of that. I had people mail me books from home. We passed books. “Oh, I’ve read this. You oughta read this,” that type of—we didn’t have TV. We had radio and it was Armed Forces Radio so it wasn’t all that wonderful. That was our major diversion was being able to read. It was good being in a more educated little group like that because we had a lot more in common.

LC: Where were some of those guys from?

LS: Massachusetts. My friend Dwayne that I went on R&R with was from Nebraska, so we had a lot in common. We got to go on R&R together, too. That was kind of nice. John who was going to become, he became my roommate. He had the culvert half next to me until we got the hooch done. John Myers was from Philadelphia. I’m trying to think if there was—oh, and then the other John was from Colorado. He was from—not Aspen. Where’s the University of Colorado?

LC: Boulder?

LS: Boulder. He was from Boulder. We had a nice little group there.

LC: Yeah.

LS: Our shift. It was real kind of interesting. You kind of got to know your shift better because you stayed on—the same guys that you switched these days and nights back and forth with you kind of stayed together. You were with the same guys that switched from days to nights together. So even though you shifted shifts, you shifted together. So these are the same guys you work with either on the day shift or night shift.

LC: Was that by design in order to get better cohesion?

LS: Probably. I mean we got to know each other. We got to know how—we kind of knew each other’s ways of doing things. It was probably smart. It truly was. The only problem I had was our master sergeant there was Regular Army. I don’t know whether he was intimidated by the fact that of course [we had degrees and he did not]—and of course the second lieutenant also had a degree. So we were all educated people and he was not. I
don’t know whether that was a problem or not, but there was friction. He would bark at
us. I wasn’t used to that. Up at the other battery he got the blue films and did all this
buddy-buddy stuff, but this master sergeant was not—there was just friction. He was just
uptight about stuff. Of course, the sergeants kind of kept together. There was a master
sergeant that worked with the gun bunnies. This is something I just heard. All of a sudden
one day they said he had been shifted out. It wasn’t his time to go home. It wasn’t
because he was short. I said, “Well, what happened to him?” The gun bunnies didn’t like
him very well because he would make them sometimes do things in old Army ways and
they had to stand in formation sometimes. Well, you just don’t do this in Vietnam.
You’re a sitting duck anyway. You do not do anything like—I mean it just wasn’t done.
You don’t do the things like we were—that might’ve been great for basic and AIT, but
you do not do that in Vietnam. He would do things like that. All of a sudden he was gone.
Well, somebody told me that he was fragged. I don’t think—only one person told me
that. I probably think that’s a story. We all knew about fragging, too. He was very much
disliked, though. I think he got transferred out some-place else where he would be less
[trouble].

LC: When you say you guys all knew about fragging, what did you know about
it? Were there rumors or—?

LS: Oh, yeah. We had all heard that—we had heard it mostly from infantry.
Infantry were the ones that more talked about it than in our type of situation. That’s how I
heard about it, some guys, some infantrymen that I had run into at various times.
Anyway, that’s how I heard about it. So I fit in very well at B Battery and felt accepted.
The accommodations weren’t so wonderful, but it was working out very well. We got
through the rainy season before Christmas. It began to get better. Right at the beginning
of December we got the hooch finished. John and I got to move in. John was gonna be
my roommate. I already knew that. So John and I moved in. It was even better than what
we’d had, when we got it done, it was better than what I’d had at C Battery because in C
Battery they had just one great big long room and it was really divided by just the bunk
beds. Well, we had single beds. They weren’t bunk beds and we had rooms to our—there
were two men to a room, but they were rooms with walls and a door.

LC: So this is wooden construction?
LS: It was all wooden construction. Then the top board that would’ve been across
the top that would touch the roof was gone, so that was your window. Now, of course,
there’s no glass on it and it was on both sides, but it let the air go through, but it had long
enough eaves that—of course the rainy season was done for us, but it had long enough
eaves coming out that it was gonna keep the rain from coming in there.

LC: Was there any mosquito protection there?

LS: No there wasn’t there, but we just didn’t have—in that part we didn’t have a
bad mosquito problem. We had no problem up north [at C Battery either]. It wasn’t really
bad there. So anyway we got to move into the hooch. In my slides, I have slides of my
one trip I got to take down to Qui Nhon City. We got one day. You gave up some
sleeping time, but I had a night shift. Sometimes in day shift if they had room in the jeep
if they were doing a PX (post exchange) run to the city, they would let some GI go along
with the guys who were going down and picking up the stuff. I got to go and I took slides
of this trip down and in the city and then the trip back. They’re in my slides with
explanation. When I was down there at the PX, I was able to buy some foil icicles like
you put on a Christmas tree. So John and I found this bush out in the brush behind the—it
was really beyond the perimeter of the firebase, but it was toward the hills. We cut it
down and we brought it in and we put these icicles—we cut out those snowflakes you can
cut out of paper like we did in grade school and we put that on. So I have a picture of that
in there too. I put my Christmas cards on our one blank wall in the shape of kind of like a
tree. So I have a picture of that, too. We thought we were really uptown because it was
almost like the Hilton. We had this space, kind of some privacy. Then Christmas Eve
came and that was when things turned around drastically for me. This was my story. This
is kind of like my pivotal story psychologically for Vietnam. On Christmas Eve we were
to have a cease-fire starting at six o’clock on Christmas Eve and all day Christmas Day.
We had a no-fire zone, excuse me. We had a free-fire zone. Remember up at Battery C
we had a no-fire zone. We couldn’t fire towards certain villages. [At B Battery], we had a
free-fire zone that if anything moved on a certain—it was the top section of the bay. If we
saw any sampans out there or anybody along the shoreline, everyone—they told all the
locals that this one section at the top of the bay so that nobody could take a sampan over
to the peninsula, was a free-fire zone day and night.
LC: Now was that true the whole time you were there?
LS: The whole time I was there. This was a free-fire zone, but during the cease-fire nothing was gonna be fired. The locals knew this. So we had already been talking. It was so interesting. It was Christmas Eve afternoon and I had a day shift that day. It was Christmas Eve afternoon. It was about four o’clock and we had just been joking. We said, “I bet those Vietnamese have got their sampans all ready to go because as soon as the cease fire they’re gonna run out there and fish. They’re gonna run out there and fish in these waters because they haven’t been able to all this time. It’s probably just”—we kind of made this joke about it. Well, five o’clock, now the cease fire’s gonna start at six, maybe a little bit before five this pilot called in and said, “I see some sampans out in the free-fire zone.” Our second lieutenant got on the radio. John took the call. John was on the radio, my roommate, and I was running the charts. The first lieutenant said, “Will you explain to me what you’re saying?” He said, “Well, it looks like regular Vietnamese sampans.” He said, “There’s two men and I think there were three boats and there were two men on each boat.” Our lieutenant said, “Well, they’re probably trying to get a jump on the”—he kinda laughed about it and said, “We’ve just been talking about this. They’re probably trying to get a jump on fishing for the cease fire.” The man [in the copter] said, “It’s not six o’clock yet.” Our first lieutenant said, “Well, yeah.” He said, “Crank up your guns. Let’s blow them out of the water.” I remember our first lieutenant rubbing his face. He had his hand up against his face and trying to think things. He said, “They’re probably just locals going out to fish. This is probably not any enemy.” [The man in the copter] said, “I said”—he said, “What rank are you?” This is what he said, what rank are you. He said, “I’m a second lieutenant.” He said, “I’m a colonel. You crank up those cannons.” It’s one of those things I can relive this moment in my mind over and it’s just as clear as if I’m sitting right there today. I could tell you exact like I requoted it, up here in my head. So we cranked up the cannons and we got the—he gave us the grids. We got the information. I was doing the charts and we did it. I really thought we were gonna stop because I don’t know what was in my head. I don’t know whether I thought we were gonna get to six o’clock and they would just say, “Look, six o’clock we can’t fire anymore,” but it was only about five. So we cranked away and we fired the first round. He said, “It was off.” It missed. So he gave us the correction. We put through the
correction and we fired off another one and he went, “Yahoo!” He said, “You oughta
seen those men. They must’ve gone thirty feet into the air.” It was just—my first
lieutenant, he was about as close to crying as I had ever seen another person in a room.
He looked like somebody—he had just heard somebody in his family had died. He had
this awful look on his face. Then [the man in the copter] said, “But we don’t have all of
them yet.” He gave us another grid. So we shot again and he said, “Yeah. That did them,”
just like that. It was sort of like a cowboy to me. It was like this Wild West thing. “Yeah,
we got them.” Then he said, “Well, that’s it. Merry Christmas.” Then that was it. It was
over. It really, really—at first it was just sort of like I was just mad. I was just mad. I
thought these are probably fishermen and everything else, but you know it really began,
almost immediately, I mean that night I couldn’t go to sleep. It was Christmas Eve and I
was feeling sorry for myself being away for Christmas anyway, but I just thought I just
know those were fishermen. I just know we’ve shot some innocent people here. I just
know it. I had enough religious background I just couldn’t do it, the Prince of Peace and
all this. It was just overwhelming to me. I don’t know why some—why would something
like that—I’m not the person. I didn’t personally go up and shoot these men in the head,
but it just really tore into my soul. It just ate away at me. We didn’t talk about it, either.
That was another interesting thing. We did not say one more word about that. I remember
one time to John I just said, “John, have you thought about what we did on Christmas
Eve?” He said, “Yeah.” He said, “You know, but things like this happen in the war.” He
just acted like, I’m sloughing off. You know how you do. You’re talking to another guy
and you say, “Yeah, I kinda am, too,” but it was really getting to me. It was probably
about a week or two after that, so we’re into January. I for the first time went with a
friend to where the heads went to smoke pot. I tried it myself. I wasn’t sleeping well. I
just wasn’t handling this well. I thought, well, everybody says it’s okay. You’re not
gonna get hooked to this stuff. It’s like drinking except you don’t have a hangover. All
things just sounded good to me and I hadn’t smoked. I had smoked [cigarettes] a little bit
when I was in college and Llona asked me to give it up and I had given it up when we
had gotten married. So I didn’t smoke at that time. I did try grass and I really liked what
it did. I have to be very, I’ll be very frank about this. I liked what it did to me because it
really got all that out of me at least for the time being, at least for when I was doing the
pot I did not think of that. I thought of good thoughts and I felt good and I understood why people liked the escape. I didn’t even feel like I was in Vietnam. I wasn’t necessarily home. I was just away. It was like taking a little vacation. I really, I really liked that. I was also very careful. I did this a couple of times before I went on R&R to Australia. I really can’t say I feel bad about the fact that I did it ‘cause I’m not really sure I do feel bad that I did it. Dwayne and I were scheduled to go to Australia together. I had chosen to take my R&R to Australia because Llona and I had already had this month together. We had originally talked about my taking my R&R to Hawaii so she could meet me, but we’d already had this month together. I said, “Well, Llona it really would be expensive for you, expensive for us together. You’re in your first school year. We’ve already lost some time because of Grandma’s funeral.” So it just seemed logical that if I had an R&R I’d do something else. She said, “Well, I think you oughta try to go”—she talked me into this. She said, “I really think you oughta go to Australia. It might be the only time in your whole life you’d be able to get that far away.” I said, “Okay. I’ll do this.” That’s where [Dwayne] was already going and he and I went together. I signed up for Australia. I had a wonderful time on R&R.

LC: Now where did you go?
LS: Sydney.
LC: Were you there the whole time?
LS: I was there the whole week. He and I did a lot of things together. We went to see Hair. The musical Hair was playing. We went to see Hair. We went to see, I don’t know, a couple of movies. I can’t even remember what they were, new released movies together and a couple of places where we could order beer. I made a mistake there. I asked for two beers holding up the two fingers like we do and he mistook me cause they do a thumb and the first finger for two and he brought me three, but that’s all right. We drank it. We drank it. Anyway, that’s what I learned about counting on my fingers differently in a different country. It was a wonderful—I mean it was just a good—we didn’t do anything wild. I don’t know. He left me alone some evenings and he may have gone out looking for gals. I have no idea. I didn’t. I was already married. I wasn’t gonna submit. One evening he left me and I went down right behind our hotel there was a city park and it was kind of—it wasn’t quite dark yet. Dwayne wanted the night by himself so
I said “That’s fine.” I went down and I was just walking. I just wanted to walk around and see what was close. We had been around and seen some of the sites. We had gone to the new opera theater. At that point it was just being finished and taken a hydro plane out to where you go to the beaches, not actually on the ocean. We had done some of the touristy things and gone to the zoo. I just wanted to walk in the area to see the city. There was this guy that was bicycling through and he almost ran over me and his name, I’m trying to remember his name. Isn’t that awful? It’ll come to me in a minute. Anyway, he said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” He said with that accent, “I’m sorry mate,” is what he said. That was so funny ‘cause they use those words. I said, “Oh, that’s all right.” I said, “I’ve been in a lot more danger recently.” He said, “Oh, you’re an American.” So we started up this little conversation. I told him I was from Kansas and da dah da dah da dah. He said, “Well, you know, we really like you Americans.” Of course, they had troops in Vietnam, as well. He said, “You know, you really oughta come and have a real home-cooked meal.” He was only like maybe five years older than me. So he would be maybe about thirty. He said, “Let me go over here and I’ll call my wife and see.” So they invited me over for—well, he did and she was part of it from the telephone call. So I went over and had supper with them at their flat. They had an apartment building. He worked for the equivalent of BBC (British Broadcasting Company), but they’re a government radio station that played mostly classical music. So we sat around talking about classical music that we liked and da dah da dah da dah. I had just a wonderful evening there.

LC: Great feeling. That’s great.

LS: That was just so nice.

LC: Did he give you any sense of how Australians were feeling about the war?

LS: Yeah. He wanted to know how I was doing and I said, “Well, I’m not really a supporter of the war, but,” I said, “it was my duty. They called me.” I said, “What was I gonna do?” I said, “I’m still not sure we’re gonna win this war.” I said, “I’m even less sure now that I’ve been here,” but I said, “What was I gonna do personally except do my duty? That’s just the way I look at it.” He wanted to know. He just wanted to know. He just wanted to know what I thought. I said, “Well, my opinion is we’re probably not going to win this war. I don’t think we’re gonna win the hearts and minds of the local people and that’s what you’ve gotta do. There’s a political side to this that I don’t think
we’re doing.” He said, “Well, that’s what we’re hearing here.” He said, “There’s a big peace movement here.” I said, “Yeah, there’s one at home, too.” He said, “Yes.” So we talked a little bit about that. I mean they weren’t extremely anti. It was just, they just wanted to kind of exchange information where I was coming from. That was so pleasant. That was just a nice little—I just felt like I’d gone to, I’d been invited to Aunt Mary’s house or something. You know?

LC: Did you stay in contact with them?

LS: Yeah and that’s what makes me mad. I’ve got the card at home. I’ll remember his name [Tony Bond]. I haven’t recently. We’ve kind of lost contact. I think it’s been about oh at least a decade now. I sent a card and didn’t get it back and I don’t know where they’ve moved to. Anyway, that was just a wonderful experience. It was just one of those fluky things. Dwayne and I went back, but as soon as I got back I was immediately back into this despondent mood. It was sort of like I was okay as long as I was in Australia, but I got back and I was back again. I did not do well the rest of my tour. I didn’t.

LC: Do you think what was still going on for you was trying to get resolved or get to grips with what had happened on Christmas Eve?

LS: That’s right. I know that more now, now the rest of the story which we’re gonna get to. I know that that’s what was getting to me, but at the time it seemed to be more nebulous than that. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I still would go with the heads every once in a while and go have some pot. It was good stuff. It got you there almost immediately.

LC: Where did it come from?

LS: I have no idea. I never asked. Somebody else provided it for me. It was sort of like one of these things where if you’re around a person that likes to drink a lot, they’ve always got booze around and they like somebody to drink with them. Well, the heads were kind of like that. I was not one of the regulars, but when I’d show up they always enjoyed one more person. They’d just hand me a joint. I never paid them for anything. They always had an extra joint around. I didn’t do that a lot, but I did do it. What I did find I was doing was, though, in the evenings when I got off work—I only did that occasionally—but I drank a lot more beer. I was drinking more beer toward the end.
It was becoming just kind of like the beverage I just drink. I didn’t drink it on duty, but when I was off duty if I drank anything I’d have a beer. I didn’t have a Coke. I didn’t have water. I would drink a beer. I was drinking more than I had ever before ever in my life and certainly even when I was in Vietnam. That did change.

LC: Beer was easy to get?
LS: Oh, yeah. Beer was very easy to get. It was very cheap. There was no taxes on it and they made them very available, anytime. There were always these guys going inbound to Qui Nhon to the PX down in Qui Nhon and if there were anybody ever—you could buy a case for almost nothing. I kept a case under my cot in the room. I always kept a case.

LC: What about harder stuff? Was that available?
LS: Oh, that was available, too. I wasn’t into drinking anything harder.

LC: But it was around?
LS: That was around, but actually nothing else really bad happened to me the whole rest of the—everything else went very smoothly. We had firefights we had to help cover almost every night. We had to be very careful. I was still mapping there. As a matter of fact, we had a Korean infantry and firebase that was just on the other side of this foothill that we were on. They were just on the other side. As a matter of fact, the only time we came close to getting bad shells coming, they messed up their figures somehow. One night they almost hit inside of our perimeter with a shell. It was a mistake, of course, and we laughed about that that we need to send the Koreans to school and teach them.

LC: How close was it?
LS: Oh, it was still a ways away. It might’ve been a half a mile, but it was close enough. You knew the explosion went off. We all, everybody just, “What was that?” because mortars are a lot different than an artillery shell. Boy, that was something. I remember the lieutenant told me later on the next shift that they had officially apologized to United States for making a mistake. They were lucky. They didn’t hurt anybody. They hit an area where there weren’t any friendly legs. Everything was okay, but oh my, that was something. Actually the rest of my tour went okay. I just put in my time. Everything went fine. I did the little bit of extension beyond my year. If you added exactly the
number of days where when you came home from Vietnam you had one day less than
three months left you were not required to do the rest of your two years. You could go
directly home. You did not have to report to a base. You could sign up to go home on
exactly that day and—

LC: That would be the end of it?

LS: That would be the end of it and mine was the twenty-sixth of April, which
was Kevin, my young brother that was born when I was fourteen, on Kevin’s birthday
was the day that I went home.

LC: So is that what actually happened? You decided to go ahead with that option
so that you would not have—?

LS: Yes. So I would not have to stay, go to any base once I [returned].

LC: Did you talk that over with your wife?

LS: Yes. She was very much supportive of it and she said, “Well, you’re one of
the lucky ones.” It was a month and a few days, but she said, “You’ve already had your
month home because of Grandma’s funeral. So in a way this isn’t costing you anything.
You’re still only putting in your year.” So we had kind of rationalized all the way through
this. Also, she was tied down to her school year. I’d be getting home. She’d still have a
whole month to teach left. It was the end of April. She was busy. It wasn’t gonna disturb
her. I had explained to her that where I was for this assignment there wasn’t as much
activity. I thought it was a fairly—I was trying to make sure that she understood. The
only thing that was going on at home at that time was my sister Debbie had had a child
out of wedlock the summer before. She was still in high school and she had gone back to
Turner High School after—she had had this baby, but given it up for adoption and she
has gone back to school to finish her senior year, but she was having a lot of social
problems at school. The boy at school that had gotten her pregnant was still there.
Everyone knew she had been pregnant. She had gone to—in those days you usually go to
a home and have your—she had gone there and finished her junior year on the Missouri
side of Kansas City, but had come back to Turner to finish her senior year. Llona had
written to me and asked if Debbie could come out and finish her year out there in Salina.
This was after I’d come back. So this was in October or November after I’d come back
from the funeral. I had told Llona I didn’t think she wanted to do that, but by the time
Llona had gotten my letter she had already decided this is what she’s gonna do and
Debbie moved in with Llona. So Debbie was living with Llona. So this was also keeping
her busy. She was being a parent to my sister. This was going on at home. We had done
all this figuring. Also, Llona had decided she wanted to know right before I came home,
she was asked whether she was gonna come [stay with that school district]. She was
gonna have to say whether she wanted to have a new contract or not. I said, “Go ahead
and do it. I will find something to work at in Salina. Go ahead and sign up for that. That’s
fine. We’ll figure a way out for me to work.” She said it was bad for her career to only do
one year and then skip somewhere else. It looks bad not to stay someplace for a while. I
agreed with that so that was fine.

LC: Coming toward the time—well, first of all let me ask you a couple of other
questions. Did you have any pets?
LS: My friend John, who was my roommate, had a dog. Now he wasn’t—first of
all, we were in the culvert halves at first and second of all, when we were in the hooch we
weren’t allowed to have animals inside. I don’t even know where he got this pet, but he
had this small dog. I have slides of him holding the dog in my slides, John. Anyway and
I’ve always wondered. John went home about four or five weeks after I did. He was
enough later than me in the cycle. I’ve always wondered how he said goodbye to that dog
’cause they were together all the time.

LC: What was the dog’s name? Did the dog have a name?
LS: Boy, I sure don’t remember. I don’t know that either, but I mean they were
together all the time. I had a mongoose, not really a pet, but I want to tell you this story.
When I was in the culvert half before we got the hooch done, I could not keep this
mongoose out of my culvert half. There were three in the row and mine was in the
middle. For some reason this mongoose liked mine, not the other two. I could put bricks
down over trying to cover up my tarp and everything from the inside so he couldn’t—but
he would find some way to nuzzle his nose under there and move that thing. Many a
morning I would wake up in the morning and this mongoose was sleeping right beside
my cot on the floor. He smelled bad because he’d be wet. That wet fur and it was dirty
fur anyway. Oh, my goodness. One morning I woke up and he was nibbling on my ear.
He really befriended me. I didn’t consider him my pet, but he certainly considered
himself—but I must say it. I’ve always said this. As much as I tried to keep him out and he got in anyway, I did not have to worry about snakes or rats. I didn’t have any problem with varmints at all because I had a pet mongoose whether I wanted him or not.

LC: He was on patrol.

LS: That’s right.

LC: When you were living with Battery B did you have radio, TV? Was it different at all from how it had been with C Battery?

LS: No. We still only had radio, only radio. No TV.

LC: Was that the best source of news?

LS: Yeah, it really was except we would hear things from the States. We weren’t hearing about the—the radio didn’t say much about the peace marches and the moratoriums that were going on. The prayer, there were various prayer vigil weekends the religious people were having. We didn’t get much of that news. The only way I got that news was—now I do remember this. I think this came—there must’ve been, that’s why I’m thinking about books again, because we could get a hold of down in the mess hall there was a place over in the corner where you could get a Time magazine or a Newsweek. Sometimes a week or two old, but they were just there for you to read. I remember keeping up on that through Time and Newsweek. That’s the only way where we got peace movement stuff. We would discuss that occasionally. It was just nothing that—we were in the war. It didn’t make any difference to us one way or the other, but we’d have a discussion every once in a while about what was going on with the peace movement.

LC: But it was pretty tame? You guys didn’t really think it was betrayal?

LS: No. There just wasn’t much talk one-way or the other on that. The only time I was ever asked my personal opinion and I don’t even know who asked me that, which one of the guys. They said, “Well, what do you think about these guys doing that?” I said, “Well, in a way I feel like,” I said, “I know some people might think that they’re against us, but,” I said, “I feel personally like they’re supporting me ‘cause they want me home safe.” So I said, “In a way I see it differently than maybe some other people would see it because I see that they just want us home safe. They just don’t think this is gonna work out.” I said, “Quite frankly I’m not sure it’s going to.” That’s when I—I think it was that
day I divulged to them that I didn’t think I’d—I don’t think I mentioned this earlier. My 
junior, the fall of my junior year at KU, I took a distribution course and I had taken that 
course in American History where I was writing the essay on Abraham Lincoln when 
JFK was killed. I took a course in Southeast Asian History at KU. I had no idea I was 
gonna end up there, but it was a big hot topic at that point in time. I thought, “Well, this is 
a history that I might be interested in.” It’s so totally different than anything I was 
exposed to before. I remember the professor. The whole theme of the class was that we 
had better not get more involved there because it would never work out.

LC: Really?
LS: The professor was very outspoken on the fact that he didn’t think we should 
ever get involved because it just—politically we would never be able to win a war on the 
ground in Southeast Asia.

LC: Do you remember the name of the professor?
LS: No. No. No.

LC: How many kids were in that class?
LS: It was a full class of maybe thirty, thirty-five.

LC: Do you think most of the other kids who were taking the class were taking it 
for the same reason you were?
LS: Yeah. I think we were all, it was beginning to get on the radar screen of 
college students that this was getting to be a bigger thing than it had been before with just 
advisors. Johnson had sent in the troops and we were all beginning to get a little nervous.

LC: Was it a new, was it a young professor?
LS: Yeah. He was Asian, but he spoke perfect English so he had to be an 
American Asian. He wasn’t a new immigrant. What I remember most from the class was 
that he kept saying we better not get overly involved. It’s one thing to try to prop up the 
South Vietnamese government. It’s another thing for us to try to win the war. I remember 
his analogy was, he said, “I think the only way we could ever stop—if South Vietnam can 
not defend itself the only way we could ever stop the North from taking over because 
they see themselves as the true patriots, the true Vietnamese. The only way we would 
ever be able to keep South Vietnam separate would make it like Korea and stay there 
forever,” his exact words. We would have to stay there forever. I already had this
viewpoint. I’m not sure at that time I just soaked it in. It was something he was saying. I was just learning the history and, of course, I learned a lot of other things. All the dynasties and all this stuff, but it was still in my mind that this was somebody who I thought was very educated and knew the area. This was his particular opinion and here we were much more involved than we had ever been before and I kept thinking, well, he may be right. The only way we could ever keep this country would be to just stay here forever.

LC: Did you hear much about Nixon’s plan to Vietnamize the war?

LS: Yes. That we did hear about all the time. We were hearing all the time about the new plans, what the new plans were going to be. Of course, we heard about the draft switching to the lottery system. That was all big interest to us.

LC: What did you make of the Nixon plan? Was it something that sounded good to you?

LS: Actually, I was a little cynical because the way I was cynical was that I thought, “Why hadn’t we tried this soon enough for me to be able to be cycled home?” By that time I was getting—I was doing my tour. It was gonna be finished anyway, so I was already paying my dues. So it was over.

LC: Were you thinking about big strategy questions as you got shorter or were you thinking about getting home?

LS: No. As a matter of fact, the bigger picture actually got smaller in my mind the closer I got—all I began to focus on especially after the—I think this was psychologically going on in my mind, too. I was so embittered by having been involved in what we did on Christmas Eve that I just wanted to go home. I wanted this all behind me. I wasn’t sure how this was going to come out, but I didn’t think it was gonna come out well. I really didn’t. I really did not believe the Vietnam War was gonna come out well. I just wanted to get myself home. The rest of the dominoes were gonna fall later after I was gone, but I needed to get myself home and get back. I just wanted to be back and all I could think of was, my biggest focus was I want to go back and be exactly the way it was before Vietnam. I wanted everything as if Vietnam didn’t even happen.

LC: Did you count down the days?
LS: Oh, yes, like everybody else. I was short and I had this many days and this many—I didn’t make as big a deal about it as some of the guys did, but I had my little chart. It was over there by the chart. I had a little chart with, “Lynn’s days left.” I marked them off.

LC: As you got right up to the time when you were gonna leave, did they throw you a party or do you remember those last couple of days?

LS: Yeah. We had a little party about two days before I left, my going away party.

LC: Do you remember that?

LS: Yes. I do remember that very much. I don’t remember, I think of my closest friends I was like a week ahead of—there was a whole bunch of us leaving within a month’s time. We were all gonna be gone. We were also lucky in that sense. So a lot of times you have a new guy. We had some new guys coming on right at the very end, but my core group—so right at the very end I was with my friends. That’s not always true. Looking back on it, I thought, well, maybe that made it a little bit easier. Are we gonna get to the point where I’m coming home?

LC: Yes. Sure. Go ahead.

LS: Okay. Okay. I was driven back to the headquarters’ base and they flew me to Cam Ranh Bay. That was kind of scary. I didn’t like that flight. That was one of these Army supply planes and you kind of strap yourself on the side. They weren’t very—but anyway, we got to Cam Ranh Bay. I was processed out there. I left at noon on April the twenty-sixth of 1970 and I arrived in Seattle at noon on April twenty-sixth, 1970 because of the dateline. I arrived the very same time that I left. Same day.

LC: That’s kind of strange feeling isn’t it?

LS: It is coming back. I remember going through the process of turning in my fatigues to get my dress uniform so I could be processed out. They were very efficient. I was worried about how much time this was gonna take. I don’t know where I can stay ‘cause all I could think about was getting on that plane and going home. I remember that they were very efficient. It went very smoothly, but when we came up to—there was a sign where we were gonna take off our fatigues and get in and be issued our dress uniform to go home. There was a sign right above—you went up some steps and into a
platform and right above the sign it said, “Welcome home soldiers,” or it was, “Welcome home American soldiers,” and it had Richard Nixon’s signature. It was like a metal sign, but it had his signature written in cursive at the bottom. It said, “Richard M. Nixon,” at the bottom.

LC: No kidding.

LS: The sign was just tattered and torn. I could see it from a distance and I said, “What is that sign?” It was hard to read it ‘cause it was all crumpled. As the guys went up the stairs they would take that last step and they would jump up and they would hit that sign. I don’t even know what was the—I didn’t do it, but I was thinking, “What’s prompting them to hit that sign?”

LC: What was it?

LS: They were bitter. I didn’t realize it till a little bit—it sunk into my head. Why are they hitting that sign? It’s all messed up and I’m thinking, “You know, they’ve got some anger in them. They’re mad that the president is saying welcome home. They don’t want the President of the United States to say welcome home.” I just thought that was an odd attitude. It wasn’t the attitude—all I could think of was get on, get on, get on. The number of guys ahead of me—of course, I came back. When you come back on a plane you’re not with just artillery. You were with all kinds of people. These guys were—I could see them doing it. They would jump up there and they’d hit that sign and it was odd. You almost couldn’t read the sign.

LC: ‘Cause it was so battered?

LS: It was so battered. You had to be right up next to it to be able to see what it had originally—it had knocked some of the color off of it. So you couldn’t see the distinction of the letters. That’s something that I really remember. I remember being handed our uniforms and there was somebody standing there and he said, “Now, remember, soldier. You have to wear this uniform to get your ticket at the airport. You have to show up at the airport and be in uniform to be able to get your half-price ticket to go home, but once you’ve done it please switch into your civies.

LC: Why did he tell you that?

LS: You didn’t even have to ask why. He said, “You may have difficulties with civilians if you’re not in civilian clothes once you’re on the plane.” So we had heard. I
had read in some of the magazines, some of the reports of people being spat upon and
harassed in various ways. This was what we were ordered to do. We were ordered to do
and that’s exactly what I did when I got to the airport. I remember being very excited
about getting on the bus to be taken over to the regular, being bussed to the airport, to be
able to get my ticket and get on the plane. I remember very much my plane. I’m not
saying—I can remember everything about going home. I couldn’t remember about going
back. Isn’t that strange? I could tell you everything. It’s just really something.

LC: Yeah, it is.

LS: What I remember the most about getting home—by then I was able to get a
flight into Salina. I flew to Denver and then there was a short flight. It was by Frontier
Airline that would take me on in. They’ve restarted up again now, but there was a
Frontier Airline and it flew into Salina. So I was able to get a ticket all the way into
Salina and call Llona the night before telling her when I would be in. Llona was at the
airport and I shall always—

LC: Let’s take a break for a minute. Lynn, we were talking about your arrival
back in the States and getting back to Salina. What did the world look like when you got
back and didn’t have to report again?

LS: I had a different view than I had had when I was home for Grandmother’s
funeral. Llona met me at the airplane and I will go to my grave remembering her standing
at the fence as the plane taxied. She wasn’t waiting inside, inside the terminal building
for me. She was standing out there watching the plane taxi and I could see her. That is the
image of my wife that I will carry with me to the grave, more so than our wedding or the
day that our children were born. It’s gonna be her standing by that fence. It wasn’t long
after I got home, my sister Debbie was at school in Salina, that she had moved out with
another boy using the excuse that, with a boy, using the excuse that she wanted us to be
alone. Actually, I think she would’ve gone anyway.

LC: How old was she at that time?

LS: She was seventeen. So we were alone. It was kind of nice to have kind of a
little period all by ourselves. Then my life began to broaden out a little bit. I needed to
start thinking about what I was gonna do for work when Llona was still finishing her
school year. I remember real early a couple of days after I got home that I just had this—I
wanted to come home and be very peaceful, but I had this inner anger and bitterness that was just there. One week to the day after I got home was when Kent State occurred. I was extremely riled up about that. I couldn’t believe we were harming our own people. All I could think of was, it was like—to me it was like the war coming home. I remember one day standing at my front door and watching somebody walking down the sidewalk and I was thinking, “We live in a society. I wonder if that person would ever think of killing somebody.” Why would I even have a thought like that except that that—see, it’s still in my head, the acts of violence, how easy it is to be around so much killing that’s just part of your duty to do. So there was just this residual anger and bitterness in there, but what I wanted to do most of all was to get back to the way things were before. Llona was still teaching so it had to have been in May and I can’t remember the date. I decided to go back to KU to test the waters—I’d had my veteran’s benefits now—on finishing my PhD. I had just really finished my MA so I would’ve started on the PhD program, but I just wanted to test the waters. I had an appointment set up to see one of my professors at KU, the one that I had been doing research on whenever I heard that Martin Luther King was shot. I was gonna talk to him just to—he was one I thought I could talk to and not—just get the feel for how the department’s going and what they would think about my trying to get back into the program. If I even had a chance, but first I wanted to see a couple of people I knew that had been a little bit further behind me in the track, but were getting their PhDs in economics and just see the viewpoint from their viewpoint. I saw one gentleman, excuse me, I don’t remember the names, but I went to see one of my friends. We talked for just a couple of minutes and I was starting to talk about the econ department and he said, “You were in Vietnam weren’t you? That’s why you were gone.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “What was it like over there?” I said, “Well, it was rough, but I really got through it. I think I got through it okay and I’m sure glad to be home.” He said, “I don’t think you’d fit in here very well,” just flat. I said, “Well, what do you mean?” He said, “There’s a lot of anger here about the war.” He said, “If anybody found out you were a veteran I don’t think you’d fit in very well. I really don’t.” I was just surprised by that. So I went to see a woman friend of ours who was in another graduate department beginning her degree and I went to see her. She met me at the door. I knocked the door. I wasn’t sure. I think I’d written to her that I was home, but I wasn’t sure I was telling her I
was coming that day. She said, “Oh, hi, Lynn,” she said and then this look came on her
face. She said, “You’re back from Vietnam aren’t you?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “I don’t
think we better talk,” and she shut the door in my face.

LC: Uh-huh. What was going on there? Were you able to kind of get a better
sense?

LC: Well, it was just strange. I said—I felt really alienated for the first time in
my life. I just felt like, “Am I a Martian or what am I?” So alienated that I thought I was
in a different world. So I did get to see the professor very shortly and he told me—as a
matter of fact, he gave me some hope that it wouldn’t be too difficult to get—some of the
professorships had changed and people had moved on. It was a little bit different
department, but he thought there was a way I might be able to plug back in if I really
wanted to. I really came back from that experience, I just was there for the day. I came
back from that experience thinking, “I don’t think I fit in here,” but Kent State occurred. I
think Kent State had just, had already occurred before I did that. Kent State and right
after that, though, about the second week in May, there was a riot on the university
campus right after I had been there. They burned the Union. They started a big fire at the
Union.

LC: What did you hear about that, Lynn?

LS: I heard that on the radio and then in the evening. I heard it on the radio first
in the car and then I went home and watched it on evening news. I turned to Llona and I
said, “Well, my hopes for going back to graduate school, I think, have just gone up in
flames.”

LC: Why did you feel that way?

LS: I said, “I just don’t fit into that culture anymore. They don’t want me.” So
actually I watched my—I didn’t dwell on it. It’s just sort of like I made the decision. It
was clean. It was clear. I want to be out in the world anyway. Maybe I didn’t really want
to know that. I didn’t even know where my interests were anymore anyway. So I didn’t
know what I wanted to do. I had a good friend that summer named John Black who
worked at the local welfare department. He had gotten his degree in physics, but it was
kind of an in-thing in certain crowds, especially around liberals, to maybe not go into the
fields you were trained in, but going to do some sort of community work first and then
maybe get a job with the corporation. It was sort of a hybrid version of not joining the corporations at all. They weren’t that much against capitalism and all this stuff, but they just thought they needed to go out and do something for the community. Kind of get that kind of a self-chosen community service period in your life. John had gotten caught up in that. He thought it was intellectually cool. So he had gone down and applied and had been hired at the welfare department as a social worker even though his degree was in physics. He said, “We have a brand new position opening down there.” He said, “I think you’d really like it down there. There’s a great bunch of people. You’d love the people that work there.” Some people I knew [already]. They had gone to KU. Some of them I only knew of them, but I’d heard of them on campus. I went down and applied and I got the job. I started as, I did both income maintenance, which is figuring out the grants and eligibility and also social work for about the first three months of my work. Then right after that they divided the jobs to where you just did income maintenance or you just did social work and I chose to do the income maintenance. That was more interesting to me. Of course, it had to do with figures and all that and regulations and that sort of thing. So that’s when I started my job. I really expected to only do it a year or two while Llona put another year or two into teaching there. Then we were gonna look for jobs in the real world. I was just gonna do this—it was a way to have two incomes. The rest of the story of that is, I worked thirty years at SRS (Social and Rehabilitation Services). I think why this is pertinent to Vietnam is I think that I remember telling Llona at one point something like, “This is really helpful for me. I feel like I’m giving back.” It was sort of like I needed to do something that was nice, even if I’m giving away other people’s tax money, but I just wanted to interact in a way that I thought I was helping people instead of doing something where I was hurting people. Psychologically it seemed to be something I needed to do. It stuck eventually. I didn’t know at the time that this was what was going to happen, but I think that’s why I chose it. I really do. I think I even articulated that to Llona somewhere along the line in that first year.

LC: Did you stay in Salina, then, the whole time?

LS: Yeah. Then we stayed in Salina. After we had done what we thought we were gonna do for just two more years, I had worked up in the system and was making better money. Llona really liked—they had opened a brand new high school and they
made her the foreign language department head of the new high school ‘cause she was
the one who had a masters. She felt like she had found her niche.

LC: Great opportunities.

LS: So we just decided that Salina was a—at that time it was about thirty
thousand [people]. It’s about forty thousand now. It was far from all the metropolitan
areas, but it was still big enough to have plenty of shopping and a nice town and the
schools were good and we thought it was a great place to raise a family. We suddenly
found ourselves deciding to settle in. So in ’73 Laura was born and in ’77 Lance was
born. The year that Laura was born in ’73 we also bought a house. We moved out of the
rental house and moved into a big two-story house on the main street in town. I really felt
like I liked my work. Llona liked her work. We liked the town. We had started making a
lot of friends through work and through her work, through my work and some people we
had a few old KU connections with. We were really settling in. I remember at one
point—oh, and the only thing I want to add here is during that period of time, though, that
first three years, the only rough spots I had where Vietnam came into the picture again—I
think it was always a driving force in some way in my life. It was part of my experience,
but I remember going to parties. I learned very quickly you did not bring up the fact that
you were a Vietnam veteran because immediately—first of all it opened me to, “Well,
what did you do there and why did you do it?” questions. That is not as important as the
fact it would start arguments. People would immediately divide and it was like you don’t
talk religion or politics at certain occasions. I never mentioned I was a Vietnam—and I
learned very early in the process. Some people knew, people who knew it and that
was already okay that we had already had our discussion about it. It was over, but I did
not bring it up. I just learned not to bring it up. The other thing that I noticed, I wanted to
say this because of what I said earlier. I tried grass twice with some friends of mine. They
got a hold of some. Both times it didn’t work out well. Either the grass was not very
strong and I just thought it was stupid or in one case I did get a little bit high, but it was
sort of like, why did I think this was so wonderful? Whatever I tried in the way of drugs
in Vietnam did not stick to me when I got home. The only other thing that did happen,
though, was and Llona’s noted this to me every once in a while, but I went through a
period in the ’70s where occasionally at parties I would over-drink. I would drink
beyond—I was not an alcoholic and was not a drunk all the time, but I would abuse it. I began to see the pattern was that I would do this usually around the holidays. That was the time I would be most vulnerable. Of course, there’s more parties at that time of the year anyway. I’d be most vulnerable to drinking to excess and she’d have to drive me home.

LC: What do you attribute that to Lynn?

LS: Well, I began to realize that every Christmas, as Christmas drew closer, I’d remember what happened in Vietnam. It was still there. I really thought, and I really did, for a whole long time that I was just a weak person. I was just weak. I don’t know why I don’t have the strength to just put this behind me and rationalize it and get it over with. It’s the only thing that stayed there that was kind of a residual anger and bitterness about my experience in Vietnam. The only other little thing that I would hang my hat on when I’d start feeling sorry for myself is that the day I left for basic training we heard that my cousin Larry had been killed in Vietnam. At the time it was just Larry had gotten killed in Vietnam and he and his brother and I had been really close. He was there. He put his life on the line and actually at the time I remember thinking, “Well, I sure hope that doesn’t happen to me, but I’m really proud of what Larry did,” but because I was going to basic training I wasn’t able to go to his funeral. When the anniversary of his—and that was in May. When his anniversary would come around I’d—what I would remember then, I wouldn’t get despondent and depressed like I did at Christmas, it was more of an anger thing. Larry became my icon that I thought that was how worthless the war was. By the time Vietnam fell, I remember thinking, “Well, this is what I thought was going to happen anyway.” I was really struck by the images the night that I was—when the North was marching towards the South, towards Saigon, one night I don’t know which one I was watching, NBC (National Broadcasting Company) or CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) or whatever, they had footage of people in Qui Nhon City, the city I was defending, waving the red flag welcoming the North troops into the city. I thought, “See, I knew this was what was going to happen.” I remember thinking that. Larry became my bitterness hook. I’d always think it. Larry was the symbol of what a waste [the war was after all]. He was such a wonderful person and he’s not with us anymore and look we haven’t—nothing’s come of this.
LC: What was Larry’s last name?
LS: Larry Johnson.
LC: What branch of service was he in?
LS: He was in the Marines and he was from Varna, Illinois, which is a very small town to the east of, well, the closest town is Lacon, but it’s a little bit north of Chillicothe and Peoria. Maybe you know where he’s from.
LC: I do know where it is.
LS: The very next year his best friend from high school was killed, as well. So this little bitty town has these two graves very close together.
LC: Do you know that young man’s name? Do you remember?
LS: I do not remember. It’s on my list. I look him up on the wall all the time.
LC: Do you have any idea what happened with Larry, how he was killed?
LS: Oh, yes. Uh huh. He was helping some of his—he was a platoon leader and he was helping some of his men on a chopper and he got shot in the back. He got quite a—his family got all this wonderful commendation and stuff after it was over, but that was something else I had to do when, a [bit] later. We’ll get to that in just a minute.
LC: Sure.
LS: So in the ’70s I felt like I had buried Vietnam. I was living my dream. We were living in Salina. We’d started our family. We’d bought a home. We had two cars. We had all this stuff. I felt like I was very stable. I was doing something for society. Llona was a good teacher. Everything was settled. Vietnam did not touch me except for these episodes. I knew some of the emotions were still there, but I really thought I was just weak. I wanted to get over this. Eventually I’ll just get over this. Then I was asked to do the—I knew the editor of the Sunday supplement of our newspaper in Salina. Her name is Barbara Phillips. She was a sub-editor of the main editor and she was the editor of this Sunday supplement. She had been for two years, had been the roommate of my wife at Watkins Scholarship Hall. She knew I had been in Vietnam and she was given this order by the editor that she needed to do an article on how men were treated after they came home from Vietnam. So she wanted to interview me. She was the only one I knew directly and then she heard about some other gentlemen just kind of through people who worked on the staff of the newspaper knew some people. So she assigned a new
reporter there, her name was Kay Barenson. The rest of that story is Kay Barenson’s
daughter and my daughter became fast friends in high school, but Kay was new at that
time. She was assigned to do the interview. I did the interview in a little café in
downtown Salina and it scared me to death because I started telling this story. She wanted
to know how we were treated afterward and so that’s what I was trying to concentrate on.
I tried to explain we learned very quick not to talk about it. Nobody ever said, “Welcome
home,” or, “Thank you for your service.” So I said, “In a way maybe that was good
because it helped me forget it. I just wanted to get it out of my life anyway and so don’t
do any hoop-la about it.” I also explained to her that I had gone to see the movie *Coming
Home*. In the movie there’s all this stuff that happened in the hospital for veterans that
came home. It was the first movie I had seen that had a Vietnam theme in it. Although it
did not pertain to my situation entirely, we came home from the movie that night and
Lance was asleep in his crib. I stood over his crib and I started crying and I said to Llona,
I said, “We can’t let him have to ever go to war.” I said, “Dad was at the war. I have
ancestors that fought in the Civil War and all the way back to the War of 1812. We can
skip this generation.” See, that bitterness was still in there. The day the newspaper came
out that Sunday, I was scared to death because I just knew a number of people who knew
me did not know I was a Vietnam veteran. I was afraid they would think of me as either
that I was whimpering and whining about the way I was treated or that, “Well, it serves
you right because you shouldn’t have been in the war.” You know, I just didn’t know
what—’cause I knew out there the pot could still be easily stirred because the nation had
not really talked this out either. The nation really just wanted to forget [the war].

LC: This was what year again?
LS: 1980. So I really thought that once the paper was out the telephone was
gonna start ringing and I was gonna hear from people I didn’t even know telling me,
“What do you think you’re doing?” da dah da dah da dah. Well, it didn’t happen. The
telephone never rang, but I was out in the yard that afternoon doing some yard work and
three men on my side of the block came up to me at three different times I was out there.
one of them lived right to the south of me, one right to the north, and one two houses to
the north of me. They came up to me and they shook my hand and they said, “I’m so glad
you talked about what we’ve been through.” I said, “We?” He said, “Well, didn’t you
know I’m a Vietnam veteran, too.” These three men, we had had New Year’s Eve block
dances together. We had had Fourth of July block parties together. None of us men knew
that the other one was a Vietnam veteran. We had all done the same thing. We had all not
talked about it. So I thought, “Well, maybe I’ve done a good thing here.” Well, the next
time in my life that Vietnam became important to me was when The Wall was dedicated
in Washington D.C. In 1988, we were gonna go on a summer vacation to the East Coast.
I wanted to work in going to see The Wall for the first time. I thought, “Oh, this is gonna
be great. I want to see something that honors our service and remembers this time period
in our country.” As a matter of fact, I really couldn’t believe that it had been pulled off. It
was just wholly amazing to me. So I was very proud of that. So we went as a family and
that was a mistake.

LC: Why was that?

LS: Because I really should’ve gone the first time by myself or at least at the very
most with Llona. She would have understood. I got there and the first thing I wanted to
look up was Larry’s name. He’s my icon, but I had some other names I wanted to look
up. We weren’t even to Larry’s name yet. I had looked it up in the book, found out where
to find it, started walking toward it, and I just came unglued. I started crying. Poor Laura
had never seen me cry and she was literally horrified. I remember looking at her and
she’s looking at me like the cat had been killed or something. She just couldn’t conceive
“What is wrong with my father?”

LC: This is your daughter and she would’ve been about how old?

LS: Oh, let’s see. In ’88 she would’ve been, what?

LC: Fifteen?

LS: Fifteen. Yeah and Lance would’ve been eleven. They were just totally
amazed. We finally got through looking at—all I could do was look at—I couldn’t
even—we walked. We did Larry’s name and we walked to the other end and we walked
out of there. I said, “Well, I’ve got to get out of here.” I just can’t—and we went on. I
was fine after that. I got my composure and I sat down that evening in the hotel. We were
staying at the L’Enfant Plaza. I sat down with the kids and explained to them, “I’m sorry.
I don’t know why I have these feelings.” I said, “They’re just there.” I said, “Someday
maybe I’ll be able to talk to you about it.” When we went back home I had Laura read a
copy of this article I’d done in 1980. I thought it might explain some things to her. She
was old enough then. Lance I just sort of—I said, “We’ll talk about it later,” and he kind
of accepted that, but Laura—

LC: How did she react?

LS: She just said, “Well, Dad, I didn’t”—she said, “You’ve never talked about
this.” I said, “Well, there’s no reason for me to talk about it to you.” I said, “If you’re
ever really interested in it, we’ll just sit down and talk about it.” She kind of left it at that
then. She’s a teenager, had her own life and I didn’t want to push it on her. I just wanted
to leave it open. If she wanted to talk about it I was willing to. What worried me about
that reaction was I didn’t realize—I will tell you how I felt. When I was at The Wall for
the first time I had all of that anger and all of that bitterness about having to have done
that. It all just came together, all at once, I was just—I thought I had worked through it
all. That’s what made me mad. I thought, “It’s all out of my system.” I was just so—I was
so angry with myself. I just couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t control those emotions. It was
really me fighting with myself. I was just mad and also hurt. In 1990, which would’ve
been the twentieth anniversary of my coming home, I wasn’t able to do it on my
anniversary. I did it that fall. I had enough leave time at work and we hadn’t used it all
that summer. So I just asked Llona if she wouldn’t mind if I took some vacation time. I
have a good friend from Battenfeld who works for the federal government and he and his
wife lived in Arlington. They wanted me to come and stay with them if I ever wanted to.
So I said I’d go stay with them. It’d be a cheap trip. I want to go do The Wall. I said, by
doing The Wall I mean I want to do it in pieces and segments as I can handle it. So I told
my best friend John in Salina, John Black who had helped me get the job with the social
work. By that time, he was a lawyer. I said, “One thing I’m doing is I want to bury some
ghosts.” He said, “What are you talking about?” I said, “Well, I’ve never even told Llona
this, but I’m gonna tell you something.” I have since, but at that time I hadn’t. I said,
“Every Christmas Eve I have to be by myself some time that evening because every
Christmas Eve I picture in my head this man who should’ve been somebody else’s father
that I helped kill and I only wish that he would forgive me for doing that on Christmas
Eve.” I said, “It’s so dumb. I didn’t know the person and maybe they were enemy. It’s
possible, but I really don’t believe so.” I said, “I need to bury some ghosts in my life.
He’s just a ghost.” I said, “I’m not superstitious, but,” I said, “I understand the concept of
a ghost.” I said, “I have a mental ghost and I have to deal with him every Christmas. I
need to start dealing with this.” So I packed up and I went back to The Wall and I did it in
pieces. I would go for about a half an hour or an hour in the morning and just do a little
bit. Look up a couple of names and kind of look at stuff. Then I would leave and go do
some tourist things. Then in the afternoon I’d come back by through there on my way
back home and I’d do another little piece. I might just stand and watch it from afar, but I
was really kind of trying to get used to the wall. I did that for a week and it was very
helpful to me. I went back to my friend’s house at one point and wrote a letter to Larry
and said goodbye. Then a school group came through and I saw a school group. This one
guy stood behind them and this one kid in the school group read this letter and it was just
so wonderful. I told Llona that the next year if I have some extra time I wanted to take
some time and go see Aunt Ruth and the boys and go to Larry’s grave. So the next year I
did that in the fall and went to see Aunt Ruth and she took me to the grave and I got to
decorate his grave. I needed to do that, too. So those were my—that was my emotional
connection to the war since the war was over. The other two pieces I need to put together
was I needed to—in my community, I was very involved with what the kids were doing
and I was in social work so I was obviously getting some of that out of my system doing
work for people that really needed it. I wanted a community connection to connect me
back to the roots of what I was like before Vietnam. In ’92 or ’93 I got involved with a
group in Salina that put together an annual celebration. It was right whenever the King
holiday finally got designated as a holiday. They had already been doing this, but when it
became a holiday it had become a bigger deal. They did an annual celebration, a citywide
celebration, for Martin Luther King on his holiday, on his birthday. So I got involved in
that group and it was so wonderful for me. I met a lot of people in the black community.
I’d worked with some of them before in various things I had done, but I got really
involved in this and made some connections through churches in town. At the same time
I started going to church—oh, but we were already going to church, but I got more
involved in my church. I had a pastor who helped me a lot in my spiritual growth. I
shared with him some of these things that were left over from Vietnam and he worked me
through some ways that had actually strengthened my spirituality by going back through
some of these things that had happened in Vietnam and things that happened since
Vietnam. That was very helpful. So the ’90s were kind of a healing time for me. I got
involved in the community in a way that brought me back to my roots in the Civil Rights
Movement. I got involved in a peace group that was working for—this particular peace
group—there was a lot of Mennonites around Salina. I got involved in a group that was
trying to get a sister city in the Soviet Union that we could write back and forth to. So we
did that.

LC: Did that work?
LS: We sent them a view book of Salina and they sent us a view book of their
city in Russia. That was helpful for me, too. I mean, it didn’t do anything. The fall of
communism and the fall of the wall was all separate from that, but it just made me feel
like I was doing something. I was reaching across to the enemy and we were trying to
make some connection. So if there were ever a time when the time did eventually come
that we could work together they would know that Americans really, I mean common
Americans could get along with common Russians. So that helped me, too. The 1990s
really were a great healing time for me. I especially attribute the impetus to start of that,
though, was this article in the paper for me and then the Vietnam, The Wall, the
memorial being built. They were very important to me, personally. Then toward the end
of the ’90s a friend of mine, Jim Dyster, who was terribly wounded, left to die in a
firefight in Vietnam earlier than me—I think he was over in ’65—worked at our office.
He works as a rehab counselor. He had started a chapter of the VVA (Vietnam Veterans
of America) in Salina. He talked me into joining and I decided if I were going to—I liked
the VVA. I had been giving them money, actually. I had been sending them money
because I liked what they were doing with Agent Orange and some other issues for
veterans. So I told him, I said, “Well, if I join your organization I really strongly believe
in this organization, but if I join I’ll join as a life member.” So I paid the money to be a
life member and active in their group. When we moved to Kansas City I still kept my
membership with their group. I want their [number of members] they have and I have not
joined the groups in Kansas City yet because when I go back to Salina I get back with
those guys. That’s been helpful for me, too, because—we had different opinions about it.
Not all of them were against the war. Some of them are very bitter about the war because
they think we should have stayed there. Anyway, we have this commonality. It’s something—we can talk about some of these things and we know where each of us are coming from. That’s really been helpful for me, too, feeling like locally and also in a national organization that I’m part of something that’s speaking out for Vietnam veterans and know where we’re coming from.

LC: Have you thought about going back to Vietnam?

LS: Yes. This is one of my desires and Llona’s very supportive of that. I haven’t seen anything that ever gets close. I want to see my area. I don’t see anything at this point that’s anywhere close to where I was. To me, I’ve told somebody this at church one day when we were talking, when I was sharing in a spirituality class that I belong to about my experiences in Vietnam, but a much shorter version than this. I said, “I think it would be helpful for me to see the country at peace.” I saw it in war and it was a beautiful country. It had wonderful people, but I’d like to see it no longer at war. I think it would really help me. I also think it would help me to go back if there was some way for me to connect with a group to go there for a month’s time or something and do some community work. Help a medical clinic or help build something. I think it would be nice if I went and did something hands-on that was good. I think it would really help me come around.

LC: Let’s take a break, Lynn.

LS: Okay. Good.
Interview with Lynn Steele
Date March 3, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Lynn Steele. Lynn is with me here on the campus of Texas Tech in the interview room of the Special Collections Building. Today is the third of March 2005. Lynn, thank you very much for coming in and continuing our interview. We’ve been kind of discussing how we might have this unfold. Reviewing where we left off last time, which involved your return to the U.S. and your feelings about what was happening in this country after your service in Vietnam. We want to talk, I think today, a little bit about the process of you essentially becoming a Vietnam veteran as opposed to a Vietnam serviceman. Do you want to kind of start with that?

Lynn Steele: Actually, my first reaction after getting home was that I just wanted to forget it all. I wanted to go back to some sort of feeling of a normal life. Llona was teaching in Salina, so I had told her, she said she didn’t want to have on her record that she only taught one year then we went off somewhere else. I wanted to pick up my dream of—at first, I wanted to pick up my dream. I really loved economics. That was my major and I thought about going back to KU and maybe finishing my doctorate. I’d always had this dream of either being in some high-powered federal job with the government or a big corporation or, since I like monetary policy, the Federal Reserve, something along that line. After my experiences I talked about before of being shunned by people I knew at KU at having the reaction to the Kent State. I decided that just wasn’t going to work out. There was a bigger pull for me now to just settle down and have a family. Salina was a very nice city of about forty thousand. It was far enough away from my family and all the chaos of my family that it took a trip to go to Kansas City. So we really kind of liked it. So I had a good friend from KU who was living in Salina and he had started work at the, it was called the welfare office in those days. It eventually became a little bit more sophisticated and was called Social and Rehabilitation Services in Kansas. He was working as a social worker and he had been the first male that they had hired at the Saline County Welfare Office. He knew some positions were opening up there and he wanted to know if I were interested. He said he really liked his job. I remember distinctly thinking
that maybe this is something I need. I had this guilt thing from being a part of the war and
the way I was being treated by my peers, the educated class, most of whom did not go to
Vietnam that like I was in that group of the baby killers and all this stuff.

LC: Did you actually hear that?

LS: No, I never heard it, but I read it a lot. You hear things through the
grapevine.

LC: Sure and you got that feeling?

LS: Oh, yes. You get the feeling that—I was very careful not to even talk about
my veteran status. I wanted to kind of give something back. It was sort of this, like,
“Okay at least for a while I will try this out and see if I like it. I’d be helping people in
crisis.” If nothing else—I didn’t have a degree in social work, but I had certainly lived
social work in my family operations and the way I had to handle to my family. I thought,
“Well, I might be able to be of service.” As it turned out, the job I was given morphed
very quickly within about four months. They separated social workers who were actually
doing family counseling and things from those who were just working with income
maintenance with figuring out grants, eligibility for food stamps and Medicaid and that
sort of thing. I went that direction. I’m more interested in the financial anyway. I really
liked it. Llona continued to like her teaching position in Salina. They just opened the new
high school. She had been hired to teach one year at the old high school ‘til they got the
new high school building done. She started at the new building and she loved her students
and she loved her job. So I thought there are worse things than being comfortable
especially after all the experience of my childhood and the Vietnam experience. We just
kind of settled down. I liked my job. In 1974, going ahead a little bit here, the state took
over the welfare system in Kansas as opposed to having each county with some state
support running the welfare system. At that point, salaries were raised dramatically for
workers. I was offered a job with—I’d already by that time worked right at four years. I
was offered a job with the administrative staff to be on a unit called quality control. We
went in and audited cases that were selected at random of assistance cases, Medicaid
cases, and food stamp cases which was part of a federal program at seeing what kind of
error rate our state had, but we were also doing it for our own good to see if there were
things we could do administratively to make the error rate lower on all programs. I had a
chance to do the job and there was one position that was stationed in Salina. Well, this
was perfect for me and it was a tremendous raise. So it turned out that that became what I
worked at SRS for the rest of my thirty years. I was a quality control reviewer and I really
enjoyed my job. I didn’t stay just in Saline County anymore. I covered all of north-central
Kansas and out to the—eventually we got a reviewer in Hays, Kansas, but I went all the
way to Nebraska line from Kansas all the way down to almost Wichita in Kansas. To the
west I went all the way to the Colorado line. It meant some traveling during the month,
but I enjoyed meeting people. I would have to go to schools, make sure kids were
enrolled in school. I’d have to go to county offices to check on property or cars and these
sorts of things, hidden resources that we were worried about, people at banks. I got to
know all these small communities. People were very friendly. I just enjoyed my job
immensely. We settled in Salina. What was going on in my mind, though, all through this
process, the birth of Laura and then the birth of Lance, Laura in ’73 and Lance in ’77,
was that I still had this guilt feeling. It came up mostly at Christmas because the what I
call now in my own mind to live up to it was the massacre of what I think were innocent
people in the sampans from our firing on them on Christmas Eve. As Christmas Eve
would draw closer I would get more and more morose. There were some Christmases,
maybe not every single one, I would drink too much. I would stay up late and drink and
kind of wallow (laughs) in my bad feelings about what I was remembering. I do
remember—I understand now why people, our ancient ancestors, would talk about ghosts
and things. I would have bad dreams about this. I would have dreams that the person
who, especially after the kids were born, the person that we killed in the sampan would
come to me and say, “You get to be a father, but I don’t get to be a father,” or, “I was a
father and I can’t provide for my family now because of what you were involved in.” It
was playing out a guilt trip, but I had real problems with this hanging over my head. The
other thing that was happening during that time period was there was no attempt on the
part of established veterans groups to get us Vietnam veterans to join their organizations.
As a matter of fact, this was not so much true in Salina, they were just apathetic.

LC: “They” meaning the older veterans?

LS: The older veterans, the World War II and sometimes Korean veterans. It
became known through the grapevine. You would just hear these things that some of the
bigger cities and things that Vietnam veterans were actually told not to even try to apply
for the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) or the American Legion because they just
weren’t wanted. In the meantime, I’m a follower of what’s going on in Congress and
politics, I always have been. I began to become more attentive to veteran issues. I noticed
that the VFW and the American Legion both were fighting against increasing benefits to
cover the Vietnam veterans. They actually fought against some issues like setting up the
psychiatric clinics for veterans, declaring post traumatic stress syndrome an actual
disease as far as psychologists and psychiatrists are concerned. They fought against these
things. Well, it’s because the pie for veterans’ benefits is always set each year by the
government. It’s not kind of an open-ended guaranteed benefit. You’re fighting over the
pie. If you give some to the Vietnam veterans you have less for the others. They actually
were fighting against it. So I didn’t really feel like I would want to join even if they
weren’t hostile or apathetic. I didn’t like their politics. Also, during that time period the
thoughts that were in my head were also turning toward the way that the Vietnam
veterans were treated at home, just in our everyday life. I would go to parties and find out
very quickly that I did not want people to know that I was a Vietnam veteran. Even when
the war was essentially over, even after North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, you
just learned very quickly that you just didn’t bring it up because there were very strong
feelings and the discussion would all come around. I remember one party in particular
that it came out. My friend told another person at the party that I was a Vietnam veteran.
It was just in the conversation and that person came over to me and he said, “What do
you think about being over there? I think it was awful.” The whole discussion was very,
very aggressive. Then the whole room kind of got quiet listening to this conflict that was
going on and I was thinking, “Oh, dear. I don’t need this.”

LC: What position did you take in a conversation like that Lynn? Did you just try
to—?

LS: I would usually tell them that whenever I got home I was very much against
the war. Well, then some people wouldn’t let you off the hook there. They would say,
“Okay. So you were against the war, but you were there.” Then I’d say, “Yeah, but I
really think it was a mistake.” Sometimes people who are more conservative would turn
that around and say, “Well, what do you feel about your father? Your father was in World
War II, now what do you think,”—it was all trying to make this blanket statement about
all wars and all that. I would try to explain that I’m not a pacifist, but I do think that
sometimes if you’re making the wrong decision you need to find a way to get out.
Anyway, I guess maybe it’s too complicated for some people. What I found was I wasn’t
really comfortable talking about it, either, because I’m not sure where I stood. I knew I
was against—I thought it was a bad decision and it was the wrong war at the wrong time
handled incorrectly, too. In some ways I agree with both liberals and conservatives. In
one sense I thought it was a wrong war and we should not have gotten involved in the
first place as heavily as we were. In the second place we didn’t fight it well, either. So I
can agree with conservatives that we didn’t fight the war well, but I can also agree with—
so I was kind of in between. Anyway what I learned was I just didn’t bring up the subject.
So I would go through these periods of depression whenever I’d think—or something
would come up, oh, like the fall of Vietnam. That was a really rough week for me. When
I saw the flag—when the North Vietnamese went through on TV, I remember that night.
The North Vietnamese went through Qui Nhon which is the city that I was close to and
the people were actually waving flags as the North Vietnamese troops went down
through the main—I could recognize some of the areas. These are in my slides that I’ve
given.

LC: Welcoming them.
LS: Welcoming—they were so happy they were being liberated. It really tore me
up because I was thinking, you know, we gave all this time and all this energy and people
dying and here the people are thinking they’re being liberated by the North Vietnamese. I
was thinking, “What is this all about?” It’s really hard to come to grips with that that all
of a sudden it is finally over and we lost. That’s basically what you get down to. I began
to have feeling intellectually—I have a great-great grandfather on my mother’s side who
fought in the Civil War on the South side, on the Confederate side. When that war was
over many of those—as a matter of fact, my great-great grandpa, when it was over they
fought that last battle when Sherman was going toward the coast and they just walked
home. There wasn’t any like the declaration that the war was over. They were over. They
just walked home and it was over.

LC: Where was he from?
LS: He was from Alabama. He was over in eastern Georgia at the end of the war, but just [went] home. As a matter of fact, he was living on land that his grandfather had been given as a veteran of the War of 1812 ‘cause that’s what they used to do is give you land as a veterans benefit. Some of my feelings must be a lot like a Confederate soldier felt when it’s just over and you just really can’t—its over. You’re now part of the United States again. You may have strong feelings about what you did and what you were trying to do, but on the other hand you’ve got to realize its over and you lost. You’ve got to live with that.

LC: You have to somehow move forward.

LS: You’ve got to pick up your life and go. You’ve just got to go on, but I kept coming back. There were just things that would remind me and I would have this depression. I didn’t understand why it was so strong. I thought I was just a weak person, is basically what it boiled down to. I thought, “Well, you’re just not strong enough of a man to stand up to this and say.”

LC: So you thought this was your sort of deficit?

LS: It was my weakness, my weakness. So in 1980, I think we discussed a little bit of this. I fast-forwarded in one of my discussions earlier, but I will talk about this again. In 1980 a woman who was a graduate of KU in journalism wanted to do an article on ten years after people had come home from Vietnam. She happened to know that I was a Vietnam veteran because one of the other women who worked at the newspaper at the time had been my wife’s roommate at Watkins scholarship hall. We did the interview and in the newspaper article I said that at one point I had gone to see a movie called Coming Home with Jane Fonda and I can’t remember who else was in it, but it was my first movie to go see that had a Vietnam theme to it. I remember coming home and going into my son’s bedroom and crying over his bed. Llona came into the room and she said, “What’s the matter?” I said, “I just don’t want him”—I said, “My father, and grandfather, and great grandpa, we’ve all been through all these wars.” I said, “I would just like to have my son be free and not have to go through a war.” I said, “Can’t we just skip one generation of this?” I told her about this in the article and it got put in the article. I remember when the article was published on Sunday I was really afraid. I was really—because I had said some things in there about the fact that I came home disillusioned and
was against the war. I thought it was a mistake, but it’s been hard for us veterans to live
with that. I thought I was gonna get some nasty phone calls, but it turns out—and the
article is on file here at the archives—that the other three men who were interviewed
when I got the Sunday paper that Sunday and I could read everybody—and my pictures
are on the front of the magazine. The other three men say, and two of them were lifers,
“lifers” meaning someone who is a career soldier, had the same problems. They said
when they were out in civilian life it was hard to talk about being a Vietnam veteran. You
just didn’t bring it up. The whole theme was we’re veterans, but we don’t talk about it.
Actually, the end of all four articles was we don’t talk about it. It got proved to me that
afternoon. I was out doing lawn work out in front of the house that Sunday afternoon and
there were five other men on my block who were—only four of them came by that day. I
found out about the fifth one later, which I’ll tell you about later, but there were four men
and every one of them came by and said they were so pleased with my article and they
were glad I was talking about veteran’s issues. We had had Christmas parties together,
New Year’s Eve party. We have a New Year’s Eve block party. We have a Fourth of July
block party and we never mentioned to each other that we were veterans, ever.

LC: Now were those men also Vietnam Era veterans?

LS: Oh, yeah.

LC: So they were in your same age?

LS: They were our age. We all had young children, but we had never told each
other we were Vietnam veterans. So that was an eye opener for me and I thought, well,
you know, the talking about Vietnam was getting less difficult for me now that I was
“out” to the whole community. I’m a Vietnam veteran now so what are we gonna do
about it? Along that same period of time, then we’re in 1980, there was talk about getting
the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C. built. It wasn’t long after that it was
dedicated. I wrote a letter to the Kansas City Star, we still took the Kansas City paper
even though we lived in Salina ‘cause that’s where I grew up and it was a better paper
over all for national, state and national news than our local paper. I wrote a letter to the
Kansas City Star saying I was upset because Ronald Reagan did not go to the actual
dedication service of The Wall and I was upset by that. It got published. I had a professor
from KU write to me, one of my former professors, and say “This has to be you because
the way you wrote the letter it was so well written I knew it had to be the Lynn Steele that
I know.” He told me about the fact that he had sure hated the fact that I hadn’t finished
my doctorate there. He was one of my mentors at KU. I wrote to him back and said thank
you for the sentiment of his letter. What was important to me about The Wall was I
thought well, now finally—I couldn’t believe that we did this because I couldn’t believe
we actually made a wall with all those names on it. I thought this was maybe a part we
need to heal. Then I wrote down to make sure I remember the dates of when I went to
The Wall ‘cause it was so helpful to me to—

LC: Now this would be your first trip?
LS: Well, actually my very first experience with The Wall was with The Moving
Wall. The Moving Wall came the year before the first time I got to see The Wall was
in—I saw The Wall for the first time in 1988, but in 1987 The Moving Wall came to
Salina and I volunteered to help with people looking up names in the book. It was a hard
experience, but a good experience for me.

LC: Can I just stop you for a minute and ask you about that? What made you
decide to volunteer to be one of the people who helps at a display at The Moving Wall?
LS: My motivation was mostly that I thought I would probably get more out of it
myself than I would do helping other people. It was also a way for me to kind of—how
can I put this? My good friend John Black in Salina when I was walking with him and
talking about this, one day he said, “Well, what you’re trying to do is put your ghosts to
rest. You’re trying to come to grips with what price was paid for Vietnam and you think
it was a sad waste, but on the other hand you need to honor these people. So you have all
these ghosts in your mind and you’re trying to come to grips with them.” He said, “This
is probably gonna be an easier way because you’re gonna have some people who have
some strong feelings to a name that you don’t, but it’s a way for you to get a little closer.”
So he had this all psyched out for me, but he was probably fairly close to being right.

LC: Sounds like a smart guy.
LS: Yeah, I think he kind of figured me out ‘cause he’d heard me talk about this.
We were close friends so I talked about some of these things with him that I wouldn’t
talk about with anyone. So in ’87 I helped with The Moving Wall and it was one of the—
I was there one evening. It was available twenty-four hours a day. Now most people, of
course, were there during daytime and it had huge crowds on the weekend, but it had to be a lighted area. So they had it in a park where there was lights. One evening I took an evening shift that went to almost ten. I went over to take someone over to show a name and I saw over on, there were some bleachers, it was in a football field. Over in the bleachers I saw a man in fatigues and I thought I knew who he was. So after I had helped them find the name and I turned around and it was this other neighbor, the fifth neighbor I was talking about. He had even during that period, and never talked about this, and he was sitting there and I turned. I started to walk over to him and they said, “You know, you oughta leave those people alone ‘cause sometimes they’re there. They don’t want to be [bothered].” But he was in his fatigues. Well, it turned out later I did bring it up to him. I said, “I thought I saw you at The Wall.” He said, “Yes.” He said, “I couldn’t go there in the daytime. I have too many names I have to look up.” I realized that he had some real difficulty with this, too. That was an eye opener to me. So I had these steps. I had the step where I found out there were other people who didn’t talk about it like I did, but then I began to find out there were some people who had these ghosts or strong feelings or whatever, that they were still having troubles to work [through]. The Wall was a way to come to grips with that. Make yourself look at it, but also maybe go through it and work through it and maybe start talking to somebody else about it. So he and I began to talk about some of our experiences. He had had a much rougher time than I had. He had been a leg, infantryman, excuse me. So he had had comrades killed and seen some pretty rough stuff.

LC: Do you know where he was? Did he talk to you about that?

LS: He was down in the southern part, down in the Delta area. They saw a lot of action down there. So anyway, in ’88 we went as a family to Washington, D.C. We stayed in the L’EnfantPlaza. I have good friends that live in Arlington, Virginia, and they wanted us to stay with them, but the family, we were all together. I kind of wanted to just do Washington. About the third day, I told them, I said, “I think I’m ready.”

LC: Had you had it in your mind that you wanted to go?

LS: Oh, we were gonna go see The Wall. It had to be right. We all went. We all went to The Wall and I just started down that path, that path that gets bigger and bigger and I was trying to find my cousin Larry’s name, the one who had died the night before I
went to basic training. I just wanted to get the effect of The Wall first before I looked up
his name. Actually I had it written down ‘cause I’d looked it up from the book from the
moving wall.

LC: So you knew what panel it was on?

LS: I knew what panel it was on. We started walking down there and I was just
overwhelmed. I saw the flowers and the flags and people had left pictures and all this
stuff. I started crying and Laura looked up at me. Laura was just in shock ‘cause she had
never seen me cry. She looked up at me and she says, “Dad, what’s wrong?” She thought
maybe I was—she said—then Lance thought I’d hurt myself or something ‘cause all he
could think of was crying and hurting. Llona said, “Well, I’ll try to explain it to the kids.
You go ahead and look.” So she let me just kind of be by myself for a while which was
really good. It was really good. Then they caught up with me and we found Larry. That
was the first time I did Larry’s name. I did a rubbing for myself and for Aunt Ruth, his
mother, who never got to go to Washington, D.C., and see The Wall, but I wanted her to
have a rubbing of his name.

LC: Where was she living?

LS: In Varna, Illinois. It’s in farmland in the middle of Illinois. It was
overwhelming to me. It really was not a good experience. It was not—I didn’t have a
feeling of the helping heal me. If anything it just opened a whole bunch of wounds. I
thought, “Well, this is not working.” So that’s all we did. We just did that one foray into
the Wall. So two years later in 1990 which was the anniversary of my coming home, the
twentieth anniversary of my coming home, we had taken a family vacation, but I would
have worked long enough with the state that I was getting quite a bit of vacation time. I
had enough days that I could take a separate vacation in the fall. I asked Llona if she
would be upset with me if I went to Washington, D.C., and stayed with our friends in
Virginia and kind of work through The Wall. I enjoyed Washington, D.C., for other
reasons, but just kind of come to grips with The Wall.

LC: In your own time?

LS: By myself and I could do it. That’s what I did. I went to Washington, D.C.,
in October in 1990 and I went by myself. I would go do some of the touristy things and
then I would go by The Wall. One day I just walked through it. I just walked through it.
Another day I looked up, I know some other names, too, some friends of friends that I know to look up. So I looked them up. Then I wrote a letter to Larry and left it at The Wall and this was toward the end of the week. I left it at The Wall with a flag and some flowers. Right after I had left I turned around and there was a student group that was obviously there on a field trip. These students, and none of them probably were even born when—they were born after the war was over. They kind of gathered around and read and one person read the letter. I put it in a plastic folder so you could read it, but it would be okay if it rained or something. This young girl, woman, or lady, picked up the letter and read it to the group. I stood there behind them. They didn’t connect me ‘cause I was just standing. I was just kind of listening, too, and read this letter. Oh, the tears, I just, oh, the tears just came down because I was thinking they were hearing my sentiments about my love for Larry and what a loss it was to the family for him to be gone. It was helpful to me because I thought now this is what The Wall is all about. It’s about bringing the nation together, understanding the sacrifice that these men made. Even if it were a mistake, it’s gonna be judged historically as a mistake for whatever reason, militarily or politically or whatever, we still need to honor the service of these people and the service of the people who lived through it. There has to be some sort of acknowledgement that we did what the country asked us to do. Even if it didn’t work, we were still patriots. Okay? It just all came together for me. This was what I needed, I think, was to think that okay this is gonna be remembered by another generation.

LC: By more than just you.
LS: Right.
LC: And Larry will be remembered.
LS: Not just inside of me.
LC: Exactly.
LS: So the next step in the series of my direct Vietnam experience here was the fact that in the mid-’90s then—I went back to The Wall again in ’93 and I saw The Wall again in ’98.
LC: You saw a Traveling Wall?
LS: Then a Traveling Wall was back—no that’s back in D.C. I went back for vacations with the family again and in 1999 Salina had the Traveling Wall again. So I
worked there. I kind of came to grips—then The Wall was here at one of the symposia [in Lubbock, TX]. I think it was two times ago. They had a Wall here in Lubbock.

LC: We’re gonna have it again actually.

LS: I have forty-four names now that—it’s kind of a—it’s kind of maybe probably this is a wise thing for me to do. I have a ritual now. Over the years people—now, see, it’s changed. Especially in the last ten years people know I’m a Vietnam veteran. I’m not hiding it under a bush anymore. I talk about it much more openly than I used to. People have told me story, anyone that I know a story about. One of the most poignant one was a woman who took a position in Hays, Kansas, that did the same sort of quality control review. So I didn’t have to go all the way to the Colorado line anymore. It turned out one day we were talking and this was after she had worked a year or two with our program. I was talking about it. It was one of these trips in the ’90s. She said, “Well, when you go there will you make a rubbing for my boyfriend?” She said, “We were engaged and he was killed in Vietnam.” She said the very next year almost to the day, it was the same month, a year later his best friend was killed and she wanted both of these names because they were close. They did a lot of things together. She wanted both of these names. Anyway, I have forty-four names that I put down that I—I know their story. I may not have known them personally, but I know family members that I look up on The Wall and so I do this. I leave a flag with their name printed out, a little bitty trailer on the flag that says remember the day and their name. I put it in front of The Wall. I’ve made it now into a ritual, but it’s a very moving ritual. I don’t want to make it sound facile. It’s something I do that has great meaning to me that I know these stories. Larry is always the one that’s closest to me. Now we were talking here about just a straight veteran story.

The other thing I want to throw in there that was very healing for me was it was when my dad died in 19—let’s see, Mom died twenty years ago this year ’85. Dad died almost Christmas time 1986. He contracted cancer. He had had cancer for almost a year and a half before he died. Right at the very end when he was really getting, he was beyond the treatments. He was actually dying at this point. He was in the hospital quite often with various crises he had.

LC: Where was he?
LS: He was in Kansas City. He stayed in Kansas City, Kansas. So he was in Kansas City, Kansas. He was in the hospital there and I was with him. I would go in and spend a weekend to help with my stepmother so she didn’t have all the burden. My one sister who ended up in Houston at that time she was still in Kansas City. So she had a lot of burden, too. So I’d go in for the weekends. I was with Dad by myself and we were talking and I said—I don’t even know how it came up. We started talking about the war. We had talked about the war on a very superficial level. He was happy I was home, but he had never shared any war stories with me and I with him. So I just finally said, “You know, I had a rough time with this, Dad.” So I started telling him. I started at first just a general thing that some bad things happened and it was really hard for me to do. He said, “Bad things happen, even in wars where we win.” So then he started in and he started telling me stories. Oh, let’s see. He would tell me stories about his—he was a forward observer and then a radioman with infantry in the Army. He just saw some awful things and he knew that they had killed some—there were some innocent people killed in World War II, obviously. When they were fighting in villages they would come in and find them. They weren’t sure whether it was the German fire or their fire or the Italian fire or whatever that killed these people, but they would find these people dead and they do. It’s just a factor of the war. It’s very disturbing. He said, “I still have vivid memories of these things.” He said, “Then bad things happen within the troops themselves.” He said, “We had a sergeant who got really mad at one of the soldiers and took him out. We saw this.” He said, “Pulled him out of the ranks, we were doing something and he pulled him out of ranks and had a shovel and beat the heck out of him with a shovel.” He said, “We were scared to death of that sergeant.” So he was telling me the stories like that. I was thinking, well, you know—we have all these movies of heroism in World War II, but awful things happened in World War II just like in any war. That was really very helpful for me ‘cause Dad and I had never talked about that before and how he had struggled with memories and with things that he worried about. He said, “Of course the good thing about my war is that,” he said, “I went with a Kansas City, Kansas, unit. We were there together. We came back on the same boat together. So we kind of went as a unit.” He said, “It must have been much harder where you were just an individual and you were stuck in and
pulled in and pulled out into these slots where you were needed, but you never had that camaraderie.”

LC: Did he actually say that to you, that he understood that your experience—?

LS: Yeah. I had described this to him and how hard it was that I didn’t have anybody to talk to about it. He said—and this was something that I never knew about my dad because my dad was not a joiner. He didn’t belong to church. He didn’t belong to any organization, but when he first came back, and I never knew this, he had lived in Bonner Springs, which is a suburb of Kansas City, Kansas, out in the county. For a while he lived in Bonner Springs. I do kind of remember that as a child. When I was about four or five we were in Bonner Springs. He was president of the Veterans of Foreign Wars unit there in Bonner Springs. I never knew this. He said, “That was really helpful.” He said, “We talked out some things.” See I didn’t have that. After I went through the ’90s and joined—I have a good friend at my office that wanted to start a unit as a VVA. I wouldn’t join the VFW or the Foreign Legion.

LC: You still felt not good about—?

LS: Oh, no. I still don’t. I still think they’re way too conservative for my type of thinking. The VVA concentrates—it’s not so political. It doesn’t endorse a president. It doesn’t endorse anybody for a cause. It just endorses a type of political action to help veterans. It’s a very issue-oriented organization. I was willing to join. I had given the VVA money. I had sent them money especially when they were doing the big fight on Agent Orange. When one of my coworkers who was very badly wounded in Vietnam came to me and said he wanted to start a chapter would I like to join. I said, “Not only that. I want to become a member.” I said, “I’ve always wanted to become a member.” I said, “Well, this will be an impetus for me.” So I have a lifetime membership in VVA and I still belong to Salina’s unit because there’s no unit—there’s no VVA unit in Lubbock, Texas, so I’m still officially a member of the unit in Salina. I did join that unit and I’m very proud to be a member of the VVA.

LC: When was that?

LS: That was—let’s see. I probably joined. Let’s say it was five years ago so that was—

LC: 1999 or?
LS: Yeah, right. Right. 1999. I think we started the unit about the time that that
Moving Wall came back to Salina in 1999. It was all the same year.
LC: Can you tell me anything about your friend who wanted to start the chapter?
What was driving that?
LS: Yeah Jim Deister.
LC: Spelled, do you know how?
LS: D-E-I-S-T-E-R. He works as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. His face
is very badly distorted on one side where he lost some of his, part of his face in a
firefight. He was left for dead by the Viet Cong, but a man, an American troop, came
through and realized he was still alive and picked him up and carried him. He was in the
hospital for rehabilitation in the hospital, military hospital, for at least a year afterwards.
LC: Do you know where this happened, Lynn?
LS: I don’t know where his happened, but I do know the name of the man who
saved him was Davis. What was his first name? Oh, like the black singer and comedian,
oh, what is his name?
LC: It’s okay. It’s okay.
LS: I’ll think of it. I’ll think of him. Anyway, the big news in the Salina paper
right about the same time, this was right at the late ’90s. He was reading an article in one
of our newsletters from the VVA or maybe another—he also belongs to the VFW. It may
have been one of their publications about this man talking about he’d gotten the
Congressional Medal of Honor for some other act. Sammy Davis, excuse me, is his name.
I was trying to remember. It’s like—
LC: Sammy Davis is the one who picked him up?
LS: He’s the one who saved him.
LC: He’s a Medal of Honor recipient?
LS: Yes. That’s right, for some other things he did. Anyway, he was talking
about—the one thing he was talking about in his article was the one thing he does
remember about Vietnam that he thought he was really the most helpful for his fellow
troops is whenever he saved this man. He talked about this firefight and picking this man
up. He said he always wondered what happened to this man. Jim says, “I read this
article.” I said, “It has to be me.” It was the same area. He wasn’t really sure the exact
date, but it was the same month. So they got to talking to each other and it turns out. So
they’ve done these tours now. They’ve done these tours together to various groups and
talked about this experience. Jim’s talking about—

LC: How incredible.
LS: So they’ve gone around and talked and given these talks.
LC: That’s exciting.
LS: This wasn’t the thing that Sammy was decorated for. This was just one of his
other things. Isn’t that amazing?
LC: It is. It really—
LS: It’s an amazing story, but it took them all these years. It took them all these
years to meet up because see this is another thing. This fog of war that happens, these
things happen. I remember that very much about the fact that in Vietnam something
would happen. The Medevac would bring in guys. You would see these guys being
worked on in the medical unit and then sent on to a hospital. You never know what
happened to these people. We were right there with all the infantry troops. They were all
right there. We played cards with them. We did all kinds of things. Something would
happen to them and they’d be sent home and you never knew that they lived, they died.

LC: Right. They just didn’t come back for another round of cards next week.
LS: Yeah. We’d kind of hear through the grapevine that maybe something had
happened, but you never knew it. You didn’t know where they—some of these people I
don’t know whether their names are on The Wall or not. I can’t even remember their
names now, but they meant something to me then. It was just a strange war in that sense
that there was no way—this was getting back to what my dad was saying was that this is
where it was different because we came back and we could talk some of these things out.
I finally told my daughter just very recently, just the last couple of years. We were talking
coming back, talking something about Vietnam had come up. I said, “Well, you know,
one mistake I made, the country made the mistake. The Armed Forces made the
mistake,” but I said, “The day I came back from Vietnam all I could think about was
going on the plane and coming home,” but I said, “That really wasn’t very wise.” The
adult Lynn Steele would tell the younger Lynn Steele that you should have taken some
time to talk some of these things through then, right then. You should have talked some
of these things. I think there’s more of that done now-a-days with the current war. I am hearing about people being debriefed whenever something bad happens. They have the soldiers sit around in a group and do this talking out thing because it took me all these years of suffering by myself and thinking I was a weak person to find out that there were a lot of other people carrying these things with them.

LC: Doing the same thing.
LS: Doing the same thing and trying to be all—putting a stiff upper lip on things and saying everything’s wonderful and whatever and having these deep, deep feelings inside. That’s not psychologically a very wise thing to do. It’s not a healthy thing to do.

LC: Did you ever hear Lynn about rap groups or Vietnam veterans sitting around and talking in the ’70s?
LS: No, not in the ’70s.
LC: Nothing like that in Kansas?
LS: No, not in the ’70s. I didn’t hear about it till it became a lot more prevalent and got into—of course with my working in social work I would hear about post traumatic stress syndrome did become a treatable disorder. A lot of that background was from the Vietnam Era. So I began to hear about—but it was after the fact, you see.

LC: After you’d had many, many years.
LS: Right. I wasn’t so bad off that I was dependent on drugs or all these things. Obviously I look back on it now. That’s exactly what I was experiencing and it might have been a fairly mild case of it, but it went on for so much longer than it really needed to have been, in my mind. I shouldn’t have had to deal with that alone or without some professional help. I think maybe if there’s one thing that I personally can endorse is that I think one thing that came out of Vietnam was this understanding of what people go through with any kind of shock or horrible thing happening in their life that we know more now how to deal with that post traumatic stress.

LC: And what resources to devote to that.
LS: The resources are there and there’s a whole bunch of literature about it now. We’ve come far enough along that we know how to handle this now. Maybe that’s a good thing. I just wish it would’ve been available for me personally.

LC: Well, let me ask you a little bit about the VVA chapter, too.
LS: Okay. Right.
LC: You and Jim were involved at the beginning?
LS: Yeah. I was never an officer. I didn’t want to be an officer. There were some other people who came forward who really did want to be officers and that was fine. I wanted to be a member of the organization and a member of my local chapter.
LC: Your chapter?
LS: Yeah. That’s right. We’ve done things together. One thing that I have done that has also been very helpful for me psychologically, this is in the same line and this has only been very recently right before I moved down here. For the last, oh, maybe two years before we moved, student groups, some schools make a big thing out of Veteran’s Day. Some don’t, but there were a couple of schools in the area that would call and say “We’re gonna being doing something special for Veteran’s Day. We would like to have some vets come and talk.” One school in particular had vets from—there was a World War II veteran. There were a couple of Korean veterans. There were some of that peacetime-era Cold War period veterans and then Vietnam. There weren’t any Gulf yet. They just had us go in kind of a sequence. The students could go from room to room. We didn’t hear each other’s talk, but I’d have the Vietnam room and somebody else had World War II. The students would go with a time period to pass to go to hear the various speakers. I didn’t share all the details that you’re gonna hear on this history, but I did share especially about the way we were treated when we came home and how different it is now and how much more healthy it is now that we make an effort to treat our veterans differently now.
LC: What was the student’s reaction to you?
LS: They were shocked. They were shocked that this was my experience and that I could explain—but it was interesting because in every case some of the teachers would come in with the students cause they would be their students and they would bring them into the room. They would be my age or maybe a little bit younger. They would all be shaking, nodding their heads with me. I’d be explaining and this is the way we were treated and for years and years and years we didn’t even talk about it. Some of them, as a matter of fact, in one of the sessions that a group of kids came in, the history teacher spoke up and said, “For my class I want to add something here.” He said, “I had a brother
and a cousin who both are Vietnam and they would say exactly the same thing that Mr. Steele’s telling you here.” So, see, I wasn’t saying something that was just my own—and I know that now. See, I know enough other veterans and I’m much more comfortable talking about this cause this was a general fact of the way people were treated.

LC: Especially the time period you came back. 1970, ’71, ’72 very—
LS: Yeah. Right and very anti-war by that time, violently so in some areas.
LC: Did you see any of that in either Salina or Kansas City?
LS: No, I didn’t. I didn’t actually—I just read about it, but I didn’t actually see any of it per say or so.
LC: Sort of what you told us makes me think that the atmosphere, although maybe not overtly anti-war in the sense that New York or Washington, D.C., was experiencing marches or protests.
LS: Oh, yeah, that’s for [sure].
LC: You had this kind of underlying—
LS: Well, now I was told this by the time I got back it kind of petered out a little bit because the Vietnamization—by the time I got back in ’70 Vietnamization was pretty well taking over. A lot of people were coming home. The very peaceful movements—there are a lot of Mennonites just to the south of Salina. They would hold the peace vigils where they would stand out somewhere in public. They would have some public space where they—usually around the city, county building or something public like that and would have a peace vigil and pray for the end of the conflict in Vietnam. It was very peaceful, but it was just to stand up for being against the war and wanting the troops to come home.
LC: Did you sense that as being especially anti-Vietnam or a statement rather than being a negative one, more a positive peace—?
LS: As a matter of fact, when I read about that while I was still in Vietnam, when I was hearing about the moratorium movements and all these things, I really saw it as a very positive thing. I thought they were doing it in a way where they were saying they were against the war, but they always said they wanted the troops home safe and sooner than what was being planned. So I saw that beam of light of they’re really praying also for the safety and wellness of the troops themselves who were over here. I saw that as a
positive thing. I was also at that point against the war, too. I didn’t think the war was
going to give us the results we wanted. I already thought we had lost the war and we were
just kind of finding a way to get out. It didn’t offend me at all. As a matter of fact, I saw
it as a positive thing. I saw these people as really supporting us in a very difficult task
where we were fighting the last legs of a war we were probably going to lose. They just
wanted us home. So, no, I did not see that as negative. Some of the other things were
negative. Students rioting on campuses and burning down the KU student union and
things like that. I mean the whole point in my mind was you don’t use violence to fight
violence. You have to find some peaceful way to turn things around.

LC: Were there any national figures, not necessarily political figures, but others
to whom you looked in the ’70s and ’80s as people who were taking the correct line
around the Vietnam experience during that time or was it just everybody kind of went
into amnesia and didn’t talk about it? Was there anybody who was talking about it—?

LS: You know, that’s a real good question because I really felt like anything that
was happening to try to come to some sort of healing from the Vietnam experience was
mostly being done out in the public. The politicians just were not there. It was almost as
bad as trying to talk about Social Security today. It was almost like it was a third rail.
You just didn’t go there if you didn’t have to go there or you just didn’t go there. It really
came home to me in 1980. That’s why I wrote the letter to the paper was that whenever
Reagan decided he just wasn’t gonna go to the actual dedication of the memorial, it really
upset me because I thought that was one more—what would I say—excuse or something
for just turning your back on not even dealing with the issue.

LC: A missed opportunity or—

LS: There were a lot of conservatives and, of course, he was from the
conservative—he was a conservative from the conservative wing of his party. There were
a lot of conservatives who didn’t like the design of The Wall. They thought it was
disrespectful and all this stuff. It was a way just to avoid all that. Politicians, if they can
find a way to avoid it and not take much flak for avoiding it, they will do that. I
understand that. They’re trying to play both sides of the fence always on almost every
issue, but it bothered me because I thought this was what we needed to do because, as a
matter of fact, coming all the way up to today at the last symposia that were held here at
the Vietnam Center, well, in Lubbock, there were two or three presentations that the
theme of the presentation was if you go to Vietnam today, the country Vietnam, today
those people have worked through it. That’s history now. They had the French War and
they fought. All these people they fought against, but they welcome us back now. As a
matter of fact, they would like to have relationships with us now. We’re the ones that are
hung up and I think one reason why we’re hung up is because we never came out and had
an actual—we just wanted to forget it and just not talk about it. Well, that’s not healthy. I
don’t think it’s been healthy for the nation, either. It came out in the Kerry campaign, this
kind of unhealthy discussion, hang up about talking about what happened on a certain
day at a certain time. It’s off the subject of how we are going to reconcile what Vietnam
means to us today. I think in lots of ways we still have a Vietnam syndrome and I don’t
mean that in the sense the Pentagon uses it that it keeps us from doing something
international. I think in terms of not healing through the process and finding some sort of
a consensus on how we view that era. I don’t think we’re there yet. I think that’s why it’s
still, it’s a hot topic. Even today and the reason why it’s a hot topic is we never came to
grips with what we did there.

LC: What could be done? What would you see as a good move? For example,
someone like John Kerry who is certainly sitting in the Senate. He has national exposure
anytime he wants it, really. He after the campaign has not come out and made any kind of
statement yet. I wonder whether he will, but is there something the president could do? Is
there something in the current situation could be done, do you think?

LS: Well, I don’t know.

LC: Or would it need to come from a different direction?

LS: I think really—actually I think it needs to come from education. It has to be
outside of—maybe politicians can start a ball rolling in a certain direction, but that’s why
I’m such a supporter of the Vietnam Center because this is the kind of thing, this is the
kind of issues that need to be discussed and re-discussed. Sometimes you’re going back
through and you’re seeing this side and seeing that side. This center kind of keeps it out
in the public discourse and makes sure that we’re still talking about what this means
today and the effects it has on current policy even if we don’t want to admit it does.

LC: You know, Lynn, that’s interesting because—
LS: I think it really comes from the people. This is the type of thing that comes from the people. It bubbles up. Politicians don’t usually take the lead on this kind of an issue ‘cause they really just want it to just be, “Well it’s out there and we’ll judge it whatever way it is. I don’t want to be the one helping to define it.” I just don’t think I can rely on politicians.

LC: There’s so much calculus going on behind the scenes.

LS: Oh, sure. Of course, they’re talking about the day. This has been a long time ago now, but that’s another thing that’s very interesting. Whenever I was in high school Llona pointed this out to me just this year when this came up in the Kerry campaign about Vietnam. She said, “It made me realize that whenever we were in school in the early ’60s it wasn’t that long after World War II and we were studying World War II as an historic event. This is what happened and this is what Roosevelt did and this is what Truman did during the reconstruction. That had only been ten, twelve years before and it’s just amazing that we’re fully discussing this in the classroom. You don’t hear classrooms talking about all—they probably don’t even get this far in history, first of all, in high school, but the general population is really very ignorant. The younger generation especially, the ones that were born after Vietnam was over, are very ignorant of this time period, but it still reverberates through the way we view political action.

LC: So the information they have about it is what they heard on the news during the 2004 campaign.

LS: Yeah. Yeah and maybe in movies and however it’s been depicted and probably maybe through some elders and what they’re own personal experience—it’s just funny that our country really had never went through it and just said—kind of came to a consensus as this is what we learned from this. Now let’s take that and go forward. We never really did that with Vietnam. I think we pay a terrible price for it in some ways.

LC: That’s very interesting because you’ve talked about that exact same phenomenon happening on a personal level and now on the national level.

LS: Yeah. I went through it personally. I think we’re still there in many ways on a national level. It came out and burnt me in a way during the Kerry campaign. I was just shocked. I was just shocked that we were talking about it in this fashion. It was just strange. It was almost like we were fighting those battles. No, we’re right. No, we’re
right. No, we’re right. I was thinking this was a long time ago. Why haven’t we settled this by now and made friends with the two different viewpoints? I mean, history is gonna see this in a fairly clear way. Why aren’t the rest of us along on this? It just seems so strange to me. I guess it’s something we’re gonna have to live with a little while longer.

LC: You mentioned that Texas Tech, the initiative here has been helpful to you and that you’ve come to, were you saying all of the symposia and seminars?

LS: I didn’t go to the first one. I didn’t know about the first one ‘til it was over and our friends told me. So I came to the second one. I’ve been to all of them since the second one.

LC: So back in the ’90s, back in the ’93, ’94 in there and you’ve come to every one of them?

LS: Every one of them.

LC: That’s astounding.

LS: I will probably never miss one as long as I can come because I learn something new every time. I make some connections there. One thing that is in the back of my mind and I’ve told this—I’m very open about this. I wasn’t at first ‘cause I thought it was kind of a dumb idea. I would someday like to go back to Vietnam and see it at peace. I would also like to go back in some sort of capacity where I’m helping with building a hospital, building a library, working with—of course, this has always been kind of my calling—working with the poor or the ones who are sick or something, maybe only for a short period of time. Maybe a couple—I’d like it to be back in the area where I was. That’s another piece that’s kind of hard to focus on because most of the big ones go to areas where I wasn’t. I think it would be the last piece that I’m missing. I would like to see Vietnam at peace and like to see some Vietnamese up close that are friendly, you know what I mean? I think it would be—for me and I would get more than I would do for them, they would be doing ten times more for me. It’s a selfish thing in that sense, but I would really like to do it someday. Maybe when I’m fully retired—we’re not quite fully retired yet—but when I’m fully retired I might be able to—that’s one of the connections I make because there’s some groups that come to the Vietnam Center who are setting up these types of programs. Maybe it’ll work out for me. I couldn’t do it yet, but maybe in a few years I’m gonna be able to hook into one of those programs. I’m also a strong
supporter of our increasing our ties to Vietnam. That’s not very popular. It’s still not
popular even today.

LC: What’s your thinking there, Lynn?

LS: I’m thinking that, good heavens. We’re probably closer to Russia than we’d
never thought we’d ever, ever, ever, ever be in my lifetime let alone ever in the whole
history of the world. In my lifetime, I mean we’re very close to Russia compared to what
we are to Vietnam, good heavens. This is crazy. This is just craziness. Oh, I know they’re
officially still a communist country, but let’s get over that. We have a lot of things we
could do with Vietnam and this is another piece. The reason why I feel so strongly about
it is because I think it’d be helpful for the country. I think this would be another part of
this road we need to go to through a healing process.

LC: To see Vietnam as some country other than what it was in 1970 or—

LS: Right and still see it as a communist enemy. They won and we’re just not
gonna have anything to do with them. To me, actually to me, that’s kind of childish. It’s
adolescent or childish acting that, “Well, we lost so we’re just gonna”—they’re still a
country.

LC: I’m taking my dollar and going home.

LS: Yeah, right. They’re part of the world and they’re not doing things the way
we want them to do, but, gosh, we could learn an awful lot from each other.

LC: Do you remember President Clinton going to Hanoi?

LS: Oh, yes. That was very important to me. That was very important to me. You
know, it’s still strained. This administration and probably even if we’re Democrat in an
administration there’s just only so much we can do because the populace themselves will
only put up with so much niceness about Vietnam.

LC: Then again coming back to your analysis that the change really has to kind
of come from downstairs.

LS: I think it has to come from the people, but this is one area where politicians
can take a lead. We can move in that direction and if there’s more intercourse and
interconnection with the Vietnam today. I keep saying North Vietnam—this is one of
my—North Vietnam. No, it’s all Vietnam.

LC: We say that, too, sometimes. I have to admit.
LS: It’s so funny. It’s so funny to get caught on that. This whole idea, I think if somebody would push that just a little bit harder it would push us in the right direction and we would be able to be more like the people in Vietnam themselves are in saying, “Okay, that’s history. It’s over. Let’s try to start writing a new chapter in our relationship.” I think it would be very helpful to our country.

LC: Lynn, let me ask you a couple of sort of big picture questions, I guess one could say. As you, sitting here 2005, think back on the experience that you had in Vietnam and your post-Vietnam experience, do you think in general that the U.S. made a good decision for bad reasons or a bad decision for good reasons in terms of its investment in the U.S., or I’m sorry, in South Vietnam?

LS: In South Vietnam?

LC: Yeah.

LS: I think it was misled by our history from World War II, first of all. Although I don’t know why we didn’t learn a better lesson from Korea. My own personal feeling about it is that we made a terrible mistake, but countries have gone to war for worst reasons. We really thought—there was fear involved here that the Domino Theory, that if it went little by little we’d lose all of Asia. Beyond that even, I think we really thought that we had a chance of, right or wrong, and I have some feelings about that too, but right or wrong what we were trying to do in Iraq in trying to get a country on the democracies and free commerce side of the globe instead of the totalitarian side of the globe. There are worse reasons for going to war or supporting it. In that sense I think our heart was in the right place. I think our head should’ve prevailed, though. I think we should have thought through what it was going to involve militarily and politically, socially, and if it was really worth what we were going to face up to. The reason why I say that is because I had the unique experience of taking a history course at KU, as I said earlier in my thing, on the history of Southeast Asia. It was the whole area of Southeast Asia.

LC: Right. Not just Indochina.

LS: Yeah. In that course I figured that at that point I figured that if we were to commit ourselves to any land war anywhere in that part of the world we would probably lose because—unless we were really there. I mean truly really there on the bequest of the country to try to save them from some foreign incursion. But, see, Vietnam was different.
It was a lot more like a civil war. They didn’t see it as a foreign occupying force trying to take over. It was just two different views of how the country should be and that’s different. I just thought our heads really should have prevailed.

LC: Vietnamese nationalism wasn’t aroused on the side that we came in on, but instead on the other side.

LS: Yeah, that’s exactly right. That’s exactly right.

LC: And all the consequences of it.

LS: History tells us that that just doesn’t work in the long run. It would have to have been a very—as a matter of fact, when I left Vietnam I told everyone when I first came home that my first reaction was the only way we will keep South Vietnam a relatively free, although it was corrupt, relatively free state would be to keep Vietnam divided forever like we do Korea. We would have to be there forever because this was gonna go on and on and on and on and on. There was no way we were gonna out-right win it. Because of that I’m not sure it was worth the price.

LC: Lynn, as things come into the popular culture realm now that bring up Vietnam like, say, a movie, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*, for example. I don’t know whether you’ve seen that. Or the discussion during the 2004 election or the parallels that are constantly drawn between the Iraq operation and Vietnam, which often are facile, I will agree. Do those kind of winds that come across you affect you still? Do they still kind of rattle you a little or are you?

LS: Yeah. I will say I was very upset about our going into Iraq for the very—I was not upset about going into Afghanistan, but I was about Iraq because I thought that this had the potential, I didn’t know. I mean I don’t know the future. I cannot tell the future, but from the past I was not sure that we were going in with a plan on what our real ultimate goal was. I know what our immediate goal was. It was to take over and get this Saddam out of there, okay, but I didn’t know if we had the rest of the pieces together and that’s exactly what we did wrong in Vietnam. We knew what we wanted to happen in Vietnam, but we didn’t know how to make it happen. If things went bad we did not have an exit strategy. I was hearing this from all kinds of sources, the newspaper articles I was reading that were more balanced in the sense that they were saying that there are some problems, some missing pieces here. One of the biggest missing pieces was I didn’t see a
plan for what happened after the fall of Saddam. If there were pieces there they were a
little bit more rosy than I think we had any right of doing. I do know a little bit about the
history of Iraq and the fact that there are three big factions there that have never gotten
along and Europe just drew those lines.

LC: Drew those lines. Yeah.

LS: Right. This is very dangerous, a very dangerous situation. I was very nervous
about it. As we’ve gone through it, it has been less bloody and less terrible than our
Vietnam experience, but it’s still making me nervous today. That comes from my feeling
that we only do this—I feel like we should only commit our troops—we never know
exactly what the outcome is gonna be whenever you have to use violence in order to get
your way. But if we have to come to that, we have to also understand that there are gonna
be things we’re gonna have to adjust very quickly and we need to have a long-range plan.
What do we really want at the end of this? What is your end result you really want to get
to and have at least some kind of structure? It’s gonna have to be tweaked. It’s gonna
have to be changed because we never know which direction things are gonna go
politically and socially, but we have to have a structure of a guideline to go by. I don’t
see that happening in Iraq. We really didn’t have that much in Afghanistan. We did have
a better coalition there. That’s the other thing that’s very important to me. The other piece
that was missing was that I want a true coalition. I was against, for example, I was
initially against the first Gulf War, but what turned me around was whenever the first
President Bush was able to put together a true coalition and got the UN (United Nations)
resolution to back it. Then I was much more happy with this ‘cause this was the world
saying “We’re not gonna put up with this. There are rules we have to go by and the whole
world is, or at least most of the world, and even people in that region, are behind us on
saying these are the rules.”

LC: That was an invasion of one country by another.

LS: That’s right. That’s another thing. We were actually invading a country to
make a regime change, which is the term that’s being used now. It’s coming from a
political mindset that had for years talked about being against nation building. That we
were not gonna do this ever again, which also by the way goes back to the Vietnam
syndrome. That we do not go in and try to build a nation when there’s nothing to build it
on which is what we were trying to do in Vietnam. This is some of their reaction to the 

fact that the political side of the Vietnam War did not work out. They were arguing that, 

but now we are. We’re gonna go in. We’re gonna build this nation that’s never really 

been a democracy. I don’t know how you—my third big picture thing is I don’t know 

how you impose democracy on a country by force. I can see how democracy bubbles up 

from the populace, that we’ve had it and we want a different kind of system. This is 

what’s happened in most places where democracy came in and stayed the way it is. But I 

don’t see it being imposed from the outside and saying this is what we’re gonna do. 

   LC: Again, a Vietnam-like problem. There was no traditional democracy. 
   LS: That’s right. We want this to happen so it’s gonna happen. Well, that doesn’t 

always work with a population that doesn’t have a history of that. So, yes, that’s my 

opinion. 

   LC: Let me just ask a little bit about your children, if I can. 
   LS: Okay. 
   LC: How do they now—you told us something about their visit with you to The 

Wall. How do they now see your Vietnam service record? Your daughter is studying at 

Berkley for a doctorate. I don’t know about Lance. 

   LS: Lance is a meteorologist. 
   LC: He’s a meteorologist? 
   LS: Yes. 
   LC: Okay. 
   LS: He’s in Norman, Oklahoma, now. 
   LC: Okay. Do they see that as part of you? Is it integrated or does it not come up? 

   LS: Yes, as a matter of fact, it does come up because, for example, the family 
talks openly about our feelings about what’s going on in our foreign policy right now. 

They know my story. I’ve pretty well—as an adult, I didn’t tell them as children, but as 

adults little by little they’ve heard the whole story. They keep saying that this is coloring 

their viewpoint, too, because of what I’ve shared with them. They make their own 

political and social decisions, but they hearken back to my experience and some of my 

viewpoints to this broader picture. How can I say this? I think they’re very sensitive to 

the fact that I need to make this an issue that’s important to me. My Vietnam experience
and my continually trying to understand what it means to me and then to the nation is
gonna be something I’m gonna be living with all my life. That’s why they were always
supportive and now, of course, it’s easy for me now living closer, coming to the Vietnam
symposium because they know I’m kind of an intellectual anyway. I need that kind of
exposure to where are we now on this discussion. They’ve always been very supportive
of that. I think in their own way they’re proud of the fact that I’m a veteran. They would
be more genteel about just saying, “My dad’s a veteran,” type of thing and wave the flag.
They’ve told me a number of times it’s come up in conversations. Somebody will say
something about this that and the other and they’ll say, “Well, you know, my dad’s a
veteran. This is kind of what his experience was,” and that it’s important to have
whatever the discussion is leading to, a viewpoint from that era. They know what
happened and I think they’re very supportive of me and that’s very important to me.

LC: It’s a very good thing.

LS: They know it’s not all of me. It’s not everything that I am, but they know it’s
a part that is important to me. I would like to add something maybe you—you probably
have more questions.

LC: Please.

LS: One thing I want to touch on because I just was thinking about it. My
Vietnam experience has affected my spirituality. At first, I realized some of my bitterness
was toward God. I didn’t want to—when I first came back I didn’t want to be involved
with a church. I didn’t want to hear any of that dogma stuff because I didn’t know where
I was, but I know that I felt like I was abandoned by God while I was in Vietnam. One
little cliché that always irritates, there’s a couple that’ll always irritate me. One is that
God never gives you more burden than you can ever, ever really carry in the long run. I
don’t think that’s true. That’s why the churches exist because other people need to help
you sometimes. The other thing that always bothered me was that there are no atheists in
foxholes. I was definitely angry. I’m not sure I was an atheist when I came back from
Vietnam, but I have some discussions that I needed to do with my God that I didn’t even
know how to start the conversation ’cause I was so angry. I was so angry and bitter. I
changed. When the kids were born, I felt like, you just go back to your roots. You’re just
sort of like this old rubber band. You might pull yourself way back to one point and then
all of a sudden the rubber band comes bouncing back to what you’re more comfortable
with. I’m comfortable in the church. My family has been involved in the Methodist
Church for generations. I felt the Methodist Church was a moderate enough church that I
could go to that church. I wanted my kids to be exposed to religious training so we started
going to church. At first for me it was mostly just a social thing. I didn’t buy all that other
stuff, but it was okay. I put up with it. I know all the lingo. I know what it all means. It
was not offensive to me. I just didn’t really buy it.

LC: You weren’t engaged.

LS: Right. When the kids got a little older, it was in line with this process of the
healing part in the ’80s. About the mid-’80s I decided, well, it’s time for me to start—if
I’m gonna be a member of an organization, I need to know a little bit more about it type
of thing. I needed to update my theology. I had things I had been taught in Sunday school
when I was young. Some of that’s kind of a young version of the stories in the Bible and
of the dogma of the church. I need to have a more adult viewpoint here. Let’s grow up a
little bit. Llona and I both got involved in a Bible study class called Disciples. It was
done by the Methodist Church. It was very good to me and it got me back interested in
reading the Bible. I began to realize that out there, there was this whole other school of
theology, this modern school of theology that was more liberal, that was more open to
metaphorical interpretations of Bible passages. Looking at dogma a little differently in
the church, my pastor really picked up on it. I went to him one day and I told him a little
bit about these problems I was having with my Vietnam depressions around Christmas
‘cause he noticed that I would get kind of cross about things that were being said around
Christmas time. I didn’t like the Christmas story and stuff like this. He said, “I think
you’ve got a real problem with this.” I said, “I really do, but it comes from”—I told him
where the source was. He got me to reading some of these people and he had me kind of
keep a little diary, just a little bit of a diary just to kind of hone my initial reactions so
he’d kind of see where I was. He kind of guided me through that and I’m so thankful he
did that because it opened a whole new world to me. I realized that there’s this whole
group of people that are much more liberal in their theological thinking and much more
in line with the way I see the world that I could have a spiritual life. It was very important
to me. I’ve realized it was something I was missing. I’ve grown a lot, especially in the
’90s. I grew a lot. I got to where I was teaching a Sunday school class and people were
very nice to me cause I would present some of these more liberal views in a moderate to
more conservative, not radically conservative, but moderate to more traditional.
Traditional is a better word for it. They just accept the dogma and that’s what you do. I
was kind of shaking it up a little bit, but they would put up with me. They knew me. By
then I knew a lot of people at church and they’d to put up with it. I just finally found a—
they weren’t as negative as I thought. Well, then when we moved to Kansas City from
Salina, we joined a very liberal church. There it was just sort of like I was just being fed.
It was so wonderful because all the Sunday school classes were much more liberal, much
more open and were in tune with even some newer theologians like Borg and [Shelby]
and some of these that I—I don’t agree with all of them when I read them, but they give
me some ideas. I’m just—they just feed me. It’s just been very healthful to me. I feel like
I have a much more healthy spiritual life. God and I have had our discussions. I found out
it’s okay to be mad sometimes, be mad at the world and God’s included in that. As I
explained to somebody, oh, just recently when we were doing a study and it was news to
him. He kind of blew up. He said, “Well, how could you ever be mad at God ‘cause God
is just God.” I said, “I don’t call God a man although I use “He” still ‘cause I’m still
stuck on the old terms.” I get stuck on that occasionally, but I really don’t see God as a
man or a He. I said, “God’s very big. God is so big that He can put up with my anger.
Usually,” I said, “but usually it indicates to me that I’ve got something I need to work on.
It’s me that needs to do some research. If I really want to be a healthy person and have a
healthy relationship with my God then I need to go through this. There’s something there
that I didn’t notice before, that’s why I’m angry.” So I said, “I’ve grown up. I appreciate
that.” Now my daughter has married Jewish and so she converted, Jewish. My son is
really kind of agnostic. He just doesn’t really care about the church one way or the other,
which is fine. He knows church. He’s very comfortable at church, but he’s married
Catholic. So he’s done what he needs to do to marry Catholic. I really don’t care. Laura
would’ve thought maybe I might have a reaction to her wanting to convert for Amanda,
but I told her, “What’s more important to me than anything in the world is not the
religion you use to have a relationship with God, but that you have a healthy spiritual life.
That’s all that’s important to me.” I said, “I’m very broad about that ‘cause I had to be
broad”—I said, “maybe it’s because I have to be forgiving of myself because I went
through that same thing. Maybe that was good.” Maybe that was good. Maybe that was
good. I needed to have this kind of an opening because that’s the way my—I’ve been
much more open to a lot of different things. One thing that I’m actually today doing in
my now life here in Lubbock is I’m exploring through the Unitarian Universalist Church
some other religions. I’m too old and too far into Christianity that I’ll probably never get
away from Christianity, but there’s a lot of things I can learn from the other religious
traditions. I enjoy—I don’t think we’re going to join that church, but we are very active
in trying to go to some of their presentations. I really enjoy that. It’s very important to
me. It’s kind of a growing experience for me. One thing I’m using my semi-retirement
here for is to take, when I do have spare time, to take some of that spare time and work
on my spirituality and my understanding of other religions. It’s been good.

LC: It’s good to have a community to do that within and then also to have your
own interface with literature and the music of different traditions and all those different
pieces coming together.

LS: Yeah, that’s right. That’s right. What’s interesting about the Vietnam
experience is it comes up. There’s some other experiences I had, like for example, we’ve
already discussed about my childhood and having some rough spots in my childhood, the
Vietnam experience, and then my daughter Laura who is currently a student getting her
doctorate at Berkeley in archaeology. By the way, she is studying Mesopotamian culture,
which is Iraq. The closest she can get to is southern—she goes to digs in Turkey. They’re
very popular, but, oh, she would love to someday to get into Iraq. Anyway, what I was
gonna say was that when I look back on the times when I’ve had some really troublesome
times like my daughter Laura having cancer. In 1995 she was diagnosed with aggressive
non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Her abdomen was full when they finally caught it. Her
abdomen was full of tumors, some of which had breached her colon and had to have part
of her colon taken out. Had this just been five years earlier they probably would’ve just
sewn her up, given her morphine, and said, “Let’s just go through the process here.”

There were some new treatments that were being developed. One of which was at the
research hospitals. One was at Anderson in Houston and one was at “the Hutch” in
Seattle, but one was at Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York for lymphoma. Laura was
a senior that year at Cornell University in upstate New York. She really wanted to finish her degree. She was about to graduate. She was just—this was like in March and she was gonna graduate in the end of May, first of June. We set up for her to get treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering and this went on for almost a year. During the actual—there were some time periods in between treatment when she would go back up to Cornell and she and Amanda could have kind of a normal relationship. The treatments themselves went on for almost a year. When she was actually in a treatment phase either I would take a full month off of work or my wife Llona would take a full month off of work. [Laura] is really one of my heroes because she went through that process and it’s horrible to watch your child go through this. She had double chemo and double radiation and then a bone marrow transplant. Her immune system was completely destroyed and they brought her back from that. It was awful to watch your child suffer. It was awful also to see the fact that it was possible that she only had a fifty-fifty chance of making it. She luckily was on the fifty percent that made it. There were other people that she met during that process who did not make it. We stayed at the Ronald McDonald house in Manhattan when we were there. It’s a seventeen-story building in Manhattan. This was all a growing process for me in the area of suffering and having bad things happen to people. I was just saying to someone last night that my childhood experience, the Vietnam experience, and my daughter’s experience have all taught me some things about God and suffering. If it had not been for my already coming to some grips with what happened in Vietnam, both intellectually and personally emotionally, I would not have been as strong as I was when we were fighting the great battle for Laura’s life. I learned so much during that, too. I’m not saying that people have to suffer in order to learn things. I think you can learn things from a lot of different sources, but, oh, I’m so much stronger a person because of this. I really respect people who can give the good fight for a good cause or for their own lives. It means so much to me. I like sharing that with other people. I think it’s also important to me now. When I first came back from Vietnam, I remember thinking that the only thing I really truly believed in was my wife, was Llona. She was the only thing I really had to hang onto. My family was just in different areas of disarray. I’d lost confidence that my country could make the right decisions all the time. It doesn’t happen all the time. I wasn’t even sure of my own morality, of my own, I was so conflicted about what I’d just
been a part of and how I was gonna deal with that. Today I feel like I need to be
c connected. I understand the importance of, even if I don’t get my way in personal
decisions or what I want to have happen in my own life or my family’s life or my
community’s life or my nation’s life, it’s important for me to be in a community where I
can talk all of these things out when I need to. It’s also very important for me to be a part
of trying to help other people.

LC: Be connected.

LS: I think that’s why I had this impetus, looking back on it, say to go back to the
beginning of the discussion today is I think this was really the driving force to my
wanting to be a social worker, more than just wanting to feel like I wanted to have the
antithesis of fighting people and killing people and doing all this damage to wanting to
help people. I think it was this thing that I wanted to share. I understood suffering. I
understood what it was like to be down and out and to not have a high self worth and to
be questioning whether you’d made right decisions or wrong decisions and why life was
dumping on you and all these questions. I have been there and maybe I could help other
people who are in that state get through that on and be better people. I know that’s very
idealistic, but even now, with all my experience I’m less idealistic than I was when I was
young, but in some ways I’m a lot more liberal. There are some ways in which I’m a lot
more open and I’m a lot more liberal than I was when I was young. Llona and I were just
having a discussion about that this week that it’s really strange. Most people get so much
more conservative. They want to conserve that old way.

LC: They want to pull in.

LS: They want to pull in. They want the next—they think the next generation’s
gonna go to pot if they don’t do it exactly the way they did it. I think I’m much—I don’t
think everything goes. It’s not that. It’s not that I don’t have some core values. I have
some very strong core values, but I’m much more open to understanding the different
people and different peoples have different experiences. There are ways we—the only
way we can ever understand where they are and have any hope of ever reconciling with
the way the world acts is to be connected. It’s not to be disconnected. It’s to be
connected. This has become one of my core values over the years. It’s been a hard
struggle.
LC: It’s taken a lot of work.
LS: It’s taken a lot of work.
LC: You’ve had to participate in it.
LS: Yeah.
LC: Not just have it come to you.
LS: Not just have it come to me. I had to take the ball whenever it was thrown to me or I had an opportunity or I saw a light at the end of this dark tunnel and take advantage of it, but because I did that I think it’s important. It’s almost like it’s something I need to do. I need to pass that on. I don’t have to tell everybody my life story, but I can hook into their life story and say, “Well, mine’s not exactly like that, but let me give you some suggestions of what I did at this point in your life.” Maybe it’s helpful. That’s what I want to do, but you’ve got to be connected to be able to do that.

LC: Lynn, is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that you’d like to pitch in. You’ve done such a great job today. Is there anything else on your mind today that you’d like to add?
LS: No. Are we gonna end this now? If I would the only thing I’d like you to indulge me on is that I’d like to read my letter to Larry.
LC: I was gonna ask you about it. If you would like to read it, please do.
LS: Okay.
LC: Let’s go ahead and take a little break first. Okay. Lynn, we’re continuing today on the third of March. Go ahead and tell me about the things that you wanted to clarify.
LS: Okay. I had mentioned in my speaking about religion and spirituality, I said that my daughter had married Jewish. I need to clarify that because Laura is a lesbian and Amanda was her girlfriend during the time period that Laura was going through the treatments at Memorial Sloan-Kettering. I knew then that this relationship was the relationship. Now we had known Laura was a lesbian from the time she had gone to start college. I knew this relationship was more than a normal relationship because Amanda really stuck through Laura through all this. She had come down to New York and stayed there with her and even dumped an entire semester so she could help Laura during the worst part of the treatment. So, it was no surprise that they announced that they wanted to
LC: When did this happen?
LS: This happened in 1997. Yeah.
LS: It was a beautiful ceremony. It was run just exactly like a wedding, the same as a wedding. The ceremony was run by a cantor of Amanda’s folks’ temple in Seattle. They flew him in. He did the ceremony and it was wonderful. The music was wonderful. The sentiment was wonderful. They still have hanging on their wall in their dining room the covenant paper that shows that they had had the ceremony in typical Jewish fashion. Whenever I talk about Laura and Amanda I always say that they’re married. Now, I know that no state government recognizes them as married, but we do. We consider them married. Amanda used artificial insemination in order to have Zoe who is my granddaughter. When they named Zoe, they named her Zoe Rene Latauer—which is Amanda’s last name—Steele, but they did not hyphenate it. So Zoe’s name is Zoe Steele. Laura cannot have children because of her cancer treatment. She would never be able to have children. So Zoe is a Steele. I’m a very doting grandfather and I love going out there. I wanted to clarify that so that we know the story behind.
LC: Amanda is studying, as well, at Berkley. Is that right?
LS: That’s right. They both should be done in 2006 with their dissertations. They’re hoping they’ll have their doctorates. Amanda’s is in American history emphasis on twentieth century women and Laura’s is in Near East Archaeology.
LC: Well, good for them.
LS: They’re both doing very well. I’m very proud of them, but I just wanted to clarify that point.
LC: Okay. Well, thanks. That’s good.
LS: Now I wanted to end this by reading the letter that I left at The Wall when I made my own personal tour of actually Washington, D.C., and then I went to The Wall a number of times. I was describing having some students read this letter while I was watching them and I actually wanted to read the letter ‘cause it meant very much to me.
and this was a very important center piece of my healing process. This along with—
before I start reading I wanted to give a little bit of background. When I was in high
school for two different summers I went to Varna, Illinois, where my Swedish side of the
family relatives lived. I worked on a farm with my uncle and aunt. They’re actually
second cousins, but they were the next generation so I always called them Uncle Oliver
and Aunt Ruth Johnson. They had three children. Larry was the second child. I consider
them my second family because at that point in my life I really needed to see a family
that was functioning very normally like everybody else’s family and mine wasn’t. They
were always an inspiration to me that there is some sanity in the world and some families
do function fairly normally. It was a very important part of my life when I was a
teenager. We found out Larry had died in a firefight. He was shot by a sniper as he was
trying to help some of his men onto a helicopter leaving a firefight in Vietnam. He was
shot from behind. We learned of his death on the night before I left for basic training the
next day. So I was not able to go to his funeral. I found out in this healing process that
one thing I was missing was I had no closure with Larry. He had become in my mind a
symbol of the wastefulness of war in general, and of the Vietnam War in particular, that
he didn’t get to have his adult life like the rest of us had. I wrote this letter that I left at
The Wall and it was all part of my process of my healing, but it also was very deep-felt
sentiment about what I cared about my cousin. If I can end my history here with reading
this letter written to Larry Alan Johnson from Varna, Illinois. He’s on Panel Forty-Three
West, Line Forty-Seven. He was born in February of 1947 and he died in Vietnam on
September the twentieth 1968. He was a sergeant in the Marine Corps. This is the letter.

LC: Good.

LS: “I have come from Kansas to remember you today with the others I know
listed on these panels. It is still hard to see your name on the panel here because it brings
back such wonderful memories of our youth full of promise before this war that snatched
us both and took you forever from us. It is important to me that we all remember that
turbulent time and the real cost of our actions which are named here before me
represents. History will not be kind to our country’s involvement in that war, but we must
never ever forget the dedication of those who went to battle when their country asked no
matter what other lessons we have learned from Vietnam. What I most will cherish about

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you are the summers I spent with you in Illinois. I remember the calf you named after me, the liver of that same bull that we ate when I returned to the farm the next summer.” We called it “Lynn’s liver.” “I remember playing in the hayloft and watching with horror as you fell all the way to the bottom of the bale you were riding like a cowboy and relief that you were not hurt by falling. I remember getting the cows in the barn in the morning and again in the evening and spraying each other with the milk. I remember going to the pasture to dig thistles and spending most of the time just telling stories and sharing dreams of what life was going to be like when we were older. That is what was taken from us, the realization of your dreams and aspirations. As I look up to the other names and remember today your absence will be foremost in my mind. It was awful that I was already away in the service when we heard you were killed. I did not get to go to the funeral and did not see your grave until years later. It has only been in the recent years with the memorials being built and the war stories finally being told that the feelings of anger and frustration and hurt have begun to heal for me and others. It is sad to see your name here. It is good for me, for others who are in and directly touched by this war and for the whole country that your name was placed here in honor of your service. You will always be my personal symbol of the real cost of war and all wars. I hope that the other names here and on other memorials express the same clarity that service to our country does not come without sacrifice. The price of loss of life and its potential must never be trivialized as the policies and strategies are formulated. Your loving cousin, Lynn E. Steele, Salina, Kansas.”

LC: Thank you, Lynn.

LS: Yeah.