Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m beginning an oral history interview with Allan Suydam of the U.S. Army. Allan is a Vietnam Era veteran. Today’s date is the twenty-sixth of February 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech. Al is in Elmwood, Illinois. Is that right, Al?

Allan Suydam: No, I’m actually in Farmington.

Laura Calkins: Oops. Okay. Farmington. How far is that from Elmwood?

Allan Suydam: Six miles.

Laura Calkins: Not too far.

Allan Suydam: No.

Laura Calkins: Okay. So Elmwood is home and then Farmington would be work?

Allan Suydam: Yes.

Laura Calkins: Al, I just want to ask you to begin by telling us a little bit about basic biographical information. Where were you born and when?

Allan Suydam: Well, I was actually born in Milan, Indiana. Actually prematurely in Milan, a couple three weeks early I guess. My folks were traveling to visit some relatives there at the time.

Laura Calkins: Was your mom okay?

Allan Suydam: Sure. Oh, yeah.

Laura Calkins: This was when?

Allan Suydam: July 5th, 1948.
LC: Tell me a little bit about your parents, about your mom first of all. What was her maiden name?

AS: Taylor.

LC: Where was she from?

AS: Actually she was born in Chicago, but then lived in the rural areas here in Fulton County most of her life.

LC: What about your dad? Where was he from?

AS: He was born just near Farmington here.

LC: What did he do for a living?

AS: Carpenter worked mostly. He worked for the State Highway Maintenance Department for a while. Most of his life he spent doing carpenter work.

LC: Was he a relatively young man when you were born?

AS: Let’s see, no, not really.

LC: I was wondering if he had seen service in the Second World War at all?

AS: Yes. He is—he was. He’s deceased now, but he was a World War II veteran.

LC: Do you know what branch of the service he was in?

AS: Army.

LC: Where did he serve?

AS: He was in Italy over seas with an artillery unit.

LC: Did you hear much about his wartime experience as you were growing up?

AS: Very little. Not too much. An occasional remark about a buddy or something, not too much as far as a particular incident, very little of that anyway.

LC: His having served didn’t really figure too much in your own growing up?

AS: Not really.

LC: Where did you go to school, Al?

AS: Here in Farmington.

LC: Tell me about that. Did you go to the public schools?

AS: Yes.

LC: What size of a community is that?
AS: Farmington is just like twenty-six hundred people. So there wasn’t many choices.

LC: I come from a place in Michigan about that same size.

AS: Mm-hmm. I wondered why you didn’t have a Texas accent.

LC: That’s right. Not yet. People are working on me though. I’m from the sort of Genesee County area by Flint, Michigan. A lot of working on the lines up there and stuff.

So your classes then in school would have been pretty small I would guess.

AS: Well, when I graduated high school in 1966 there were ninety-nine graduates.

LC: Really? What was your experience in high school? Did you play sports at all?

AS: No, sure didn’t. Never had any interest in that.

LC: Were you a good student?

AS: Oh, average.

LC: What subjects did you like and then which ones that you didn’t like?

AS: I liked shop class mainly. I kind of liked bookkeeping. I did pretty good in English class. Overall, I didn’t care much for school.

LC: What were you busy doing?

AS: Other than school?

LC: Mm-hmm.

AS: Well, for years I had a paper route. I carried papers, delivered papers after school, on Saturday’s also.

LC: How did you carry the papers around? Did you have a car?

AS: Bicycle, or on foot if the snow was too deep.

LC: Which it often is up there.

AS: Yes.

LC: That’s one nice thing about West Texas I have to say.

AS: Yeah, I would imagine.

LC: Al, tell me a little bit about your awareness as it were when you were a very young man, still in high school, of the war. Did you pay any attention to the news?
AS: Yeah, I did, but just more or less in passing. I didn’t dwell on it or pay that much attention to it. I was well aware of it.

LC: Did your dad talk to you about it at all?

AS: No.

LC: What about other kids in class, maybe friends that you had. You guys were subject to the draft and I know that eventually you were drafted. Did you guys talk about it much?

AS: Oh, yeah. Of course it was more or less jokingly like, “Oh, you’re 1-A,” and all of that kind of kid thing I guess. Kid each other about going, but it was on the lighter side I guess the way we talked about it.

LC: Yeah, it wasn’t really a serious kind of thing.

AS: No, as I remember, no.

LC: You gave me the year that you graduated. Could you just repeat it quickly because I didn’t get it?


LC: What plans did you have? What were you looking forward to after graduation?

AS: Just getting a job.

LC: Did you know what kind of work you wanted to do?

AS: Yeah. I kind of wanted to do carpenter work.

LC: Had you been kind of hanging out with your dad and seeing what he was doing and thinking that might me a good way to go?

AS: Yeah.

LC: Was there a lot of work around?

AS: Yeah, at that time there was.

LC: What kinds of things, was it house building or was it commercial buildings or what kind of things?

AS: Just more or less odds and ends, small like additions. I actually, when I graduated from high school I went to work for one of the two lumber yards here in town. That’s what I did until I was drafted.

LC: When did you get your draft notice?
AS: Oh, gosh, I don’t remember now.

LC: Do you remember getting it? I mean actually how you felt?

AS: Yeah, in the mail I do remember that.

LC: What was that like?

AS: It was expected.

LC: Really? You weren’t surprised?

AS: Oh, no, because I was non-college and I was prime, prime time you know.

No, it was not a surprise.

LC: What did your parents think or say to you when that notice arrived? Do you remember?

AS: They were most, from what I remember, they were concerned.

LC: Sure, yeah. Did your dad talk to you much about what might be coming up for you based on his own experiences?

AS: Well, somewhat. The local Army recruiter was in touch with me at that time. I was pretty close to actually joining for a four year obligation to do something that would maybe have kept me out of the infantry. I came close to doing that.

LC: Do you remember talking to that recruiter?

AS: Somewhat, yeah.

LC: Was that someone who had combat experience? Do you know?

AS: He was an older fellow, even at that time he was. He was a sergeant and I would say it would have been Korea if he did have.

LC: Probably, yeah. When you were sort of weighting that option about the four-year obligation what was going through your mind and what kind of lead you in the direction that you actually took?

AS: Well, I guess what I wanted to sign up for was to learn to be a truck driver, but then I thought man that’s four years and if I end up—and at that time I guess I realized that everyone was being funneled into Vietnam for whatever they needed at the time. At the last minute I said no I’m going to take my chances with the draft and not sign up for a four-year obligation.

LC: So your calculus was sort of driven by wanting to get out of there sooner even though you probably weren’t going to—
AS: Yeah.
LC: Did you ever pursue the truck-driving thing? Did you ever go into that later on?
AS: No, did not.
LC: But it was something that appealed to you earlier on?
AS: Yes. I think that was just, like I say, my logic back then probably would have been to stay out of the infantry in some way if I could.
LC: Oh, okay. But you decided in the end, as you say, to kind of take your chances with a shorter hook-up.
AS: Right.
LC: When did you have to report and where?
AS: I went to Chicago for induction and flew from there to Ft. Benning, Georgia, on March 4th, 1968.
LC: Al, tell me about the induction center. What went on there?
AS: Oh, it was memorable. I guess the thing that really stands out in my mind, even to this day, that of course you go from I think you got like eighteen stations you had to process through. I was behind this one guy. Every place, every station we visited they would stamp a great big red “M” on all of his papers. I thought shoot, well, I didn’t get one of those. The guy behind me didn’t. I thought, man, I don’t know if I should be getting one of those or not.
LC: Right is this a good thing or not.
AS: Yeah, right. Anyway we get processed through all these stations. He’s still getting the big red M’s and I’m not getting anything. Nobody around me. I thought, well, it’s just him. So we get to the last station and there is a smart aleck private there that told this guy in front of me, said, “Oh, hey, congratulations. You’re the first one to be drafted into the Marines this month.” I thought, well, gee now I know I didn’t want one of those.
LC: You just as soon not do that.
AS: Yeah, at that point I thought wow. As it turned out it wouldn’t have probably made much difference.
LC: Yeah. You had hard duty as well as those guys it sounds like. Going through those different stations and stuff, were you sort of getting the idea of how the military operated? Was this kind of your first peek into how life was going to be kind of thing?

AS: Yeah.

LC: How long were you there? A couple of days?

AS: No, just a matter of hours. I flew down to Ft. Benning, Georgia, in the middle of the night.

LC: Was it a charter? Do you remember?

AS: I think it was TWA (Trans World Airlines), I believe.

LC: Was it full of people, I mean guys who were reporting?

AS: The plane was pretty full, yeah.

LC: Now when you arrived at Ft. Benning—okay, it’s the middle of the night. Can you describe what happened when you first got there?

AS: Yeah. It was dark and it’s an unfamiliar place at dark. It’s always a little hard to figure out what’s going on or where you’re at or what the place looks like. We were taken from the airport to some old rundown wooden barracks. Again some smart aleck private comes up and, “You, you, and you are going to do fire watch.” “Well, what’s fire watch?” Of course he gave us the big ration of crap because he had a whole one stripe on his sleeve, but anyway we didn’t know any better. So we had to take turns actually walking up and down the center aisle of the barracks just to make sure that if a fire did start in that old thing that we could wake everybody up and get them out. That’s something you done pretty regular in training. Everybody had to do some fire watch because buildings were old and it would go up like a Kleenex if a fire did start.

LC: Sure. Was this kind of standard as it turned out? Somebody had to be doing this?

AS: Oh, yes.

LC: Was this while other people were like sleeping?

AS: Sure.

LC: Wow.

AS: Like pulling guard duty on your job.

LC: So you’re just walking up and down?
AS: Right, for probably an hour. Of course it might be from two o’clock to three o’clock in the morning, but whatever.

LC: When did you get your gear and stuff? Had they already issued that to you?

AS: No. That was probably—we processed in the next morning and within a couple of days we had all of our clothing and fresh haircut and things like that.

LC: Other guys have described having the DI’s (drill instructor) right up in your face from the minute you got there. Was that how it was for you guys too?

AS: Oh, yes.

LC: Really? Do you remember some of that?

AS: Oh, yeah.

LC: How did you handle it?

AS: Oh, I wasn’t used to it by any means, but you quickly learn to not make a name for yourself. I was in pretty much kind of an elite group in my eight weeks of basic training in that we were the first company in the Army, the way I understood at that time, to have—our company was like fifty percent Puerto Rican draftees. The first group of Puerto Ricans to be drafted the way I understood it then.

LC: They told you that at the time?

AS: Yes.

LC: How did you get along with those guys?

AS: Oh, I got along with them okay in that I didn’t have much association with them. Some of them, they weren’t willing to associate so therefore I didn’t. There was a lot of, well, turned out to be anger between the Puerto Ricans and the rest of us.

LC: Where did that come from? Did it preexist before Ft. Benning and it was just getting played out?

AS: Well, one thing, they spoke their language and we couldn’t understand them. Naturally some guys don’t get along, but this fact really made it worse I’m sure.

LC: Did you have any sense of how well they understood English?

AS: No, I don’t think they did understand very much English. In fact one of our drill sergeants was really a good guy. He was partly Puerto Rican and when he would say something in English, he would always say it in Puerto Rican where they could understand it too. So it was kind of a bilingual thing if you will.
LC: But it was a little tense.

AS: It was and we never were quarantined to the base the whole eight weeks. We never left while we were doing training. We got no weekend passes and we didn’t get to leave the post.

LC: Was your company pretty much the only one that that applied to?

AS: That I don’t remember. If any of the other companies in the battalion had Puerto Ricans or not I really can’t remember.

LC: Did other companies though generally get to go off base?

AS: Everybody you talked to in basic training they at some point got weekend passes to go somewhere, but we did not. Never did. Like I say, we were totally quarantined.

LC: Did that kind of hack off the guys in your unit?

AS: Well, yeah, because we were, “Geez how come we got the short straw?” Being in this elite group and like I say it did make for some tense times. Then we had a big rash of URI, upper respiratory infection they called it. I actually spent a couple of days in the hospital as did oh I bet seventy-five percent of the guys here, just a real high fever and congested lung. You were just pretty darn sick really. Some guys were coughing up blood even. Eventually like I say I’ll bet seventy-five percent of the guys went on sick call for that and ended up in the hospital or whatever.

LC: What did you guys attribute that to? Was it just a germ going around?

AS: I don’t know. I guess I always thought maybe it was something from Puerto Rico, but I don’t know.

LC: Something anyway that you guys didn’t have a defense against.

AS: Something that I had never seen before. I mean, I’d had colds, sure. That was, it was pretty nasty really. The big thing there was if you missed so many days of training then you had to be, the termed they used was “recycled”. That means you had to do basic training over again.

LC: And nobody wanted that.

AS: And nobody wanted that. So you took those—when you were in the hospital, you took those cold showers at two o’clock in the morning to get your fever down so you could get back to the company area and not be a recycle.
LC: You guys were already having to think in those terms?
AS: Yes and that was kind of added to the pandemonium.
LC: Let me ask you about weapons training. What did you qualify on or what did you have exposure to during basic?
AS: Mainly the M-14 rifle.
LC: How did you get along with that? Had you done much shooting before?
AS: No, not really. I mean, I went hunting with my dad. My brother and I and my dad used to go hunting with shotguns, but never really around a rifle that much.
LC: How’d you do with it? Was it something that you picked up easily or not really?
AS: Oh, I think so, yeah. It was fun.
LC: What about after basic, what happened to you then?
LC: Why didn’t you get a leave in there? Most people did.
AS: None of us did. We all went directly to AIT after basic. I’m sure that was due to the big push to get warm bodies in Vietnam. Looking back I’m sure that was the case.
LC: Probably, yeah. Where you at this point paying more attention to what was going on over there in terms of the news and maybe news papers? Did you not have access to that?
AS: Again I didn’t understand what you were—
LC: I was just asking if you had any access to news while you were either in basic or going on up to Washington?
AS: Oh, really very little. We didn’t have TVs or much of anything like that. We just totally went on hear say.
LC: Were people talking about the Tet Offensive and stuff?
AS: I don’t remember hearing that term at all.
LC: Really? Tell me about Fort Lewis. What was that like?
AS: Cold. The day we landed at Sea-Tac Airport and here we got our short-sleeved khaki dress-up uniforms on. We got off the plane and the wind was blowing
about fifty miles an hour and there were snow flurries and we were just sitting there just
shaking, actually freezing. There was a lot of days that the weather was not good. I still
say about that area, to this day, that when it’s sunny and nice there is not a prettier place
in the country than up in that area.

LC: It is beautiful, yes.
AS: Yes it is. It really is.
JC: What were you supposed to be learning during AIT (advanced infantry
training)?
AS: Well, AIT stands for I guess, the way I understand it, two different things. It
can mean Advanced Individual Training or Advanced Infantry Training. In my case it
was the latter.

LC: What was the content that they were trying to get across to you? How was it
taught?
AS: Well, again we learned more weapons, more weaponry, machine guns, lie
down and tank weapons and how to maneuver. About this point, we’re all seriously
trying to pick up on anything that we could that might keep us alive.

LC: Like what kinds of things, Al?
AS: Well, what to look out for. All the DI’s there, most of them, were all
Vietnam veterans. They would off the record say, “Hey watch this and watch that,”
which you definitely kept your ears open.

LC: Al, do you remember some of the kinds of things they were trying to tell you
about? Were they trying to tell you about the enemy, about the enemy tactics, enemy
weapons? Do you remember?
AS: Yeah. A little bit of everything. Anything that was—they were good about—
anything they thought would be helpful to us. They would, like I say, keep us from
getting hurt or killed. They tried to convey that information to us.

LC: Did they talk to you for example about booby traps and stuff like that?
AS: Yeah, we had classes on that. Then escape and evasion and you know things
like that.
LD: Did you actually have to take any kind of special sub-course that was an E&E (escape and evasion) sub-course? Like did they take you out in the hills, have some kind of a mock trial or anything like that?

AS: Yeah, we actually did escape and evasion at night. We had to get from point A to point B at night. There was another company of people there that were going to be our captures. Of course obviously we were trying to get to point B without being captured. If we were captured then they did in fact try to extract information from us and some pretty, not real harmful ways, but they did do a little torture on some guys I guess.

LC: Do you remember any details around that that you can share or is it kind of vague at this point?

AS: No, I don’t remember, just what I heard, but I don’t remember any particulars on what they actually did too those guys. I fortunately never got caught.

LC: I was going to ask, how did you do?

AS: I made it.

LC: You made it. Were you paired up with somebody?

AS: Yeah, we were like in groups of three.

LC: Do you remember the guys that you were with?

AS: Mm-hmm.

LC: Were they buddies of yours or had you kind of known them before?

AS: No, I really did not know anyone from basic that I knew. A lot of guys from Ft. Benning, Georgia, and basic, everybody went every direction. Guys that were going to special schools. Artillery guys went to Ft. Hood, Texas. Meanwhile a lot of them went to Ft. McClellan and Ft. Polk, Louisiana, for infantry, but I went to Ft. Lewis. I did make some buddies there, yes.

LC: During AIT you kind of gelled with a couple of people there?

AS: Mm-hmm.

LC: Just if you recall can you say their names or where they were from?

AS: Yeah, sure. One was Joe Swells and I can’t tell you where he was from. I want to say Washington DC. A guy by the name of Joseph Shick from Indiana, and a guy by the name of Clyde Sweatt.

LC: How do you spell his last name?

LC: Okay, two t’s.

AS: This guy was from the foothills in Tennessee. He was KIA (killed in action) in Vietnam I found out in the last three years.

LC: You’ve just found that out?

AS: Well, within the last two years actually.

LC: Did you kind of just hook up together? Were they like bunkmates or how did you kind of find yourself—?

AS: Yeah, however you hook up with guys. You find you have the things in common or whatever, same demeanor or whatever and you hang around together. There we had passes for a weekend. We would go into Seattle or Tacoma and spend the night and just walk around and see the sights a little bit. Go to a concert, you know, something like that.

LC: How long did AIT last for you at Fort Lewis?

AS: Nine weeks.

LC: When you came out of there after nine weeks what would you say your confidence level was about what you were going toward?

AS: That’s a good one.

LC: Did you feel like you had—?

AS: Did I feel like I had ample training?

LC: Well, yeah.

AS: Then I probably thought I did.

LC: Maybe later you changed your mind?

AS: Oh, yes.

LC: The before and after is a little hard to sort out sometimes.

AS: But I thought that I could do that.

LC: You thought you could handle yourself probably?

AS: Oh, yeah. If I had to put a percentage I would say sixty percent or maybe seventy.
LC: As you say you had been kind of been listening for any kind of off the books cues about things to do. So that probably also made you feel like you had some kind of inside knowledge too.

AS: Yeah. They, going back to the DIs here a little bit, but they in some of their talks they would try to scare you into making a point. That worked. They got your attention and it did scare you so you listened. That was kind of a good tactic for them to use I guess.

LC: How did they actually do that? Did they scare you by telling you of something that had actually happened? What kinds of things did they use to get your attention?

AS: Well, let’s see. I do remember prior to the escape and evasion we had like a two-day class prior to the actual escape and evasion thing that we did. One of the guys, the instructors up on stage, he gave a long meaningful talk. He had this rabbit in a cage beside him all this time. When he got done, he was telling you how to survive if you got somehow left, how to survive. At the end he pulled the rabbit out of it’s cage, snapped it’s neck, pulled it apart with his bare hands, and ate the heart out of it. That’s true. Then he says something like, oh, that’s good when it’s still warm like that. You’re like, oh my God. This guy’s for real. Something like that, you know, he was making a point, but it was high drama I would say.

LC: That’s some pretty graphic stuff there. And that got your attention.

AS: Yeah. Also it maybe told us, hey anything goes. You do what you have to do.

LC: Is that what you took away from that?

AS: Yeah, I mean like I say he was, I’m sure he was being very dramatical, but it worked.

LC: Wow. Did you have another stop in the U.S. before you went overseas?

AS: I went home.

LC: Tell me a little bit about going home after you had all this training and stuff.

AS: I believe I had like a fifteen-day leave, which was not a thirty-day leave. It was fifteen almost certain. Two weeks. Oh it was—actually I don’t remember much about it. Got drunk a few times.
LC: I don’t blame you.
AS: Other than that I think I tried to stay maybe away from home a little bit to
not pick up on the feelings in the household at the time.
LC: Did you have brothers and sisters?
AS: Yeah, an older sister, a younger brother, and a younger sister.
LC: How much younger was your brother?
AS: Three years.
LC: Did you have concerns about him going through the same thing you were
going through or not really?
AS: Well, no I guess I didn’t really. I guess I was hoping he was young enough.
Three years might keep him from—in that respect I guess I was and I sure didn’t want
him to have to go through that. Especially because I know it’s hard on my parents. One
family member doing that was enough.
LC: So you had a little bit of time back at home and your orders to report, what
did they say?
AS: Well, be in Oakland Army terminal at such and such a date in Oakland,
California.
LC: How did you get out there? Did you fly?
AS: Flew.
LC: Was this Travis that you went though?
AS: Yes.
LC: How long were you there?
AS: Oh, gee, don’t really remember. I would guess probably two days at the
most.
LC: What kinds of things did you have to do during that time? Get shots and
stuff?
AS: Well, I think we had all of our shots prior to that, but we may have gotten a
shot or two there. We had umpteen shots of course with being in basic and AIT. Like I
say I don’t really remember, just processing I suppose is the overall term to use there.
Waiting for the plane to leave and all that’s planned out ahead of time.
LC: Al, how much notice did you have? Did somebody come in and say all right, you’re on a plane in twenty minutes or how did it actually happen that you got to the plane?

AS: There again I honestly don’t remember. I suppose we got that message when we first arrived there and then just processed. Then we knew what time we were going to go.

LC: Then you’re just killing time.

AS: Yeah.

LC: Was there anybody there that you already knew?

AS: Pardon me.

LC: Was there anybody there at Travis that you saw that you already knew?

AS: Oh, excuse me just a minute here.

LC: Sure.

AS: Yeah. This Joe Swells was there and Joseph Shick was also there.

LC: Did you guys get on the same plane or did you get separated from them again?

AS: No, I think we were on the same plane.

LC: Do you remember the flight at all?

AS: Yeah, Flying Tigers Airline.

LC: Flying Tigers, okay. What was your route over there, over to Vietnam?

AS: Anchorage, Alaska, and then Yokota Air Force Base in Japan. I know we were in the air, well, I shouldn’t say in the air, but travel time was exactly twenty-four hours.

LC: Really?

AS: Yes, long time.

LC: Did you get off the plane at Yokota?

AS: Both places.

LC: Oh, you did, both times?

AS: Yeah.

LC: Okay, but not for very darn long?

AS: No.
LC: And where did you fly into? Do you remember?
AS: Into Long Binh.
LC: Okay. Al, did you arrive at night or during the day? Do you remember?
AS: Daytime.
LC: What do you first remember about arriving in-country?
AS: Well, first of all flying over you’re looking down there and you’re seeing bomb craters and you’re like geez. This is it. The reality comes to you that it’s crunch time. So we land and I guess I have to echo the same responses to everything I’ve ever read here in the last two or three years and mine would be the same that when the door opens and you walk towards the door you feel the intense heat and humidity and the stench that the country has.
LC: That was real for you too?
AS: Oh, yes.
LC: Where did you go when you got off the plane?
AS: Formation.
LC: Oh, really? Wow.
AS: I must tell this story too. I had been in-country about twenty minutes and we’re standing there in formation. You’re fatigued. You’re covered in sweat at that point. Again some private walks up and says, “I need three volunteers. You, you, and you come with me.” Well, again, I got picked.
LC: Yeah, what is it about you Al?
AS: I don’t know. (Laughter) I’m a pretty average looking guy and everything. I don’t know what it was. So he says, “Follow me.” So we did, not knowing what the heck we were going to do. We were taken to a little wooden building. This was a latrine and he instructed us to go around back and open up these trap doors. So we did. Now slide out the barrels. These were fifty-five gallon drums cut in half and they were full of body excrement. You’ve probably heard this before.
LC: Well, it’s pretty bad but go ahead. I just have an idea about it.
AS: Then here’s the kerosene, here’s a little gasoline, burn it. Here’s your stir stick. I mean you actually, you know, had to burn it down. You stirred it so that it was all—when you’re down there was nothing but ashes left. You waited for them to cool off
and you slid them back in there. So I wasn’t out in the country and I was burning shit already. Not a very good first impression, but that’s the way of life there. There is no sewers so.

LC: What about the other guys that had to do this too? Were you guys just all why us and that kind of thing?

AS: Probably not too much because we were used to Army ways. You had KP (kitchen police) one or two times prior to that. It’s just duty. Everybody had to take turns doing it. It was just that we had never done duty like this before.

LC: How long did it take to finish this process of getting everything burned up?

AS: Oh, I suppose an hour or so.

LC: Really? Okay. Now you’ve had this introduction to life in Vietnam and you, what, go back and fall in again?

AS: Well, by that time the rest of the group had moved off by bus, I guess, maybe to the 90th Replacement Company. After we had done our little duty we joined them.

LC: Now the 90th Replacement, was that like a holding company where people are waiting to get dispersed to their units?

AS: Right, exactly.

LC: How long did you have to kind of hook up with that unit until someone came for you?

AS: I really don’t remember how long I was there. I would guess probably a couple of days.

LC: Did you have any other duties during that time period? Put down watch or anything?

AS: Just processing, no. No guard duty there that I can remember.

LC: How did you get out of there?

AS: Convoy. When I got assigned to my battalion we convoyed out and actually went right through—let’s see. I believe we went through Saigon.

LC: Where did you end up?

AS: I ended up in Dau Tieng.

LC: What unit were you assigned to?
AS: Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry of the 25th Division.

LC: Tell me about where you arrived. Where did the convoy kind of put you out?

AS: In Dau Tieng, the base camp there.

LC: Was it a fire support base?

AS: Yes. I never got familiar with the place that much because I was only there two or three days.

LC: Right and then you were out into the bush, right?

AS: Well, that pretty much was in the bush. Near the rubber plantation, but it wasn’t, as I remember, not a real big base. Not like Cu Chi was. We processed in there and at that point the whole battalion was moving. During Tet it had lost a lot of people. They were actually—like I say the two or three days I was there, then we flew back toward Saigon and were in a kind of a logger position in a little village of Hoc Mon which was just outside the air base there. It was not a safe area by any means, but it was kind of a back position where there wasn’t a whole lot going on at that time and we were just rebuilding.

LC: Now by airbase, do you mean Tan Son Nhut?

AS: Right.

LC: About how far from the airbase were you?

AS: Oh, I don’t know, maybe a click, a thousand meters.

LC: Who did you report to, Al?

AS: Probably the company clerk back in Dau Tieng. Other than that I don’t really remember. Probably the platoon leader I would imagine would had to have been. When I got assigned to a platoon, which was 1st Platoon.

LC: How many guys were there in the platoon when it settled down?

AS: Yeah. Around Hoc Mon there I’m almost certain that we had about, I think right at thirty-seven guys.

LC: Was that pretty much full strength?

AS: Yeah, I would say for that place and time that was a large platoon.

LC: What was your rank at this point?

AS: I was just a private.

LC: Were you assigned to a particular squad?
AS: Yeah.

LC: Which squad? What was its call?

AS: That I don’t know.

LC: How many guys were in a squad?

AS: I think, if I remember, it was something that was very unclear because so many people were in and out, but I would say their maximum only had like fifteen guys in three squads. In each of the three I should say.

AS: Somewhere in that area.

LC: Right, fifteen guys in each group.

AS: Yes. At that point most of us were rolling in.

LC: So the platoon strength was being rebuilt basically after Tet.

AS: Yeah, the whole battalion, as a whole, yes.

LC: Where had the battalion been during Tet, did you ever find out? Did you hear?

AS: Yeah. They were in the defensive right around Saigon during Tet. They took some losses, a lot of large losses.

LC: You were essentially a rifleman, is that right?

AS: Yes.

LC: That was your MOS (military occupational specialty) basically.

AS: 11-B. 11-bang bang, we affectionately called it.

LC: In your squad were their people with other specialties or was it all riflemen?

AS: No, we were all 11-Bravos. We carried different weapons, some of us.

LC: What were you carrying? What were you assigned to carry?

AS: At that point I was carrying an M-16.

LC: Now you had, I think, trained on the M-14 earlier.

AS: Yes.

LC: What was the difference to you?

AS: Oh, the 16 was just a lot lighter. Of course we had training on it too in AIT so I was familiar with it.
LC: Did you have a preference between the two of them?

AS: Oh, yeah, I would have carried the M-16 just because it was lighter. You could carry more ammo. Even though it was a smaller round, it was very effective.

LC: It was substantially lighter than the M-14.

AS: Yes.

LC: What did an average day—when you first got there, how did an average day kind of unfold for you? What were you supposed to be doing? What did you do?

AS: Around Hoc Mon when I first got into the field?

LC: Yeah.

AS: We would go out on patrol every day and ambush every fourth night.

LC: What’s the difference between a patrol and an ambush?

AS: Well, a patrol you’re moving all the time basically. You plot out your course on a map before hand. You might take a 118-degree azimuth for 600 meters and then go on a 273-degree azimuth for 200 meters and blah blah blah until you usually made a clover leaf and come back to the camp. You walked and you had a point element of usually two or three guys that lead you. This is in the daytime on a, what they called a RIF, an R-I-F. It was short for reconnaissance in force. You had two or three guys that were point men that had to keep the pace count and use the compass to make sure. They were the leaders and the first ones through. Then behind those guys there were two lines of people, riflemen. On the outside of these two lines on either side were flank men that walked flank for protection from the flank obviously. At night, an ambush was at night. When you left the wire and the camp you went in a single file. You were extremely quiet as you were all the time, but at night in particular you wanted to maintain silence, radio silence. You didn’t talk unless you whispered up close to somebody. Then what you did on an ambush, just like it suggests that you go to a pre-plotted place on the map and that was so that everybody in the artillery knew where you were and everybody knew where you were so you better be where you were supposed to be for obvious reasons. Then you would set up in usually three, maybe four five-man or four-man positions. You would set out your claymore mines in front of you. You would set up a guard thing for, one guy is on guard and the three are asleep. Then you would take your turn staring into the
darkness for a couple hours at a time trying to stay awake and fight off the mosquitoes
and the ants and whatever else might be crawling on you. It was pretty tense.

LC: Yeah, I was going to ask you. Maybe the first couple of times that you had to
go out on one of these, can you describe what that felt like?

AS: Yeah, it was tense. It’s just like, well, again, I would have to say my feelings
at night like that were just like a lot of everyone else’s. Every little bush you would see
out there in the dark would be—you’d swear it was moving and it was somebody and not
just a bush. You’re just hyper alert.

LC: Did you have any contact at all on your first time you went out?

AS: No.

LC: What about during the daily patrols?

AS: Yeah, it was about a couple of days we had. We were going through an area
and received several sniper rounds.

LC: Where were you in the formation?

AS: I was in one of the files.

LC: Where did the bullet come in vis-à-vis sort of where you were? Did it come
in at the guy on point? Do you even know?

AS: That I probably wasn’t that familiar at that time. I knew it was an incoming
round, but at that point I was green enough that I couldn’t really tell if it was close or not.
We learn that eventually, but at that point I didn’t know. I do know, I explicitly
remember this, your first reaction is to hit the ground and I did that. Just as a natural
reaction and I remember laying there in the ground and just, it was clear. I got up. The
whole front of me was just soaking in sweat because of the heat and a little tension too I
guess.

LC: A little adrenaline rush there.

AS: There you go. Yes.

LC: I can well believe it. Al, when was the first time that on one of these walk
out’s either during the day or at night that you came across more than just sniper fire? Do
you remember that?
AS: Well, I should explain that after we spent a couple, I think maybe a week and 
a half maybe two weeks at this little logger position. It was actually in a graveyard in Hoc 
Mon we moved again.

LC: Where did you go?

AS: This time we went to a fire support base out in the boonies. It’s called Fire 
Support Base Pershing

LC: Pershing? Like General Pershing?

AS: Exactly. This is where things were happening.

LC: Where was it? Still in Dau Tieng area?

AS: No, it was not quite that far north, nor west. It was kind of near the village 
Trang Bang. It was awfully close to the Hobo Woods, if you’ve ever heard of that. The 
Boi Loi Woods and so forth and so on. It was just off the road of 6-Alpha, 6-A. Like I say 
it was pretty much, I mean it was out in the boonies where things were happening. 
Actually in that place we got I guess my actual first contact. I really don’t remember. I 
mean there were many, but I don’t remember the first. I would guess it was probably that 
place got—well, we had a battery of 105 Howitzer artillery pieces there.

LC: At the base?

AS: Yeah, at Pershing. We got mortared quite a bit because the enemy was trying 
to knock out those guns. I think any incoming rounds was probably from mortars. We did 
get mortared there a lot.

LC: Al, describe the defensive perimeter of the firebase. How was it set up?

AS: Just in a circle. It was probably maybe 250 yards across. It had I believe, we 
numbered the bunkers there at one time, but I believe it had close to fifty bunkers around 
that they were so far apart. All manned, well, most of the time at night until we got so 
thin that—but anyway, yeah. Well, we had RPG (rocket propelled grenade) screens in 
front of them during the wet season.

LC: What’s an RPG screen for somebody that doesn’t know about it?

AS: Do you know what an RPG is?

LC: Yes.

AS: A rocket-propelled grenade. During the wet season—we had our bunkers 
underground at first because it was the dry season you could stay underground. It was a
little cooler and you obviously had more protection. In the monsoon seasons we had to
build them—well, actually we came back from patrol one day when it started raining and
found out our underground bunker had totally collapsed. It had filled with water and we
lost all of our personal stuff. We were distraught. Then we built bunkers on top of the
ground for obvious reasons. Being if you were profile, silhouette bunker for the enemy to
shoot an RPG at. How an RPG works, do you know?

LC: No, go ahead and describe it.

AS: Well, I think all of us had RPGs hit close to us and I have. You have to
understand, I guess you could almost say we ate those things for breakfast, which a lot of
cases we did, but the thing is if one landed somewhere beside you they weren’t that bad,
okay? The shape of the charge, if it hit an armored personnel carrier or a tank or a bunker
the force goes straight forward and therefore that’s when they are really devastating. You
follow me on that?

LC: Yeah. The force of the explosion goes right straight forward.

AS: Goes forward and that’s why guys in APCs (armored personnel carrier) got
hit by those things. If it would have landed beside them it wouldn’t have been anything,
but being that it hit that and that round.

LC: Something about the design of it.

AS: The design, exactly. It’s a shape charged and it’s made to do that. Here’s our
bunker sitting up here. What we would do is get big metal stakes and drive in the ground
in front of the bunker and we’d attach wire to them. Therefore if an RPG hit that screen it
would blow up not hurting anybody, but if it hit the bunker and it was full of guys it
would probably kill a bunch of guys. Do you understand?

LC: Sure. Did you guys just make this up?

AS: No it come down from somewhere. Everybody had RPG screens. That’s just
a given.

LC: There wasn’t any like special material. You guys just kind of threw it
together.

AS: Just Army stuff. Just actually what they called engineering stay system.

Metal stakes that we would drive into the ground and just like chain link fence wire,
unrolled and wired it up there.
LC: Now tell me a little bit about this time that you came back and it was raining and your guys’ hooch basically had collapsed.

AS: Our bunker, yeah.

LC: What happened? What did you lose?

AS: Well, you know all your personal stuff.

LC: Like your letters and stuff?

AS: Well, actually I did manage to have a lot of my stuff in an ammo can that when you clamped the lid down it does seal pretty much tight. I saved a lot of my letter writing stuff and some letters. Then also I had a wet weather bag. It’s like a canvas bag that has a plastic lining that I kept stuff, which you had to keep stuff in from the humidity and so forth and so on. It was just really disheartening. I remember coming back and seeing that. Then we had to dig it all out after we had been humping the boonies for all day and then you got to do this.

LC: Like a kick in the chest kind of thing.

AS: Yeah, it was. Anyway we salvaged what we could and went on. What could you do?

LC: Not much, probably not much.

AS: Guys were good about helping on things like that. We all worked together. It was a lifetime of shoveling dirt, filling sandbags anyway. I think everybody there in my capacity probably dug twenty, thirty tons of dirt during the year.

LC: So digging out your place wasn’t a whole lot different from stuff you had to do kind of all the time, at least in terms of the digging.

AS: Exactly. We were all the time doing that. We were digging all the time it seemed like. Filling sandbags at night. Ambush, we’d dig a foxhole a lot of times. We were always doing work on the bunkers just for our own protection.

LC: Yes. So there wasn’t a lot of off time for you basically?

AS: No. Well, no.

LC: There was always something to do.

AS: Oh, yes. I guess one of the big things, I look back and a lot of guys talk about now was sleep deprivation. I’m sure we all—I know in particular two or three
times we would be up for two full straight days maybe with two hours sleep or less.

That’s not exaggerating.

LC: Oh, I’m sure. I believe you.

AS: If you did get a night’s sleep it was, well, just to give you an example, like I said when we left Hoc Mon we probably had thirty-eight, forty guys in our platoon. I don’t remember at which point after we got to Pershing, but this same platoon had thirty-seven to forty guys in it was down to thirteen. Of course some of the guys DEROSed (date of estimated return from overseas). They went home, but most of them were injured or worse. You’re one of the thirteen so therefore comes guard duty at night. Where normally you would have an hour, you might have had two or three hours or more.

LC: Right. So one of the consequences of it being low on men was you had to stay awake longer basically.

AS: Exactly. Then you’d be up early and you’d be gone all day. You’d be humping the boonies with thirty, forty, well, I wouldn’t say forty, thirty something pounds on your back. You’re sweating and you’re battling the elements. You’re doing the Army BS. You’re very intent on watching where you’re walking and you’re looking. You’re looking everywhere to try to see somebody before they saw you. I wasn’t at Pershing very long until I did manage to switch weapons. I somehow got conned into carrying an M-60 machine gun. I carried that thing for I think about seven months I guess or maybe longer simply because nobody else wanted to.

LC: Al—

AS: There I go again.

LC: Yeah. Why didn’t anyone else want to, Al?

AS: Well, a lot of reasons. The main things is—well, no. I’ll start with the lesser reasons. It weighted twenty-three and a half pounds. Then with that I always carried a belt of ammo. You know what a machine gun belt of ammunition would look like? Bullets all linked together. I carried about three hundred round of ammo for that gun. I carried a .45 pistol with two or three clips of ammo for it. Of course the other thing, I carried C-rations, some grenades, some smoke grenades. Maybe a white phosphorous grenade, couple canteens of water. Maybe a light anti-tank weapon. Maybe a Claymore
mine, and whatever you thought you needed. Maybe some C-4 explosive and stuff like that. A first-aid packet, you know. Oh and my good luck charm.

LC: Tell me, what was your good luck charm?

AS: Well, believe it or not it was—and you know there was no gas agent things, stuff like that used there you know that I ever knew of. I always carried an injection of atropine.

LC: Where did you get that?

AS: That was issued to me. I think it actually became my good luck charm. I always carried it in my pocket. I thought I never need this damn thing, but I’m going to carry it. I did lose it a couple of times, but found it. I was like, “Man, where is my atropine?” It was kind of weird. I just couldn’t be without it. I found it every time.

LC: So it just became the thing that you had that you better have all the time.

AS: Everybody, “What the hell you doing with that thing?” “It’s just in my pocket. Leave it alone.”

LC: When was that issued to you?

AS: I don’t know. I have no idea. Probably when they issued us gas masks when we first got in-country.

LC: Interesting. Well, it was pretty lightweight good luck charm. I’ve heard of other things. Seems like you’re carrying a lot of stuff so light weight was good.

AS: I’ll tell you a little more about the M-60 machine gun. When you carried that you had two guys that were rifleman that each carried five hundred to a thousand rounds of ammunition for your machine gun. They were really loaded down. Plus they carried a M-16 with eighteen loaded magazines for it, plus their own stuff, you know, C-rations, water, some grenades, smoke grenades, some oily peters, maybe some LAWs, you know light anti-tank weapons, and claymores and whatever, but you were pretty well loaded down by the time you got saddled up.

LC: Being the person who had the M-60 was not, it wasn’t like a choice job.

AS: Oh, it had lots of fire power, but the drawback is that if you had to shoot it at night it was not—and this is the reason nobody wanted it. Every fifth round that came out of it was a tracer. You know what a tracer is?

LC: Yeah. The reason therefore is that they know exactly where you were.
AS: Exactly.
LC: Every fifth round, why was that? What was the mechanism of that? Do you know?
AS: Just simply so you would know where you were shooting.
LC: Really?
AS: Yeah. You could follow—if you shoot at night, how do you know where you’re shooting because you can’t see the bullets? I mean you can’t see the bullets in the daytime, but with tracers you can. If you’re trying to shoot at a bunker and the wood line, how do you know where you’re shooting?
LC: So every fifth round was loaded with a—
AS: Well, it had a red phosphorous tip on the end of it. It went through the air, just the air resistances made it glow red. Yeah, you could be accurate that way, if you knew what you were shooting at.
LC: But you could also be found.
AS: Exactly. That’s the main reason nobody wanted it.
LC: So how did you get this duty? Do you remember?
AS: Oh, I just volunteered. I think somebody DEROSed home or begged or something. I said, “Well, I’ll take it.” It was pretty much a load. It made a sore. I carried it on my shoulder like everybody did. It took me a couple of weeks to get a callus built up there where it wouldn’t hurt.
LC: Especially you’re sweating and all the rest. Well, you’ve mentioned water a couple of times. Talked about just sweating out all the time, how did you guys handle the water situation?
AS: You started out, maybe you carried two or three canteens when you first got in-country and then you’re still looking for water. Eventually I think I got down to one canteen. Actually your body adjusts well. I think most people and I did. I adjusted pretty well to the heat and humidity after a while. I know there were a couple guys over there that got to us. That went through eight weeks of basic, nine weeks of AIT and they were still pretty plump. Well, when they got with us, believe me they melted. They really did. After a while you got, you actually got used to it. But water, no. In camp there we had
potable and non-potable water. We were lucky to have the potable for showers or whatever go. They were few and far between as were clean clothes and clean socks.

LC: How was the water brought in?

AS: In a tank. We had a daily convoy that came in from Cu Chi, brought us in our mail, maybe some clean clothes, water, ammunition, you know, things like that.

LC: About how many trucks were in those convoys? Do you remember?

AS: Four or five probably.

LC: They came every day?

AS: Everyday. I shouldn’t say everyday, everyday that they didn’t have a problem on the road. A trunk hit a big land mine and blew it to pieces or they got ambushed or whatever.

LC: Right. You talked about the problem of getting clean clothes and stuff. I wonder what did you do about taking care of your feet?

AS: I was fortunate I guess. I was out everyday just like everybody else, but I didn’t have quite the problems with my feet like a lot of guys did because you’re wet. You’re wet even in the dry season. You’re always walking through a vacant rice paddy or a creek or stream or whatever. You’re sweating too still. Yeah. You just never took your boots off. You slept in them. Same socks for sometimes weeks on—at least a couple of weeks you know.

LC: So it was a problem for a lot of guys I’m sure.

AS: Yes it was.

LC: What about getting sick?

AS: Getting sick?

LC: Yeah.

AS: No, I never was sick there.

LC: Not from bad water, no food, lack of food, bad food, any of that?

AS: No. When we were doing road security you had occasion to maybe eat something from one of the local villagers little whatever. Anybody that was smart would not eat that. I can remember one guy catching a cold. This is a totally different subject. We had a couple of guys, like I say, all of our spare time was spent digging, filling sand bags. They had these huge centipedes in the ground. I mean bigger around than a big
guy’s thumb and six, eight inches long. We would always find them and cut them up with a trenching tool, but we had two guys that were actually bitten by those. Oh, they were like flat on their back sick for two days. I don’t know what kind of venom they had, but they were pretty nasty.

LC: Did you know about the insects and stuff and what to stay away from? How did you find that out? Just by experiences like this, where these two guys just—

AS: Yeah, basically. When I left the States I thought yeah I was pretty confident. There is no way any training can prepare you for the actual doing it. Yeah the mosquitos were terrible, but there again I don’t know. I guess I just had enough body order later on they wouldn’t come around. That is something that you really—at times you were bothered by them, but not like you were when you first got in-country. I mean they just ate you alive. Like fresh meat, mm here we go.

LC: They smell you coming.

AS: I mean I always like to say that besides the elements that was tough, all the insects and the reptiles and everything was against you there. I’m sure you’ve heard of the big red fire ants.

LC: Go ahead and describe those.

AS: Well, if you would be walking through the jungle or whatever and you hardly, unless you were really looking, you’re ducking through brush and this and that. If you happen to hit a limb that was totally—I mean these limb and leaves would be totally covered with these big red ants. If you would bump that with your helmet or whatever I mean they would just rain down on you. When they bit you I mean you knew it. I’ve seen many a guy completely just strip down to nothing in a matter of seconds to get them off of you. You actually had to pick them off.

LC: Is that all you could do is pull the guy’s clothes off of him?

AS: Yeah. When they bit you they wouldn’t let go, their pinchers. They were pretty, they were three eighths of an inch long or maybe a little longer even. When they bit you they left a mark.

LC: Oh, yes. We have fire ants in the southeast when I lived over there in Atlanta and they were bad enough. If you had any allergy to it at all. Did you ever see guys really get sick with having been stung or bitten by those?
AS: No.
LC: Okay. That was yet another hazard.
AS: Oh, yes.
LC: Al, what about pets? We’ve talked about bad animals, bad insects, what about pets? Did any of the guys keep pets at all?
AS: Yeah, but I would like to tell you about the other ants.
LC: Good, okay. More insects.
AS: These were little tiny things. Almost you couldn’t hardly see them in the daylight. A lot of times on night ambush you’d be laying on the ground or head to a fox hole or something and all of a sudden your whole arm would feel like it was just burning up. What had happened is all these little tiny, tiny, tiny black ants would crawl on you, like I say, like your arm. It seems like they had a commander that said, “Okay, bite.” They would all bite. But actually this felt like, “Oh, damn,” and you’re out there in the middle of the night or whatever.
LC: Trying to be quiet.
AS: Yeah. They were pretty nasty too really. As well as the snakes and the water buffalo.
LC: Did you come across snakes at all?
AS: Oh, yeah, cobras.
LC: Really? Did you see any?
AS: I had one crawl over me.
LC: Okay. Tell me about that.
AS: Okay. It was one of those days, well, it would have been October eighth is the exact date. We had been involved with the enemy for a couple of days. It was one of those days where hardly any sleep for two days and we were still on the marsh chasing, well, actually running chasing, but we were behind the left over elements of the unit we had been engaged with of the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). We had stopped because the guys up front had found a wounded NVA soldier. I was still carrying this big machine gun at this time. Of course when you stop you get down and maintain a defensive posture. I just put my right hand down on the ground and my head flopped over to the right on my right shoulder and boom I was asleep. The next thing I know I feel something
and I just happen to open my eyes and look down. I could see this tail of a snake that had
crawled right over my left shoulder. I just thought oh man. They always said ninety-eight
percent of the snakes there were poisonous and I believe it. I just grabbed its tail and
whipped it off and I stayed awake.

LC: You just literally grabbed him and slammed him off of you?
AS: Yes.

LC: Oh, geez. Okay. Well, that’s chilling.
AS: Oh, just another day.

LC: Yeah. What about the water buffalo? You said something about them too.
AS: Well, they were the farmer’s tractors, but whenever GI’s got around them
they went crazy for the most part. If we were going around a little farmer’s hooch that
had a water buffalo in a pen I mean that thing would get so excited it would just about
tear that pen up. The farmer would come out and try to calm it down. That was about an
everyday thing. If you were around a water buffalo you had to watch them all the time.

LC: Because—

AS: Because they would run you over.

LC: They would like be aggressive towards you?
AS: Oh, yeah. They would charge. Actually about a couple of hours after the
snake incident with me we were still giving chase to the enemy we had been engaged
with. We were going through some heavy bush. About three guys ahead of me, out of
nowhere came probably the hugest water buffalo (tape goes silent for a few seconds)
knocked this guy down just flatter than a pancake and then hit the second guy. Then it
turned around and lowered its head and was going to use its horn to inflict damage on this
second guy that was on the ground. This guy, I can’t think who it was, he was thinking
because he actually jumped up. He had an M-16. He just flicked it on—you know you
could flick your weapon on automatic without even thinking about it. He must’ve shot
this thing in the head about, give it about a six round burst in the head. The thing just
raised its head up in the air and snorted and took off running.

LC: The bullets just basically bounced off?
AS: Yep. Well, I don’t know if they bounced off, but they didn’t seem to hurt him. That was the biggest water buffalo I had ever seen. It was going to hurt someone. In fact the first guy it knocked down we had to have dusted off.

LC: Really? Do you ever know what happened to him?

AS: I really don’t.

LC: I was just going to ask if you felt okay about talking about this engagement that you had with the NVA the one on—

AS: I’m sorry. You want to do the pets things first?

LC: Well, sure, go ahead and tell me about the pets.

AS: Because I do have good pets. One of these guys, his name was Ted Cox. He was from Texas. He bought a monkey.

LC: Where did he buy the monkey?

AS: Off of some civilian, Vietnamese, or I don’t know. He wanted to have a monkey so he bought this monkey. We kept it in our bunker. Oh my, that was a disgusting little animal if ever I seen one.

LC: He lived in your bunker?

AS: Well, in our hooches, yeah. Our little make shift sleeping place in the bunker. He was around there all the time.

LC: Did he have a name?

AS: I don’t remember. He got teased pretty regular.

LC: I’m sure. Did he have a cage?

AS: No. We had him on a chain usually. Sometimes he would just be loose, but I know he would bite the crap out of you if you’d let him. I know there was two mornings I woke and he was—he always wanted to sleep beside somebody at night so he could get their warmth off their body. A couple different mornings I remember waking up and there he was right by me. If you moved quick he’d bite you. So I’d just like ease away.

LC: He lived in your bunker?

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AS: No. We had him on a chain usually. Sometimes he would just be loose, but I know he would bite the crap out of you if you’d let him. I know there was two mornings I woke and he was—he always wanted to sleep beside somebody at night so he could get their warmth off their body. A couple different mornings I remember waking up and there he was right by me. If you moved quick he’d bite you. So I’d just like ease away.

We had fun with him. I say we teased him, poor thing. When we’d chain him up and we would go out in the daytime. The owner would chain him up by the artisan well. This crazy thing would dive down in this artisan well. Of course it was full of water clear to the ground level all the time. He would dive way down in that well, crazy thing. He ended up getting distemper and we had to shoot him. We had fun with him.
LC: He would actually like dive into the water and swim around?
AS: Yeah, he would go just clear to the end of the chain and then finally he
would come up. We had fun with him though. He actually caused his owner to get a
Purple Heart.
LC: How’s that?
AS: Maybe not deservingly so. Artillery at this fire support base they were
shooting—the word came around that at whatever time it was to get in the bunkers
because artillery was going to shoot a VTH or whatever they call it. The variable time
fuse on the artillery round and they wanted to get all their coordinates down in case we
had a ground attack there. They could just say let’s shoot this coordinate at, you know,
we’ll set the fuse to go off in an airburst at a hundred meters outside the perimeter,
however the artillery does it. So we’re in the bunkers and they’re lobbing these rounds
out there. They’re just blowing up in the air, just boom, boom all over the place. Getting
their coordinates down and all this and so forth and so on. Well, so the first few they
shoot this monkey takes off and runs outside the bunker. The owner chased him. We said,
“Just let him go.” He was like, “I’ve got to get him.” So he runs out there about the time
an airburst went off. He took on a little shrapnel from it and got a Purple Heart.
LC: Did it get the monkey?
AS: No, didn’t get the monkey.
LC: Oh, okay. So the monkey was okay. Was the guy badly hurt or was it not
quite so bad?
AS: No. I think he maybe missed a day or two and he had to go to 12th Evac and
get a little shrapnel dug out of him, but it wasn’t even a big deal.
LC: The monkey basically had to be put down because he got sick.
AS: Yeah, we shot him because he got distemper.
LC: That was tough I bet.
AS: Nah.
LC: Not to bad?
AS: Another day in the life.
LC: You had other things you were confronting.
AS: Scorpions
LC: Scorpions?
AS: Oh, yeah.
LC: What happened with those?
AS: Oh, the country is full of them too. I do remember one day I was going to write a letter home one afternoon or something that we happened to be in camp. Again I had this wet weather bag that I kept all my writing supplies and personal stuff in. I just untied the top of it and stuck my hand down there. I was trying to find an ink pen. I couldn’t find it. I got disgusted and finally I was groping around in the whole bag full of stuff. So finally I just turned it upside down and shook it out on the floor of the bunker and there was two scorpions in it. Why I didn’t get stung I don’t know.
LC: Did you ever get stung, Al, by any of those guys?
AS: No.
LC: Did you know anybody who did?
AS: I can’t think of any. Probably somebody was
LC: Yeah, that’s pretty remarkable that you didn’t take a hit right there.
AS: Yeah, I don’t know how I didn’t.
LC: Well, let me ask you about contact with the enemy. Now you mentioned that you had during October this fairly extended confrontation with some NVA. What can you tell me about how that developed? How did it start off?
AS: Well, I guess I would have to go back to October the sixth. That night of October the sixth we were on a night ambush. At this point we were down to, again we were down to a very few men. It was a squad sized ambush. Maybe there was, well, again a squad. Maybe at that time it was most of our platoon probably. Maybe twelve guys went out on a night ambush. Like I say you don’t get much sleep. We had just come back in the wire about—I don’t know what time it would have been. We’d probably been out, I don’t know, four, five, six hundred meters outside of Pershing in the boonies. We had come back in. We’d just no sooner taken our gear off, was going to get something to eat, but the sergeant came over. We knew something was going on. We could hear a fight going on. Artillery was pounding the heck out of it over there from our base. I was in Bravo Company in 1st Platoon, but the rest of the company had taken off that morning on a search and destroy or whatever. They were heading out towards this way out in the
boonies village of Tan Dien. I learned this later, the name of it. The sergeant came over and wanted to know if—because I was still carrying the machine gun—and said, “Hey, the rest of the company ran into a big bunch of crap out there and they need help.” So I said, “All right.” My buddy Buck from North Carolina he carried ammo for me for my machine gun. I said, “Buck, what do you think?” He said, “Oh, let’s go.” So I said, “Yeah, let’s go.” So we threw our gear back on and took off. I think we walked about—by the way we were really, really forced marched toward the rest of the company out there in this village. I guess how long it took us to get there probably. I think we went like four or five thousand meters. It was quite a ways away to kind of really double-time it out through the boonies and the jungle and everything.

LC: Is this just the two of you guys doing this?

AS: Oh, no, there was—I don’t know how many there would have been that volunteered to go. I suppose—I don’t really remember.

LC: Okay. It doesn’t matter.

AS: Along with some other guys that may have been around, I think there were maybe twenty of us all together or something. We finally get out there and they had walked into a regiment, 101st NVA Regiment that was in the outskirts of the village. They had six guys killed right off the bat. We get there and all this time the jets, F-100’s, are coming in and they’re dropping napalm and 250 pound bombs. Artillery is pouring in and a Huey cobra. Gun ships were just pounding the area with machine guns and 40 millimeters whatever they had. It was just all out attack. Anyway all of our guys got out and then we grouped up into a—we knew what was coming. We all dug in and dug fox holes and a Chinook helicopter brought out what we called a night logger kit, which was your concertina wire, flares, claymore mines, ammunition, water, whatever. At that point you knew you were going to stay all night and wait for the enemy to attack you. I mean that happened every time. If you make contact in a large element like that and you’ve done this night logger thing you can just bet the farm that you’re going to get a ground attack that night. Well, we did, but the way it turned out for some reason our sergeant come back to us. We’re all digging in and we’re putting up concertina wire and working pretty hard. After a night of maybe two or three hours sleep and it’s getting afternoon, evening, here now and we’re still working. Sergeant comes by and says, “Hey, they
brought our mail.” Why in the hell did they bring our mail? You don’t bring mail out to
something like this. “Well, we got ours.” I said okay. So we took a little break and read
our mail. He brought us over some sodas. We said, “What’s going on here?” We reloaded
up ammo and just made a defensive perimeter. So then he comes down a little while later
and says, “Well, guys, guess what?” “What’s that?” He said, “We got LP (listening post)
tonight.” Which is listening post, which means that we were not going to be with these
120 guys. We were going to be out by ourselves. Of course they were in a circle
perimeter again as usual, but we knew which way the enemy was and which way they
were going to attack us. So that’s the direction we had to go to set up this listening post.

LC: About how far out did you have to go?

AS: 125 meters. So six of us end up out there. We all were like, hey, we just had
ambush last night, how come we drew LP for tonight. I said, “I don’t know. That’s what
the orders are.” We were not pleased, but what could we do? We voiced our opinions a
little bit, but nothing like GI’s once you let them voice their opinion, they’re okay and
they go on and do it anyway. So out we go. We make sure and tell the guys in the
perimeter the direction that we’re going that “Hey, we’re going to be out here about 125
meters. For some reason we have to haul ass back in here, don’t shoot us.” Of course that
was something you did. That was just standard procedure. They probably already knew it,
but we wanted to tell them too. So anyway we get out there and dig in again. We dig
more fox holes, big enough for two or three guys to get in. That’s pretty labor intensive
too you know when it’s dark. We’re our there, the six of us, in a little L shaped
LP/ambush. We put our claymore mines out. The artillery is still going on. Artillery is
still pounding this area. That’s one thing that always amazed me, how them little guys
could escape all this horrendous pounding of munitions on them and still—

LC: And there’s still a force there.

AS: Right, yes. There are still a large number of them there. Buck and I, my
ammo carrier from North Carolina, we were really good buddies. We’d snuck a soda in
our pockets, our jungle pant pockets. We actually were traveling pretty light in case we
did have to move. So when the artillery would hit we would pop the top of these soda
cans, try and coincide with the sound so we wouldn’t give our position away. Well, then
the artillery stopped. I don’t know what time this would have been. I don’t know, three,
four o’clock in the morning we hear this dwp, dwp, dwp (making sound) you
know the sound of a mortar tubes. We thought, oh, shit. Pardon my language by the way.
LC: No, that’s fine. It’s totally fine.
AS: I don’t usually talk that way in front of women.
LC: I think it’s appropriate here.
AS: Well, sorry if I offend you.
LC: Not at all.
AS: Anyway we knew it was incoming mortars and this was going to be it. Here
the six of us are out there by ourselves. Mortars just kept going off. I think we counted I
don’t know maybe we didn’t but somebody did. There was like seventy some mortar
rounds came in on our position. You got to give those little guys credit. They don’t have
instruments to sight in or anything like that. They just do it by feel and they knew exactly
where we were. They didn’t know where the six of us were, but they knew where the
main bodies of guys were. Actually a lot of them did hit right around us. They were just
walking, the term walking the mortar rounds. They would walk in whatever direction.
They would set them a little different with every round just so they covered more area
with their fire. A lot of them actually lit right around us and a good thing we had dug in
because you would have been hurt pretty seriously with shrapnel because some of them
like I say were very close to us. So the incoming mortars stopped and walking behind this
other guy who carried ammo for me, just so much dust around there. There must have
been just a little bit of a breeze because within a minute or so the dust was gone. Of
course we’re hyper alert by this time. I’m thinking this is it. You might as well kiss your
behind goodbye. We have our head’s out of the foxholes looking around. Out in front of
us there was a grove. I never will forget these trees. A grove of little trees of some kind,
they were about six feet tall. They were just like a little bush on the very top with a trunk,
if you will, about maybe an inch in diameter. Like I say, they were six feet tall with like a
bushel basket on top of them, some vegetation. They were all planted in nice, neat rows
and there was jungle around us other than that in this opening. We look out there and my
God there is just nothing but people coming through these trees. I mean they’re getting
closer and they’re hunkered down and they’re halfway running. We thought aw, well, it’s
nice been knowing you, Buck.
LC: About how far away were they? Could you estimate?

AS: We first saw them they were probably I suppose sixty, seventy yards away.

LC: And getting closer?

AS: Oh, yes. I mean they knew where they were going. They knew where our main body of guys were, but they didn’t know where we were. So anyway we had this one little guy with us by the name of Dela Pierre, a French guy. Well, about the first thing he did was fire his M-16 a couple of times. Somebody grabbed it from him. You did not want to do that. You didn’t want to give them a muzzle flash to give away your position. I said, “Serg, we better blow this thing. Let’s get out of here.” He said, “Yeah, on three everybody detonate their claymore mines.” By that time these guys were pretty damn close. We all detonated our claymore/anti-personnel mines and jumped up out of the fox holes and just started running for all we could back to the perimeter. By that time artillery had shot up illumination flares. It was flares, have you ever seen those? Probably not.

LC: Yeah.

AS: Well, maybe you—but they’re kind of an eerie orangeish glow they give to everything. It’s weird because when they float down in these parachutes the light rays come down. As they’re moving, all the shadows move.

LC: Yes, they’re changing.

AS: Changing. It just gives you a really eerie feeling. Here we are running, the six of us. Like I say we’re carrying. We were light but we still had all of our ammo and weapons with us.

LC: You’re moving as fast as you can.

AS: You bet. We’re screaming. We’re screaming the password as we’re moving.

I still remember the password.

LC: What was it?

AS: Sixty-nine. We’re just running. AK-47s, even though we had blown all these mines, there was still a huge volume of enemies still like right behind us. By that point in time we all were pretty much acclimated to the sound of rounds that are coming close to you. These were close. We’re screaming sixty-nine, but then we think, oh, gee there’s all this concertina wire in front of us. We got to get over it somehow to get in there with these guys. Of course you don’t think, you just react. Carrying all this weight, all six of
us jumped over this, you know one by one full speed. Only one guy got hit on it—you
know what concertina wire is?

LC: Yes, sir.

AS: Okay. It’s razor sharp. The last guy—and I always think this. I don’t mean to
be anything prejudice or racist at all, but out of the six of us one guy was black and pretty
athletic, but he was the one that got cut.

LC: Really?

AS: I mean it’s not funny, but it’s funny. It’s one of those things that maybe the
white guys had more adrenaline or something, I don’t know. I can say that without
feeling anything about it because we were buddies. Yeah, but anyway we all jumped
over.

LC: You cleared it? You guys all cleared it?

AS: Yeah, we all did. Carrying all that weight and in the half-light. That was
pretty amazing. Like I say the adrenaline did give us a little like clicking on the after burn
on a jet engine probably. Then we got in the perimeter and I mean all hell did break lose
and this went on for two or three hours. The machine gun barrel I had got red hot more
than once then. We just shot so much ammunition and received so much ammunition.

RPGs were hitting everywhere and the bamboo around us. I mean, there again when
those things hit the bamboo around you heck you got to where you think you’re immune
to them. Now a days they shoot a RPG in Iraq and the whole country knows about.
They’re like I say this, in exaggerated terms, but we ate those things for breakfast. So
what, you know?

LC: Right, right. So how close did the NVA actually get? Did they come up to
the wire? Were they that close?

AS: No. By that time artillery was fired up again and some gun ships were on
station. I didn’t know it, but these guys were even there until we got back there after our
110-meter world record dash. There were two companies of 101st Airborne there. They
had been sent out after we left to help us, to reinforce us. I guess I found out just in the
last year or two. They were op-conned to the 25th Division for some time. I didn’t know
they were even there until we got back in the wire that night. It went on for at least two
hours. It always amazed me that times like that, how much ordinance there could be in
the air at one time between blowups and shrapnel and whatever and how more guys
didn’t get hurt than what they did.

LC: Did people get hurt that you know of, our guys?
AS: I think only—well, I don’t really know. I don’t know of any of my guys that
got hurt, except this one guy that got cut on the concertina. Oh, yeah. I think there was
like six guys or six or eight wounded. For everything that was going on, it was totally
amazing.

LC: The NVA was using RPGs and AK-47s?
AS: Yes, AK-50s and the 60 millimeter.

LC: The 60 millimeters too?
AS: Mortars, yes. 82-millimeter mortars, I think they might have been 82s that
they shot at us that night because they were pretty violent when they exploded around.
You’re just amazed. We naturally, being in a tight group in a defensive perimeter like
that we put out an awful lot of firepower. We did. Maybe I told you that—was that the
thing that I filled out for you that was the question on there was what was the bravest
ing you’ve ever seen?

LC: Yes, sir.
AS: I think I did answer that by saying when the enemy comes at you like that.

Now did that take guts?
LC: Yes, absolutely.
AS: I mean I don’t want to take anything away from even myself. I have to think
if I was on the other end. I think I couldn’t do that, even though there were times where
we actually had to get on line and kind of make an assault. If we had a choice we didn’t
do it. Here these guys are running at you for all they’ve got.

LC: With very little chance of surviving.
AS: Yes and knowing and actually have ropes around their neck so if they got
killed their buddies could grab the rope and drag them back.

LC: Was that true that night?
AS: In another battle it was.

LC: This engagement you said it basically didn’t stop although the heavy fire that
night sort of tapered off. I guess you indicated before that you and the other men, and the
guys from the 101st were—you got mobile and were trying to stay with NVA guys as they were retreating.

AS: After the initial fight was over?
LC: Uh-huh. How did that go?
AS: Yes, we did.
LC: How did that unfold?
AS: Well, you just take off in a suspected direction that they may have went. We found a couple injured and got a few POWs (prisoner of war). They were injured. I think—well, I don’t know. I’m a little bit apprehensive about mentioning the body count.
LC: Okay. That’s all right. It was clearly a very serious engagement on both sides.
AS: Yes. I’m thinking that I’ve got an Internet buddy that was there with me that day. We’re guessing there was probably three or four hundred of them, maybe two hundred of us. But I will tell you, the body count, we had like 147. The real ironic part about it is that I had been trying for a couple of months now to get an after action report for that particular battle. There was never anything written up on.
LC: Is that right?
AS: That’s right. I’m also finding out it seems like, and again my Internet buddy and I talk about this all the time. It’s like we never existed there because there is very, very, very little stuff written. I did find out from some archive people that the 25th Division was not very good on keeping records and writing up after action reports and so on. He keeps telling me, “You dumbass,” pardon my language again.
LC: It’s okay.
AS: “You dumbass, I keep telling you we both had these bad dreams. We never left the U.S. We just had these similar bad dreams. Come on, you know?” I said, “No, I’m not accepting that. I’m going to dig some more.”
LC: How does it make you feel when you think that this wasn’t recorded and you guys can’t get information about it? Is it frustrating or maddening?
AS: Yeah, it is. Well, no, I don’t get mad about it. You’re really disappointed. There was a funny feeling that you had. Okay, thirty years after I come home I never talked about any of this, okay? The last five years—and I think I speak for everybody
when I say that we kind of like—four, five, six years ago we all started to come out of the
woodwork in my term. We’re proud of it now.

LC: Yes, sir.

AS: Now, I’m really into all these emotions that we had there. One of the craziest
ones I would have to say would be after—and I was in three including this one. Two
other very similar instances with, you know, all out ground attack. The crazy thing about
them is how you feel after that. Here we were two days without any sleep, more or less,
and all this big adrenaline rush, and all this combat, and all this shooting, and all this
screaming, and all this everything, but when it’s all over with and you kind of sit back,
light up a smoke and shoot the breeze with the guys and you have this crazy feeling of a
high. It’s like a combat high if you know what I mean. Does that make any sense?

LC: Yeah, it does. I mean I think what they call this like an endorphin swim or
something. I mean, you have been living on the edge, up so high that your brain is so
keyed.

AS: Exactly. I mean, you just have this weird high. You laugh, even though some
of your buddies died. You got this sense of something, I don’t know what. What did you
call it?

LC: Endorphins. Some kind of chemical in your brain or something that just
makes you act weird and inappropriate really almost.

AS: Yeah. In retrospect it does seem like, geez, how can we have felt that way?
But we did. Like I say that’s just one of, I would say I’m just in the emotion—I still say
that whenever I talk about it that it was a year of not only was it so, so physically
demanding, but it was very, very, very mentally demanding.

LC: I can only imagine.

AS: One of my nephews, he’s a nurse on a hospital chopper. If he goes out and
picks somebody up from a car accident that dies he goes to therapy for two or three
sessions afterwards. Well, what did we do? We threw our dead buddies’ bodies on the
chopper and we continued on with our patrol.

LC: Did you have to do that kind of stuff, Al?

AS: Sure. Everybody did. I realized that was just a timing issue or that was back
then and this is now. Things are different, but I mean just to make a comparison between
the two it’s just how mentally defeating it was sometimes. What could you do? You just had to go on.

LC: Not only did you not get support really but no recovery time. You just had to keep going.

AS: Right, exactly. There was no time to reflect on things. Well, come on, let’s go. Here we go again. Get up in the morning and do it all over again.

LC: On this battle in early October, did Medevac choppers come in and take guys out?

AS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LC: How did you feel about the guys that were medics who were on the ground with you and the guys who were flying in the choppers and stuff?

AS: You mean the Medevac guys?

LC: Exactly.

AS: They were great. They really were. They would come in. Even though they had a big white cross painted on, they were just a target for them.

LC: They took a lot of fire.

AS: Oh, yes. So they had guts. That’s for sure. Even though we would support them the best we could at times. You had to get your wounded out.

LC: Well, when everything was breaking loose it was hard for you guys to protect yourselves.

AS: Right.

LC: Al, you mentioned that there were a couple of other big battles similar to the one that you’ve described already. Can you say roughly during your tour when those happened or do you know exactly when they happened?

AS: I know exactly when they happened.

LC: Okay. I thought you might.

AS: That was the first one. I got there the first of August. Then this is October.

LC: ‘68.

AS: Yeah and then December eleventh. It was the same kind of scenario. We had been out on a night ambush and come back in and another company, Delta Company out of Pershing had got in a big melee out there. I don’t remember exactly where it was, but
they were wanting some people to go out and help. Well, actually I think we were called
up to do it because we had just come back. So we get on choppers—no, wait a minute.
I’m wrong. We had been out that day and came back toward the evening. Then they ran
into enemy, large force of enemy, which at this time were I guess maybe a battalion sized
Viet Cong. So we were choppered out in the dark. We get with the rest of the guys. I
think they had two or three guys killed right off the bat. We had taken some causalities.
Again the same thing the artillery is pounding from three different fire support bases.
105, 155, eight-inch canons were shooting. It’s busy. We didn’t dig in that night. We got
in kind of an “L” shaped because behind us was nothing but open rice paddies. In front of
us was the wood line. They told us to get in an “L” shape, which we did. We were all
right behind like a three foot high rice paddy dike. Right beyond that was just a little bit
of an opening and then nothing but wood line, you know jungle, woods, brush, bush,
whatever you want to call it. They do the same thing. They bring out the Chinook with a
sling underneath it full of everything. More ammo, more water, more concertina wire,
more claymore mines, more blah, blah, blah. We set up the same type of thing although
we didn’t dig in because we had a good protective rice paddy dike in front of us. It was
thick. Same thing, we had a couple of guys out there a hundred meters at a listening post,
which in retrospect now I think that was the dumbest thing the Army could have done
there for one thing. The LPs got us in trouble more than once. Anyways this particular
night I do remember the really strange things that were going on there again after the
artillery stopped and we got the LPs out there. Of course you can’t sleep. Nobody can
sleep and your hair is standing up on the back of your neck. Same old scenario. You
haven’t had much sleep. You’re hungry and you know what’s coming. So distinctly we
could all smell marijuana in the air and then we hear this music playing. The enemies, it’s
like something you would see in the movie that the enemy is over there smoking pot and
listening to their music. You’re over here waiting for them. It’s strange.

LC: Very, very, yes, very strange.

AS: Yes, and you think, oh, this is—

LC: Something’s wrong here.

AS: Pardon me.

LC: Something’s way wrong.
AS: Yeah. Anyway, so sure enough here they come. They just came. It was another good fight. I lost a good buddy of mine got killed that night. I got a Purple Heart.

LC: What was his name?

AS: Dusty Sugdan.

LC: Where was he from? Do you know?

AS: Verona, Pennsylvania.

LC: Okay. What happened to him? Can you say?

AS: Pardon me?

LC: What happened to him?

AS: Gunshot. It was another one of those things because I was shooting this—I had the machine gun around. I was shooting at them. Just shooting, shooting, shooting and the next thing I know there’s tracers coming at me from behind me, way over in the other wood line. I think, holy shit, somebody take care of that quickly please. Then they done it again. Luckily they were just ever so slightly above our heads. I got just grazed by a bullet that night. That’s how I got a Purple Heart, just grazed by a bullet. That lasted for a couple of hours. I mean, it was pretty intense there for a good hour and a half or so. Like I say we had only six or eight guys wounded. Well, I was walking with a band-aid. A band-aid, Purple Heart, no big deal. This buddy of mine got killed doing that, but still we had this same crazy high. Then word came down, “Hey, Dusty got killed.” “Oh, man, that’s too bad.”

LC: Did he get medevaced out of there?

AS: In a body bag after sun up, yeah.

LC: So you didn’t know that he died when it actually happened?

AS: No, I was down a line a way’s from him.

LC: Okay, but a number of guys were killed that night?

AS: Just one.

LC: Just him?

AS: One of us. Yes. Earlier that evening before we got there I think they had two or three guys killed. Again there was nothing ever written up about it because I’ve tried.

LC: Al, how did you know that this was VC (Viet Cong) instead of NVA? How could you tell?
AS: I think it’s mostly because of the marijuana and the music. We could actually hear them talking. Talk about an eerie feeling. It’s like something that somebody would write up in a move script to make it real dramatic, but this was real life. Kind of weird.

LC: What happened the next morning? Did you guys di-di out of there or what happened?

AS: No, we didn’t go chasing this time. I think we just got Eagle flighted back out. The funny—well, okay, here I go again, funny is not. It was at the time. I mean here we are again in this crazy little high we’ve all got going. We light up a cigarette and we’re kind of relaxing. We know it’s over. They’re gone. We’re just reflecting on, “Man, did you see this?” “Did you see that RPG?” “Yeah.” We’re on this little chat thing we all got going on. At this time there was another guy carrying ammunition for me. His name was Sanders, black guy. I can’t think of where he’s from, but really a good guy. We all got to laughing so hard, if you can laugh about this, but he took his helmet off and was scratching his head and he noticed on his fingers there was a little blood on his fingers. So he starts looking at his helmet and here was a hole in front of his helmet and a hole in the back of his helmet and a little spot of blood on his hands. That’s not really funny is it?

LC: Well, it’s frightening.

AS: Well, it’s funny too. Yeah because we went on and on about that. It just kind of one of those things that went along with our high if you will.

LC: And sort of like you getting grazed too.

AS: Yeah.

LC: Just so many close, close calls.

AS: Oh, yeah.

LC: What rank was Sanders? Was he just a private with you?

AS: He was probably a Spec-4 and I was a Spec-4 by that time too.

LC: Was he the only black guy in your squad?

AS: Oh no, no. We had several.

LC: Did you ever see any tension between the African American guys and the White or Hispanic guys?

AS: I would say no. I mean a lot of people like to bring that up, but I never did see it. Of course they would group up and listen to their music and jive around, talk. But
there wasn’t one of them that I couldn’t walk up and talk to. It just wasn’t that way. At least I didn’t see it. I’m just relaying my own information.

LC: That’s what we want to hear is what you saw and how it happened for you.

Al, did you stay in the same area around Pershing then for the better part of—?

AS: The whole time. Well, no I shouldn’t say that. Actually we would rotate over on I’d say during my year there, most of which I did spend in Pershing. I think three times we rotated over to this other fire support base called Stewart. It was right outside the village of Trang Bang on this little river, which I’m still trying to find out the name of this river. There was a bridge. It was Highway 1 and it was one of the main routes in Vietnam. That’s how we got our resupply. Had to come across this bridge and go into the village of Trang Bang and then go down to 6-Alpha. That road had a lot of military traffic that fed and supplied fire support bases all around the area. So that bridge had to be protected. There was a fire support base there right outside the village. On this bridge itself there were four big bunkers. We had to man those bunkers I think for maybe two weeks at a time. That’s three times during my year.

LC: Did you see much in the way of enemy activity around there, around Stewart?

AS: Oh, yes.

LC: You did? What kinds of stuff did you see? Do you remember?

AS: Well, again they had three track mounted eight-inch guns or cannons there. They got mortared all the time also, every night just about because again the enemy is trying to knock out those big guns. Those guns could shoot twenty miles away in support of other troops out in the bush. They could shoot a long ways away.

LC: So the guns sitting there were just a target?

AS: Well, they were a magnet, yeah. Well, one night we were on guard just after dark there. A couple buddies and I were in the very—these bunkers were big and had like a little crow’s nest on top where you pulled your guard duty at night. In the daytime we went out on operations just like we did no matter where we were. At nighttime our job was to protect this bridge with these bunkers. We were up there one night just getting ready to start guard duty. From way far away there comes two and I’m not sure what they were. I think they were rockets or recoil. I never did know exactly. I mean they came
from probably three, four hundred meters out to the front of us, right beside our bunker and landed in the fire support base there and killed a couple of guys. I had never seen those things. It was the first time I had ever seen those things shot.

LC: Did you ever see those again?

AS: No, never did. It’s weird to see something go straight as a string for seven hundred yards straight as an arrow. We saw them. So we got on the radio and called in a fire mission. Of course it was too late. They were gone. Yeah there was a lot of things happening there.

LC: Did you see the damage that those did at Stewart?

AS: Oh, a couple days later. If we were there we went up there for breakfast on occasion. If you wanted to go eat some breakfast you could go have some green eggs or whatever.

LC: Were you able to actually see what the outcome of those two missiles or whatever they were?

AS: No.

LC: It had been repaired probably by then?

AS: I think maybe they might have sent a little patrol out there the next morning, but it was funny. I need to tell you this story about the—we always called it the Oriental River, but I don’t think that’s the correct name of it. They always told us don’t go swimming in the river. Don’t get any wise ideas guys. Don’t get into the river. Of course we had been out in the bush enough we knew about leeches. We had them on us all the time. There’s another thing. We thought, aw, hell with it we’re going to go swimming tonight. So a bunch of us did and oh man we come out of there and we were covered with leeches.

LC: Yikes. How did you get them off? Did you pull them off?

AS: No, we learned quickly how too. I suppose it was something was passed down from the older guys that were there. All you did was get your old C-rations out. You always saved your packets of salt. We usually used salt for sweating. We salted our food, but you take a little bit of salt, just put a few grains of salt on them and they’ll drop right off. If you pull them off or knock them off you’ll bleed I guarantee it. They would make you bleed pretty bad really if they’re a big one.
LC: They would leave an open hole basically where they latched onto you. So the
salt was effective?
AS: Oh, yes. Like I say we got leeches on us all the time. I mean not that many,
like we did the night we went swimming. Every time you go across a creek or through a
rice paddy you just walk through them. Next time you stop for a break picking the
leeches off or salting them off because I guarantee you’d have them. How they got on
you, I mean you usually tied the bottom drawstrings on your jungle fatigues as tight as
you could around your boots or whatever but you would still get leeches on your legs and
wherever. I know we even had one at that night we were in the river. One tiny one even
crawled up a guys’ penis and couldn’t get it out.
LC: Oh, no.
AS: So he had to be Medevac’ed. I mean it’s just another thing that kind of
mentally beat on you all the time.
LC: Al, did you get any breaks from this? Did you have an R&R (rest and
recuperation) at any point?
AS: Mm-hmm.
LC: How did that happen?
AS: Well, I don’t know. I just put in for it and went.
LC: Where did you go?
AS: I went to Taipei, Taiwan. Another thing about that was R&R were six days,
mine was three.
LC: What was going on there, Al?
AS: Well, I don’t know. At that time R&R coming down from I guess division
that R&Rs were to be kept to three days so.
LC: At what point was this in your tour?
AS: I don’t remember when I went on it. I really don’t
LC: Oh, I’m sorry. Okay.
AS: I would guess it was—I would say maybe February, March ’69 I guess. I did
go to Taipei, Taiwan, for three days. I mean you had a chance to see another world and
why not. It was free. You wanted to get the hell out of the field for any minute you could
you wanted to get out of there. It’s another weird emotion thing that I think of. I also
went to the Bob Hope show, but both of these times and everybody I think reading what I
do now that you really didn’t want to leave your buddies. What if something would
happen to them while you were gone? You wanted to be there.
LC: I’ve heard other guys say that too, that an R&R of seven days or whatever
they almost couldn’t stand it.
AS: Yeah, exactly. Well, I was only gone three days. The guys look at you when
you leave and you think, geez, I don’t want to leave these guys. Why? Self-preservation
should tell you to get the hell out of there. Again it’s just another emotion that I’ve been
digging into lately.
LC: Well, you guys got yanked around pretty good I think emotionally.
AS: Oh, you bet.
LC: What did you do when you were up in Taipei or can you tell me?
AS: Oh, we’ll pass on that one.
LC: Okey-doke.
AS: No.
LC: Well, you can say what you like or not.
AS: Did some sight seeing and spent money on this and that. There again nobody
wants to die not having some exposure to some things that he would never be able to do
at home. You know what I mean?
LC: I think I’m following you, yes.
AS: That’s another thing that we all say too. Who wants to go back and die when
you could’ve really lived, had a good time there? You know what I mean?
LC: I think do.
AS: Well, that’s true. You say screw it.
LC: You’re just in a different place.
AS: I’m going to have fun and you drink and you have fun because if you go
back there and get killed in two days you’re like, gee, why didn’t I have some fun? Why
didn’t I experience this and that? I’m twelve thousand miles from home. Who’s going to
know? That’s just what you do. Everybody did. It was a good experience. Like I say you
got to see another culture, another part of the world.
LC: And you blew off some steam probably. When you came back was it also tough to come back although you had only been gone just a short, short time? Was it tough?

AS: That’s one reason I didn’t want to go too far because I didn’t want to spend all the time flying. I didn’t want to go to Australia or Hawaii. I was single. I could’ve actually taken an in-country or went to Bangkok, Thailand, or Vung Tau on the coast of Vietnam and the China Sea. I thought how about Taipei just to go to a different country and have some experiences.

LC: Was it sort of like, I don’t know—my thinking is it must have been like being a yo-yo. I mean one minute you’re in Vietnam in this horrendously risky situation. Then you’re off in Taipei blowing off steam and then boom you’re right back. Was that tough at the time or is it tough as you subsequently think about it?

AS: I think just following along that same scene about didn’t want to leave your buddies. You were glad to be back with them. You couldn’t wait to get back there to tell them about it.

LC: You had some new stories.

AS: That was some of the best bonding of guys ever in that situation. Those lonely nights out in the bunker where you don’t want to go to sleep. You should, but you’d rather stay up and talk to these guys and see who can tell the biggest stories about their home life. You want to share all that information with these guys and makes for some tight bond that I’m sure you wouldn’t find anywhere else ever.

LC: I believe that’s probably true.

AS: It is and it’s still that way today.

LC: A couple of things you said make me think that’s probably true. Al, what about going to see Bob Hope? When did that happen?

AS: Well, again this is what I’ve learned lately and I’m not sure but I think it was December 23rd, ‘68

LC: So right before Christmas. That was at Cu Chi?

AS: Yes.

LC: Yeah. That sounds right. How did you happen to be selected to go?
AS: Well, I don't know. I became a sergeant, an E-5. I have to look back to find out exactly when that was now. I think at that time I was still an E-4, but here I had been in-country five months at that point and I was one of the oldest people there. I had more whiskers, if you will, than anybody or a lot of them. I mean there weren't too many guys that had been there longer than me when I had five months there. So that tells you something.

LC: Yes, sir.

AS: By the way, don't call me sir.

LC: Oh, okay.

AS: I wasn't an officer. No, I'm joking with you.

LC: Oh, okay. I'm just trying to be respectful.

AS: No, that's all right. We always used to say that. "Don't call me sir. I'm not an officer. I'm not a CO (commanding officer)." I'm sorry. They said, "Suydam, why don't you go?" I said, "I don't want to go." Again, I didn't want to go do something fun and leave my buddies. Even though I was one of the most senior guys there and I probably deserved to go, but I didn't want to. Finally they just made me go. I don't know how many of us went really out of my platoon. Maybe three of us and I can't even remember who went with me. I think out of the company there was probably eighteen guys there from our whole company that went. I thought, oh, well, okay if I'm going to go, gosh, hey we're going to get to spend the night in Chu Chi and not pull bunker duty. No guard duty. Might be all right, plus seeing Bob Hope show. Well, it didn't work out that way.

LC: What happened?

AS: As soon as the show was over they Eagle flighted us right back out to Pershing again and we pulled guard. So yeah, there's your yo-yo again. You have these expectations and they don't pan. I mean not that I didn't shirk duty by any means, but you wanted a break. If you had an opportunity for a break you wanted to take advantage, but it never happened, which wasn't surprising either.

LC: Do you remember the show at all?

AS: Oh, yes. I have lots of pictures of it. I guess the main thing I would have to say about it is this that—oh, yeah I remember everybody that was there. Well, of course
Bob Hope and Les Brown the Band of Renown. Now I’m not thinking of anybody. Ann Margaret was there. Penelope Plummer who was Miss World. Gold Diggers, which was a Jerry Lewis dance group of young ladies. I just found out this lately who this other group of dancer ladies were, Honey Limited. Did I say Rosey Grier?

LC: No, you didn’t. He was there too?

AS: He was there too, yes. It was really a good show. I must say that when we first got there, we’re late getting there. The place is like an ocean of guys.

LC: Yeah, I’ve seen the films.

AS: We walk up there and I’m thinking, oh, crap we didn’t have any binoculars or nothing. We’re grunts. We’ve just come out of the field. Well, we had terms for the guys that spent time in the base camp. Maybe you’re familiar with, maybe you’re not.

LC: Well, you could reel off a couple of them, if you wanted to. It’s fine.

AS: Okay. I’ll finish my story first. Anyway we get up there and I’m thinking man we just as well stayed. We can’t see, can’t even see the stage from here. The guy comes up and said, “Where you guys from?” “Bravo Company 2nd of 12th.” He looks down at his list and says, “Oh, well come on.” Our CO, company commander is there, Captain Wesenger from San Diego. We walk up there and we have seats reserved in the third row.

LC: Are you serious?

AS: We’re on the ground. Well, no, we’re sitting on a little bench they had made. I think in retrospect I think the reasoning for that was they had us on the list because we’d had some of the largest body counts so that was our reward. I mean, how sick is that? My buddy and I’ve discussed that and he says he thinks it’s the truth too. There’s a certain sickness to that. It’s kind of hard to cope with at times. It’s bitter sweet. At the time, damn, all right, we were happy as hell. Thought nothing of it. Now it’s like I say—but anyway we had good seats and I got lots of pictures.

LC: But it’s something you also have to deal with in terms of why it happened.

You’re smart enough to figure it out.

AS: You figure a lot of things out thirty years after.

LC: Yeah, but as you say you didn’t think about it or talk about it pretty much in the interim.
AS: No and at the time it happened you’re just like all right. You don’t think anything about it. If it’s there you do it. If it’s something that’s good you grab it. If it’s bad you still grab it.

LC: What did you think about the fact that these civilians from the states had come in? I mean Chu Chi was still near their pretty hot area. I mean, obviously you were enjoying the show while you’re living in the moment, but did you also think about these people who came out to basically entertain and try to lift people’s spirits? Did you think about what they were doing too or were you just kind of eating it up as it was happening?

AS: Yeah. It was great. I mean it was a great thing they did. We just really appreciated it. I mean, who in this world has seen the Bob Hope show in a combat zone? Me along with thousands of others. It was good. The guy deserves all, and everybody that was with him, deserves all the accolades they could get because that was above and beyond the call for entertainers really.

LC: Did you feel a tug when he died here recently?

AS: Yeah, I did. Because like I say I’ve got pictures of him. There were so many memorials on the Internet that, “Thanks for the memories, Bob.” It’s really sad, it is. The guy devoted so much of his life and his own personal money to do that kind of thing. He is one of the better people America will ever have probably just for that reason.

LC: Right, he made his own particular contribution to the troops. Al, I want to ask you a little bit about—

AS: Well, you didn’t let me tell me tell you about the guys that were—

LC: Yeah, go ahead and talk about them for a little bit.

AS: Okay. Maybe you know the stats and I don’t claim to know a whole lot from being there, but now I read this and that. I read the book *Stolen Valor*.

LC: Yes, sir. I mean yes, Al.

AS: (Laughter) You remembered. That is, to me, that is truly a great book. It’s true.

LC: Which pieces of it do you think particularly, for somebody that hasn’t read it?

AS: About Agent Orange, I think that’s probably true what he says about it. I was through many places that had sprayed. Those guys had to drink a cup of it, the ranch
hands that went into that, they had to drink a cup for their initiation. So the whole big
inght about Agent Orange I don’t totally agree with it I guess, but maybe I should. Maybe
I’ll have some effects from it someday, I don’t know. I kind of agree the way he, and this
guy, Burkett, he did a lot of the research on this and I kind of what he says I’ve kind of
taken it on as a gospel I guess because he’s pretty much an authority. Anyway the point I
wanted to make was of all the Army that was there. Did you remember reading what
percentage of them were infantry?

    LC: Not a big percentage.
    AS: Twelve.
    LC: Yes.
    AS: Okay. Sure there were artillery guys, 11-Charlies, which are mortar guys.
There were combat engineers who were out in the bush, but the majority of the Army was
back at the base camp, pushing a pencil, typing, doing laundry, just a myriad of people
doing resupply. Truck drivers, you know on and on and on and on about the jobs. They’re
the guys that stayed in the base camp. They’re more or less eight to six and then they’re
off to go to the night club, cook out their steaks, or have a hooch girl to come in and do
whatever kind of favors for them at night including polishing their shoes or whatever if
you catch my drift. Us guys had not a lot of respect for them. Even though they didn’t
choose where they were going to be or what they were going to be doing, but still we had
this feeling towards those guys and maybe you’ve heard the term REMF (rear echelon
mother fucker)?

    LC: Yes. Yes, I have.
    AS: Okay. Well, then I’m not telling anything new, but there was a big and there
still is that. I actually been doing some therapy for the last year and a half with a therapist
because of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). One thing I told her, it’s a lady and I
really like her, anyway that somebody says, “Oh, I was in Vietnam.” Well, I need to
know more. I kind of got that attitude, but hey I work everyday. I get along in whatever I
do, but I still need to know more about this guy. I guess more so since I read the book
*Stolen Valor* too. If this guy wasn’t in the infantry then sorry, but I just don’t feel any
connection to him. Maybe that’s a bad thing or I don’t know. I like my buddies and guys
that were there in the same capacity as me. Is that understandable?
LC: Yes, I think so. It’s like maybe—I’ve heard it describe as two different wars in a way. It won’t surprise you. A lot of Marines talk the same way about people in the Navy. I mean they were up I Corps. They were in the enemy space and vice-a-versa. They don’t feel so close to guys who were two hundred miles off shore.

AS: Yeah, I guess I would say I wouldn’t even count them. That’s terrible to say, but everybody had a job and I realize that and we couldn’t have done it without them. We needed that ammunition. We needed intelligence S-3 guys and intelligence to work in there and talk to these prisoners and try to get information out of them. We need all those people. We got the short stick. We were where we were doing what we were doing. We wished to hell we would have gotten picked to do what they were doing, but we didn’t so therefore we had this little attitude. I know that a good buddy of mine in Toledo when he came home he came home like two months after I did. He got into a lot of fights in bars and had a drinking problem when he came home just for that very reason. He’d gone in a bar and got a guy bragging about being in Vietnam and said, “What did you do there?” “Oh, I was a clerk typist.” Boy, that’s all it’d take and you’d be fighting, but understandable.

LC: You sort of, if I’m hearing you, you felt that way kind of when you were over there or is it sharper now?

AS: Well, I never had time to really think about it there I guess. The one experience I did have, I think twice in my year’s time there I also went into Chu Chi, our whole company did for what they called a stand down. We would go in for maybe thirty-six hours I think. Have a trailer full of iced down beer, a little Filipino band just play some American songs, cook out a steak and not pull guard duty for a night. Oh, that was great. One afternoon we got into Cu Chi. Me and three, four other guys said, “Hey, let’s go down to the PX (Post Exchange).” PX, what was that? We forgot what those were. We take off down the street. “Where is it?” A guy says, “Well, it’s down there.” So we take off walking. Some military police stopped us. “Hey, soldiers, where are you going?” “I’m going to the PX.” “What’s up with those boots?” We just come out of the field. Our boots were worn paper thin on the soles and all the leather worn off of them. He says, “You’re supposed to have those boots shined.” I said, “Come on, pal.” Who do you think you’re
talking to? You couldn’t say that or they would take you to the brig. But I thought, yeah, I have no use for you guys whatsoever. Give me a break.

LC: What did you actually do when that happened?

AS: Oh, I don’t know. We said, “Yeah, when we get back we will.” We said, “We’re going to go down and buy some shoe polish right now.”

LC: Right. We’re on our way right now.

AS: Screw you. We’re out of here. After they left it was like geez who in the hell were these flakes. REMF bastards, give me a break.

LC: Was that phrase, REMF, were you guys using that at the time?

AS: Actually, no. Actually, up until five or six years ago like I say when we all came out of the woodwork I looked at that term on the Internet and I thought what in the hell does that stand for? Then I finally found what it stood for.

LC: Worked it out.

AS: Yeah and that’s weird. I never did anyway, never hear it before.

LC: You won’t shock me. What did you call these guys? Not just these MPs (Military Police), but men who were over there who were pulling this kind of duty and hassling you? Did you have names for them other than the general?

AS: Mostly just four letter words. I did look on the Texas Tech site into some interviews you or who else had ever done. I started reading them. I think it was about some guy that had a MOS (military occupational specialty) of missile control when he was in Vietnam or something. I’m not reading this. I’m not wasting my time. I’m not reading about somebody that was—you know?

LC: Well, I can give you names of a couple that you might actually be interested in reading. I’ve talked to some guys who they did amazing things, like a couple of tours. It made my hair basically stand on end to hear some of the situations that they were in. When you talked a couple of times about coming out of the woodwork in the last couple five years or so, has the Internet helped with that?

AS: Oh, yes.

LC: Are you now an Internet junky? Do you spend a lot of time doing it?

AS: Oh, way too much, but I mean no. I work sixty hours a week. I’m working in a Ford dealership. I sell cars and I do many things around the dealership. I always have
time to go check two or three boards I hit everyday. Another term, I’ve got another term for you. This implies a lot to me. You’ve probably heard the term FNG (fucking new guy).

LC: No, I don’t think so.
AS: Really?
LC: Can you say it?
AS: Yeah, I won’t say it though. I’ve already used too much foul language.
LC: This is for historical purposes.
AS: Okay. Well, I still won’t say it, but FNG. The first word is “F” and it ends in an “ing,” N is for new and G is for guy.

LC: Oh guy, oh yes.
AS: Blank new guy. You’ve heard it?
LC: Yes.
AS: Again along with the emotional side of things, it’s hard being that. You’re an FNG. You’re twelve thousand five hundred miles from home. You know absolutely no one. These elements are trying to kill you along with all the insects and reptiles, not to mention the enemy. You’ve got to put up with being an FNG in that you have to prove yourself. The jury is out on you. These guys have been there for a while. They don’t know if you’re going to stay awake on guard duty. Can they trust you? What are you going to do the first time you get into a fire fight? Are you going to react the way you should or are you going to cower down where somebody has to carry you somewhere? There’s a lot of emotion involved with being where, in my capacity, with the term FNG. You understand what I’m saying now? Did I make it pretty clear?
LC: Yes, I think so. Yes, you did.
AS: You know the more I think about that term boy it implies so much emotion. There’s some good stories about my unit that some guys wrote that are really good reading too. Well, I’ll just give you a brief, if we’ve got time.
LC: Sure. Yeah, of course.
AS: It’s just so well written. It’s another thing that this happened. This guy wrote just recently, well, it’s actually on the board, the Internet site of the unit I was in. It’s the 2nd of the 12th Infantry. The guy wrote this story about how he hadn’t been in-country too
long and he had this sergeant that was from Canada that joined the Army because he
wanted to fight in Vietnam. So he did and he was the platoon sergeant. They were out in
the jungle and they were going to set up this ambush at night. So they do and it’s raining.
It’s monsoon season and they’re soaking wet. This guy has ring worm around his wrists,
which everybody had that when they got home. He’s got ringworm around his waist from
being wet all the time. Mosquitoes are tearing him up. They hunker down in this stand of
bamboo to set up this night ambush along the trails through the jungle that they thought
they might get, blow an ambush on some enemy coming by. They get in this bamboo and
it’s so thick it’s like they’re contained inside of a small room or something. This
Canadian sergeant gets to where he is claustrophobia and he can’t stay there. He just gets
shaken. Again you’re maintaining quiet. You’re having to hold this guy’s arm and he
says, “I’ve got to get out of here.” So he goes out from the rest of the guys maybe twenty
feet, thirty feet away. He’s just sitting there with his legs crossed and it’s raining on him
and he’s shaking. He’s just having a real bad spell of, well, claustrophobia and whatever
else might be.

LC: Right, panic or whatever.

AS: Yeah. So this guy that wrote the story he’s an RTO, radio telephone operator
for the sergeant, so he thinks he better go with him. He crawls out there with him and
“Sarge, what’s the matter?” He can’t hardly talk. He’s so emotional. Something had just
overtaken him. Anyways to make a long story short this goes on and this kid doesn’t
sleep all night. The next day he has this migraine headache like you can’t believe. He was
so tense because they were right beside this trail thinking the enemy was going to come
down. If something happened his own guys would shoot him because it was dark and
they were out in front of the main body of guys, but thank heaven nothing happened. The
next day this sergeant is still all screwed up. So they Medevac him out and take him back
to the base camp or back to their camp whichever one that was I don’t know. This is
classic of a group of guys I guess. He’s back there being tended to and he’s got dry
clothes on. He’s walking around the camp. These guys come humping in from the
boonies from being out there another two days after this night. So they come in and they
see this sergeant and they won’t hardly speak to him. He’s walking up to them and
saying, “Hey, guys, back me up on this. You saw the problem I was having. Remember
that other incident a couple of weeks ago I had the same thing. It's just claustrophobia.”

He singles this one guy out that was his RTO, the guy that wrote the article. He’s saying,

“You’ll back me up won’t you?” So this kid, this RTO, he’s looking at the sergeant and
he’s looking over to the guys that he’s just been with and he has to make a choice. Do I
join the pack and turn on this guy and cast him out or do I stick with him and then I’m an
outcast with the rest of these guys? Is that not a great story there? He chose to stick with
the other pack of guys. They end up casting this guy out and he left. They never knew
what happened to him.

LC: But just encapsulates the kinds of dilemmas that they could just crop up from
nowhere that had nothing to do with VC, NVA. The Army really had just come out of
nowhere and suddenly you have to make a decision that’s going to affect the rest of your
time in the country.

AS: It ended up he says at the end of this he says, “I don’t know where that guy
is today, but I’m still wondering if I made the right choice and if this sergeant if he stays
awake at night thinking about it just like I do.” Just a very emotional choice for a
youngster to make, twenty, twenty-one years old. He thinks now he made the wrong
choice, but he made the right choice for the time. It’s just some more of the emotion that I
find very interesting at this point.

LC: Stories like this reveal some of what happens in the context of a war
situation that has again nothing to do with bullets flying, but it’s equally as impacting if
you want. It’s just in a different place in your head, processing all of this. I know that a
lot of returning veterans did just kind of cap it all away, just cap it off and not unearth it
for a long time. I’ve talked to a couple of different men who have said that to me. You
said that you didn’t really talk about it much for thirty years.

AS: Right, because you were afraid to. Everybody has the opinion we were baby
killers, dope heads, and we committed suicide, which none of it’s true.

LC: When you came back, Al, did you encounter any of that?

AS: Not too much. I know when I came back. I landed at O’Hare Airport, the
airport here in Peoria, Illinois, near my hometown. All I can remember is the glares.
You’re walking down there with your uniform on, your medals, and you’re getting glared
at. People looking down their noses at you and you think, geez, I knew that I was going
to get some of this, but this is really—how come I’m getting this? No, I never got spit on
or anything like that. The looks could tell. I could call them. At that point that kind of sets
a pace for the rest of your life. You know what I mean?

LC: And how you—

AS: Yeah, oh, I’ve got to keep my mouth shut. I’ve known guys that have lied
about it, lied about it on a job application. They didn’t put anything on there about them
being in Vietnam. Otherwise they wouldn’t have got the job.

LC: Right, and I’ve heard that too.

AS: That’s wrong.

LC: Nothing like that happened to you though? Did you ever lie about it or not
include it as it were?

AS: Not that I know of. When I first got home I had ringworm and I had a big
open sore on my leg that just would not heal up. I don’t know what it was. My ears were
so dirty I couldn’t hear squat. My mom said, “Well, go up to those doctors.” So I go up to
this doctor here in Farmington and he treats me and he ends up telling me, “Oh, that
Vietnam War. That should never have been.” He’s just ragging on this and going on and
on about that. I’m sitting there thinking, geez, he’s right. I’m an idiot. When I got home
my mom said, “How’d that go?” I told her. Oh, she was madder than hell. She called him
and read him the Riot Act. Here I’m thinking I was wanting to go hide because this guy
was right. I was a bad person.

LC: She came out and protected you?

AS: You bet. Yeah, she still tells me that story once in a while.

LC: Good for her.

AS: Yeah, that’s good. I mentioned that I was seeing a therapist. I probably
should explain some of that.

LC: Well, if you want to.

AS: I recently just—let’s see. When was it? January twentieth got awarded thirty
percent disability for PTSD. What I had and this actually started eighteen years ago. I
didn’t know what they were at the time, but over the years I figured it out. One day going
to Peoria in the car I had a panic attack. I thought I was dying. I just told my wife and the
six or seven other people in this van that I was sick and I needed to go home. I didn’t
know what the hell it was, had no idea, but I didn’t tell anybody anything about it. This
grew on for years. I’d say like two years ago I got to the point—then I got to keeping
track of these things and when I was having them and how I was having them and where
I was at. It boiled down to whenever I got in an open space like driving down the
interstate, if I come to a wide open expanse here in this part of the country, there’s corn
fields, I have a panic attack. If I was on an interstate going over a bridge, oh, that just
killed me. Yet I got to the point that I could control them by just jabbering, talking,
making goofy conversation or whatever.

LC: Just keeping your mouth running.

AS: Exactly. Then it got to the point about two years ago I didn’t want to go
anywhere. I had seen things here and there, books, magazines, TV, Internet, and I
realized that these were panic attacks. My wife decided to take my daughter to Chicago
shopping. “Well, you’re going aren’t you?” I said, “No, I don’t want to go.” She got mad.
I never went anywhere. She finally just said, “How come you will not go anywhere
anymore?” I thought, geez, that’s the first time she has ever asked me that, but I do owe
her an explanation. A dumb guy thing but it was two days after that I said, “I’m going to
tell you why.” I told her. Then everything made sense to her why I didn’t go here, why I
didn’t go there because any road around here I could almost mark an “X” with a paint
brush on the road where I’d have a panic attack. So she said, “Well, you’re going to go
see someone.” I said, “Yeah, I want to. I’m tired of living like this.” She got me into this
therapist. It’s really been very good for me. In fact over Christmas week last December I
actually flew in an airplane. That was hard. I mean just the thought—when I look up in
the air and see an airplane I would freak, up until I’ve been doing this therapy. Well, what
I’ve been doing—what is your PhD in?

LC: Well, actually Chinese history. Modern China.

AS: Like psychology, you probably know something about that.

LC: A little bit about group psychology, yeah.

AS: Well, have you ever heard of EMDR?

LC: No, what is it?

AS: It stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing.

LC: Okay. What does that mean?
AS: Well, when I first went to this therapist, like I say it’s a lady and I like the idea of going to a lady, I really do and I did. Well, I used to go see her every week, now I’m like once every month or two months because I would say I’m eighty percent better than what I was two years ago. I can do things now. Anyway first night in there with her I’m sitting there and she goes through your family history, your home life. How was your home life? How was your home environment? Blah, blah, blah and all of this. Then well, “Were you in the Army?” “Yeah.” “Did you go anywhere?” “Yeah. I was over in Vietnam.” She keeps going back to Vietnam and I’m sitting there thinking wait a minute lady. I said that was—I didn’t say this, but I’m thinking this that’s been thirty-five years ago and I’ve been nothing but stand up, go to work every day guy since then. It’s been too long. I can’t be having any problems from there. Boy, did she prove me wrong. Like she said there’s a little part of your brain that encapsulates all the trauma that you’ve ever had in your life and of course my trauma was maybe a little more severe than most people. Would you say?

LC: It sounds like it. Yes, I would categorize you there, yes.

AS: Just the way it chose to rear its ugly head in me was in the form of panic attacks. Then I finally start thinking about it, working with her, that I think the problem, well, I know it is, that the problem I had with the wide open spaces and going across a bridge and that was that I was always in a car. I was always moving fast. When I was in Vietnam you never went into an open place or something like that without doing it very cautiously. My mind was just saying you don’t go into these open areas at high speeds like this. You take your time. You be cautious. I was just moving, my body was moving too fast to be in those open areas. That’s how it affected me.

LC: To manage the vulnerability of being out in the open.

AS: Exactly. Is that bizarre or what?

LC: Actually the way you’ve explained it makes it pretty clear.

AS: It does, really. I actually kind of gleaned that out of my own brain that that’s why I was having them. Like I say I could mark a spot, take a paint brush and mark a spot on the highway where I would have a panic attack because it was wide open and I was going at speed. My mind says, “Hey survival says you don’t go into open spaces quick. You take your time and you be cautious and you go slow.” So yeah it all makes sense.
LC: Your life depended on that in Vietnam, your life, the life of the guy next to you or behind you. This gal sounds like she’s pretty heads up.

AS: Yeah. I really like her. She has really done a lot of good for me. I would encourage anybody to do the EMDR. I asked her first, she said, “Did you want to do the EMDR?” I said, “What’s that?” “Well, you go look it up EMDR.org.” I did and it explains how this lady discovered it. What it does, it’s simply a trained person. They move their fingers back and forth in front of your face and you follow their fingers with your eyes. What it does, it stimulates all parts of your brain. I keep telling her—she said, “You’re an awfully good subject.” Every time I’ve done it with her it’s really come out. It draws a lot of stuff out. I keep telling her it’s because I’m so weak minded. She doesn’t buy that.

LC: She doesn’t buy it? I believe that.

AS: Anyway, it’s so weird. I mean, it’s not voodoo. It’s not hypnosis. It’s nothing like that. It has no affects on you whatsoever. She tells you going into it, “Now again just put yourself on a train. You’re moving along the tracks slowly and you’re looking out the window and whatever you see out that window, you tell me what you see.” So she’ll move her fingers for maybe thirty, forty-five seconds and it takes me two or three of these little movement things to get me going. I’ll be damned, you start seeing things in your mind. It’s important that you do tell her what you see. I mean to tell you, I’ve told the wildest stories doing this with her. Every one of them—and I’ve done it like four times in the last thirteen months. Everyone of them has been tremendously symbolic of emotion, mostly emotion. That does kind of cleanse that part of your brain I guess. Another thing that used to just freak me to no end was seeing—where can you go now days without seeing a big tower at night with red lights flashing on it?

LC: Nowhere.

AS: Those freaked me.

LC: Why?

AS: Because they reminded me of tracers, red tracers at night. I finally figured that out. We worked on that. Now they don’t bother me a bit
LC: You just had to actually consciously think about it and know that that was
what the connection was and if you actually were thinking about that consciously it made
it less frightening?

AS: Yes, I did. I told her that’s what I thought those towers meant to me. We did
some EMDR on that and I told this wild ass, pardon me again, this story. It’s just like
you’re dreaming. I don’t know how to explain it, but it is important that you tell her or
whoever is doing it with you exactly what you see and then she starts doing it again. Then
your mind will just carry out that story farther, farther, farther, farther and it might go on
for like two hours on occasion.

LC: Is it stuff that actually happened to you?

AS: Well, no, but the last time I saw her she said, “Alan”—well, no this is like a
couple of months ago. I actually did it with her again before I went on this flying trip
because I knew I was going to freak on this airplane. Actually I didn’t. But anyway I said,
“Oh, you’re ready for another wild ass story tonight?” She said “Well, Alan I’m not so
sure that these are stories. They might be true.” I said, “No I don’t think so.” Again
they’re just so meaningfully symbolic of just emotion. Are we running out of time?

LC: We’re okay for a little bit, maybe another ten minutes or so.

AS: I told this story the very first time about how—well, it lasted a couple of
hours but it went on and on and on. I was in a tree in Vietnam and these NVA soldiers
walked under this tree. Every one of these stories I’ve told my buddy Ralph Buchcannon
from North Carolina. He and I were good buddies. He’s in every one of them for some
reason. It’s just him and I. He’s hiding in the bush and these NVA soldiers come walking
by. This one looks up at me. He’s armed and I’m armed and I don’t want to be seen
because there are five or six of them. There are two of us. He’s the last one and he stops
right under this tree and lights up a cigarette. He’s cradling his weapon in his arms while
he’s lighting his cigarette. I’m thinking I’m not going to do him because I’ve got the
jump on him. If he makes a move I’m going to defend myself. Instead he just looks up at
me with these beady little yellow eyes and stares at me. Looks straight ahead again and
takes off. So I’m thinking oh man, what’s this character up to, you know? Like I say this
is all I’m telling her. I’m relaying this story I’m seeing. So they take off and they
disappear in the wood line. I get Buck. Buck is one of the guys that always had feet
problem. I said, “Buck, we’ve got to get the hell out of here. They’re going to be back so
let’s go.” I finally get him. He boxed, he didn’t want to go. I said, “We can’t stay here.
We’ve got to go.” I finally get him up and he puts his arm around my shoulder. We go
off. Why we’re out there by ourselves I have no idea. We get into this other wood line
and we see them coming across this field. They’re coming back after us. We get deeper
into the woods and—oh, hold on a second. We decide he can’t go any farther and I can’t
carry him any farther, help him any farther. So I said, “Okay, let’s go over here and we’ll
get down. If they come in here we’ll just have it out. That’s all there is to it.” We get
down and get in a little place with some cover and wait for them. Well, they split up and
three of them go around behind us and about four of them are still on foot following us.
They come right up to us where we’re still waiting. If they go by, fine. If not and they see
us we’re just going to have it out and be done with it. So whatever happens, happens.
That’s all we can do. This guy with the beady eyes who looked at me, he’s coming close
and he stops and he looks. He sees us, but he doesn’t do anything again. Then at that
point she quit moving her fingers and I updated on her what I was seeing and we start
over. This is where it really gets bizarre. We start over again and I am this beady-eyed
NVA soldier and I’m looking down there at myself and Buck, okay?

LC: Mm-hmm.

AS: You probably think this is—

LC: No, go ahead. What happens?

AS: So I look down there through the eyes of this NVA soldier and I see the two
of us and I see what the two of us do with each other. What we do is Buck and I look at
each other with eye contact. We don’t say anything, but you know we’re thinking the
same thing. “Hey, Buck, damn it’s been good to know you. I’m really glad we’re friends.
I love you,” and this and that, that kind of a thing. At this point I know what the two guys
on the ground are feeling, which is me and Buck, but I’m observing this as an NVA
soldier.

LC: Like out of your own.

AS: Yeah, I’m out of my—it’s just really weird. Then I get madder than hell
because these guys aren’t afraid of me. I take off and I leave them alone. How is that? Is
that symbolic or what? We didn’t have any fear. Whatever happened happened. We were
so glad we spent time with one another. We loved each other. We’re friends. We’re still
good friends. That is bizarre.

LC: That’s so intense.

AS: It is. I’ve had a headache, a slight headache a time or two because it’s hard
work. It really is.

LC: It’s pulling up a lot of stuff from different places. Maybe she’s suggesting
that it’s possible that you’re not—this isn’t all a fantasy. There are pieces of it that may
have actually happened that you just haven’t thought about.

AS: Like I say it’s really, really, really worked well with me and I might even be
normal someday. (Both laugh)

LC: Al, let’s take a break here.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with U.S. Army veteran Alan Suydam. Today’s date is the twenty-sixth of March 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock. As before Al is in Farmington, Illinois. Good afternoon, Al.

Allan Suydam: Good afternoon.

LC: Al, I want to ask you about your communication with family and friends in the States while you were in-country. Did you get letters often?

AS: When I was in Vietnam you’re saying?

LC: Exactly.

AS: Yeah.

LC: Did those letters primarily come from your family or friends that you knew from high school?

AS: Mainly family and a girl that I was dating at the time who is now my wife of thirty-one years.

LC: What’s her name?

AS: Rosie.

LC: Was Rosie from the same area that you were from?

AS: Elmwood, six miles from Farmington.

LC: When did you actually marry her? How long were you back in the States?

AS: We got married in November of ’71.

LC: So about eighteen months or so after you got back—well, a little bit more than that in fact. Two years I guess.

AS: Yeah. I got back in July.

LC: July of ’69, yeah. So how often did you get letters and were they important to you?
AS: I got a letter from her like almost daily, which was my gosh that really meant a lot. The guys would say, “Oh gee, Suydam, did Rosie write you again today?” “Yeah.” Yes, it was very important.

LC: It got to be like a regular thing. They knew about it.

AS: Oh, sure and when I didn’t I was like well gee. As far as family, yeah my parents and my sister and oh maybe my brother and my other sister, but they were pretty sporadic.

LC: What kinds of things, if you remember, did they write to you about, just family business?

AS: Just things that were going on at home. Maybe who passed away and some of my buddies, but they were reading about them in the newspapers as far as their military. You know, where they were at or if they were coming home or where they had been transferred to or whatever.

LC: Did you find comfort in getting those letters?

AS: Oh, sure. That was your soul link to like we termed it back in the world. They meant a lot, sure.

LC: Were you able to write back at all?

AS: Oh, not as much as I should’ve or could’ve. I know at one point, I don’t remember this happening, but she told me the story again the other day about how she hadn’t heard from me. My family hadn’t heard from me, and they actually got a hold of the Red Cross and they contacted my commanding officer. He came along and said, “Hey, you got to write home.” So I did and it was a big event here. I probably just lost track of time there and not having the opportunity maybe.

LC: How easy was it for you? I mean, you guys were moving around a lot. How easy was it to get a hold of writing materials for example and to actually put a letter through?

AS: Well, we always seemed to have that available. I don’t remember how we got it. Evidently they supplied it. Maybe, I really don’t know. I sure didn’t have any access to a PX at all. Maybe on two occasions. Maybe I did some of that kind of stuff then when I did get to base camp and go to the PX. Yeah we always seemed to have something to write on and write with.
LC: Did Rosie or your mom keep the letters that you mailed back?  
AS: Yeah.  
LC: Have you ever sat down and looked at them yourself?  
AS: No, not really.  
LC: Did you ever have a chance to make a telephone call back and speak with anyone?  
AS: No.  
LC: Did anybody ever offer that or did you know anybody that who was able to do that?  
AS: Not to my knowledge no  
LC: Really? Okay.  
AS: We were out in the boonies for the most part.  
LC: Sure. Al, I want to ask you a little bit about morale. We talked a little bit about this in our earlier session, but I wonder if you can just talk about how the guys in your unit, the men that you were working with were handling what they were confronted with and how did they feel about it? What assessment could you make about that?  
AS: Well, it’s kind of hard for me to draw up anything about morale I guess at this point. I guess we were—well, for sure we were somewhere else obviously. I think at the most part everybody had the attitude that hey make the best of it. If you get a chance to have fun, play some cards with the guys, you did it. It was always a bad time when we lost someone. It was a little hard on morale. Your first inclination was some sort of revenge, but you couldn’t just blatantly revenge somebody that you lost. That was the hardest times I’m sure.  
LC: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, other guys have said that too, Al. That it varied depending on what was going on.  
AS: Yeah, not that we didn’t have good times and had fun. Guys being around guys, you BS each other around and you just make the best of it.  
LC: Did you guys have access to cassette tapes or reels to reels or anything like that?  
AS: No. Oh, no.  
LC: So you guys didn’t have any music?
AS: Yeah. We pooled some money and we bought a radio. A little blue Sony radio that I think we bought off some Vietnamese civilians. Of course then it took the D batteries. We were scrounging for batteries all the time. It was kind of a community radio and we would play it. Of course we listened to AFVN, Armed Forced Vietnam. They played the old top forty back home. Of course you didn’t get your local sports and weather. That was nonexistent. It was mostly music.

LC: Did they do any news at all that you remember?

AS: I suppose they did, but I don’t really recall any of it.

LC: Was it something that was kind of on in the background or did having that outside connection help you kind of cope a little bit?

AS: Oh, yeah. I think it helped to hear the music. It kind of gave you an outside connection there, what was going on music wise.

LC: Al, did you in later years being back in the states connect certain songs to the period that you were over there.

AS: Oh, yeah.

LC: Can you name or hum a few bars or anything? Any songs come to mind?

AS: Oh, gosh there are tons of them and I’m just drawing a blank right now.

LC: Sure, but it does come back to you?

AS: “Are You Going To San Francisco,” that’s probably one of them. We all wished we were because that was your port back home when you got home for a lot of guys. Oh, yeah, there was a lot of them, but I just can’t recall too many right now.

LC: When you hear them even now do they kind of crystallize things back to that time or not so much anymore?

AS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Sure. Yeah, they do. There are songs you connect with for that time in your life.

LC: I want to ask you a little bit about the end of your tour over there. You had your twenty-first birthday I think in July of ’69 before you were coming, just before you were to come home. Do you remember that? What happened?

AS: On my birthday?

LC: Yeah.

AS: Anybody make a big deal out of you or anything?
AS: Oh, I don’t think so, not that I remember. Just another day. Another day in
the life.

LC: How did that make you feel? Do you remember at all?
AS: No recollection of it even. You’re doing what you were doing. No big deal.
LC: Do you remember how you managed getting short? Did you keep track
everyday like some guys did?
AS: Oh, pretty much. Everybody did that.
LC: How did you do that? Did you have a calendar or were you just counting
down?
AS: I don’t remember having a calendar, sure don’t. Yeah, you definitely counted
down the days.
LC: Was there any option for you to get out a little bit early?
AS: Not that I was ever presented with. I know a lot of guys that they did extend
their tour for three months to get an early out in the military or Army, but I never was
presented with that, never pursued it or anything.
LC: Your enlistment period was for how long?
AS: Two years.
LC: That was set to expire when?
AS: March 3rd of ’70.
LC: So you knew that if things didn’t change you were going to at least still be in
the service until the spring of the following year?
AS: Yes.
LC: Did you ever consider trying to extend your in-country time?
AS: Surely not. I wouldn’t think. Not if I was going to be doing the same thing I
was doing. There was no way. If I would’ve gotten offered a job back in the base camp or
something I may have considered to get an early drop, an early out.
LC: Sure, but it didn’t gel that way.
AS: No. I just wanted to get home.
LC: Now we talked last time about your leaving Vietnam and your arrival at
O’Hare and people glaring at you. I wanted to kind of follow up on that a little bit and ask
about your adjustment to getting back to the States. You’re still in the service of course,
but I guess you had a little bit of time off there upon arriving back in the States.

AS: Sure.

LC: About how long did you have off, Al?

AS: Oh, geez I want to say three weeks.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about how you did being back in the country, being
back in the U.S.?

AS: How I did?

LC: Yeah, how you coped with getting back to the States and the abrupt change
from being in a battlefield situation which is where you had been for all that time.

AS: I don’t remember there being a big adjustment. I mean I’m sure it was, but I
don’t remember. Well, just like you wanted to grab everything and get caught up you
know. I remember being busy with family and my buddies, this and that and just wanted
to live pretty hard.

LC: I’m sure. Were people asking you about your experience or were they kind
of shying away from it? Do you remember?

AS: Nobody really asked. I just found out the last couple years maybe that my
dad told everybody don’t ask him anything.

LC: Really? Why did he do that?

AS: Well, he was in World War II as an artillery person in Italy. Well, he knew
more of what was going on than civilians at the time. That’s what his wishes were not for
anybody to ask me anything. So they didn’t.

LC: Was he trying to protect you?

AS: I think so.

LC: You just found that out recently?

AS: Yeah, just within the last two or three years.

LC: After you had that leave at home, where did you go?

AS: Well, I actually extended that leave. I thought, gee, I’d like to be home
another week so I actually called my next duty station and actually fibbed somewhat by
telling them that, I just got back from Vietnam and there was some family members
coming in that I hadn’t seen for over a year, if I could have another week. They said, “Oh, sure. Take another week.” So I did. Well, I went to Ft. Riley, Kansas.

LC: How long have you known that you were going to be going to that station?

AS: I probably got those orders in Vietnam. The next duty station would be there

LC: What were you supposed to do there?

AS: Just play war games.

LC: What does that mean?

AS: Well, it was a mechanized infantry, 24th Division. Like I say they had tanks and APCs and you just had to play the Army games. Do classroom things and sometimes you had to be the teacher in classroom things. It rolled around where you had to present a class to some of the under ranking people.

LC: Did you do that on a couple of different occasions where you actually had to teach the class as it were?

AS: I don’t think I ever did. I was scheduled to, but I can’t think what happened now, but I ended up I didn’t have to.

LC: So it was basically kind of you were going through the paces is that fair?

AS: Yeah, you’re just playing the Army stuff. Formation in the morning and PT (physical training) and go to class or something, go down to the motor pool and work on the APCs. You would go out in the field occasionally and pull guard duty for some communications people that were there. You were just actually playing war games, you know, just doing stuff that was really very boring.

LC: In your own mind at that time, were you more or less just kind of marking time until the expiration of your enlistment?

AS: Sure.

LC: Did they ever put the arm on you to reenlist?

AS: Oh, yeah. Our CO there was a battalion-recruiting officer. He had all of us Vietnam guys down there one by one. Then it was my turn to go down. I thought, oh, boy this should be good. They actually offered me, and I was E-5 at the time, they said they’d give me another—they would raise me to an E-6 and give me $6,000.

LC: That was a boatload of money.
AS: It was back then. They said, “Well, Sergeant Suydam you could buy a new car with that.” I said, “Well, I already got one, thanks. I think I’m just going to get out of this man’s Army.” My thought at that time was I would have orders cut to go right back where I came from before the ink dried. There was no way I was going to do that.

LC: Do you remember mustering out?

AS: Muster ing out? What’s that?

LC: Actually separating from active service.

AS: Yeah.

LC: What was that like?

AS: Oh, it was good, a good feeling for sure when you processed out your last couple of days. You had to go to this place and process out there. Then it was kind of, gee, now what am I going to do? My whole life was kind of specked out for me there in the Army. If you’re out a civilian again, what are you going to do?

LC: Did you have much of a plan in mind?

AS: I really didn’t.

LC: What did you end up doing?

AS: I came home and went to work at a factory emporium.

LC: What kind of job?

AS: It was final assembly on huge off road trucks. I mean big trucks that would haul anywhere from 35 to 150 tons, mining trucks, that kind of thing.

LC: Was that something that you liked doing?

AS: Oh, yeah. I really kind of liked it.

LC: Just for the record basically you’re in the automotive industry at this point. Is that right?

AS: Right.

LC: I want to ask, Al, about your life as a veteran. Have you spent time reading about the war at all?

AS: That’s pretty much my interest here over the last two or three years really.

LC: Is that right? Before that not really so much?

AS: No. Well, this started five or six years ago for me. I think I mentioned earlier us guys, I will say us because that includes a lot guys that I know. Whenever you get on
the Internet and more than anybody could probably ever imagine, but we spent thirty
years in shame and not saying anything about it. Not writing that on our resume for a job
knowing that would not get us the job. That’s that kind of a thing. I think I did mention
how five or six years ago a lot of us came out of the closet, if you will. Then my interests
have been learning all the units that were there and where they were, where exactly we
were at and battle’s that we were in. Just reading, just general reading about that time.

LC: Kind of getting in your own head a map of where you were and what you
were involved in.

AS: Yeah and some of the operations we were involved in that they—I mean,
you hear about operation this and that, but they never told us anything about what
operation we were in.

LC: You guys didn’t have a clue at the time?

AS: No. No. No. No, but just things like that. How the 25th Division compared to
some of the other divisions. Just about anything that’s worthwhile reading I find myself
reading. I’ve read some books the last couple of three years too.

LC: What have you learned about the 25th Infantry Division in terms of the role
that it was playing? Can you talk about that for a sec?

AS: Yeah. Well, I found out if you look at all the statistics as far as KIAs, we
were second only to the 1st Calvary I believe. Over all causalities we were in the top spot.
I’m not saying this as good, bad, or indifferent, but to me it’s interesting.

LC: Sure.

AS: You’re bragging about a lot of guys killed, well, I’m not. I just find it
interesting for whatever reason. Everybody is truly really proud of who you served with
and the guys you served with. You want to say, yeah, I was in the 25th and you want to
brag about that and be proud of it. You want people to know that.

LC: Are you proud now?

AS: Sure. I’m a lifetime member of the 25th Division Association.

LC: Okay. What do you think it was that helped change your feelings about your
own service from more or less being ashamed of it and not putting it on your résumés to
how you feel now?
Well, I don’t really know. I guess it was five or six years ago when I got a phone call from a buddy of mine. I may have said this before even with you, but he called one night and I was sitting there in the living room. Eight o’clock and the phone rings and I happened to answer the phone. “Is this Allan Suydam?” “Yeah.” “Well, this is Robert Dave.” I just kind of like, oh, man, just shocked me. We had a good talk. He actually lost his leg there in I believe it was December. No, wait a minute, it was April I think. I think he came in December. So many guys come and go I can’t keep them all straight, but I think he got to us in December ’68, and April of ’69 he lost his leg in a booby trap. I was just so shocked to hear from him. I guess at that time I guess I was ripe for the picking too. I was ready to come out of the closet as well as it seemed like he was and to find some old buddies and talk about it and just kind of get that weight off your back and talk about it.

LC: Was he living there in the Midwest somewhere?

AS: No, Rochester, New York.

LC: What made him call you that night?

AS: I guess he was just feeling the same thing that all of us were at the time. It’s like a telepathic thing I guess that was going on. Everybody at the same time felt the same thing. One person makes the phone call and then that excites everybody else to start making phone calls and then getting on the Internet and doing all this and all that, and getting some reunions together and just time to stand up and come out from under that rock and be proud.

LC: Al, let me ask you a little bit about the Veteran’s Administration. First of all just on a general basis is the Veteran’s Administration been a helpful organization to you? Do you think it’s done enough for Vietnam veterans?

AS: Yeah, I would say—well, I can only speak for myself I guess. I would say they do pretty well. I mean, naturally it’s a government thing. Once you start getting into their whatever it’s time consuming. They work slowly. In my case I think they probably helped me.

LC: Do you think that the nation as a whole has given adequate resources to caring for veterans both Vietnam veterans and really veterans of any conflict?
AS: Oh, I would say so. What little I do know about it I would say they probably
do, but I think they need to have somebody police it a lot more closely.

LC: What makes you say that?

AS: One of the first books I read two or three years ago was *Stolen Valor*. You
ever read that?

LC: Yes.

AS: That just opened up a whole new world for me. Here are all these phony
guys out here and that maybe something that prompted everybody to come out of the
closet too. Realizing there’s all these phony guys out there that are getting compensation
for nothing, never leaving the States. In that respect I think there needs to be—these
people that are doing this need to be cut off big time and make it available for somebody
that really, really deserves it.

LC: Right, who paid in as it were—

AS: Pardon?

LC: Who paid into the system by serving the country.

AS: Right. Exactly.

LC: Recently, Al, I understand from you and from the conversations that we’ve
had that you had an opportunity to go and talk to some young people about the war. Can
you tell a little bit about that experience and how you felt about doing that?

AS: Yeah. It was last winter I guess I was asked to do that. I should explain it. In
the Elmwood High School history class, senior class that my daughter is in, and my
wife’s niece happens to be the teacher. So I had a little insider, little inside thing going on
there. I’m thinking now that, gee, if she wasn’t the teacher and knew about me personally
because we live just a couple blocks away and we’re pretty close family, I would never
have gotten this opportunity, if it had not been for her. I really appreciate it and I really
wanted to do this. I made an outline and took some of my pictures there. I really, really
enjoyed it. I really did.

LC: What kinds of things did you say to the students?

AS: I started out with things I didn’t think they knew about like how is an Army
made up. I think they ought to know that. It goes down from a division, to brigades, to
battalions, to companies, to platoons, to squads, to an individual person. Well, I did
actually start off with just tell them where I had training at, basic training and individual
training, or infantry training. When you get done with your—in my case it was advanced
infantry training—you got assigned. We all knew we were going to Vietnam so it was no
big secret. From there on I just took them through the short time at home and then going
to California and getting on the plane and the twenty-four hour trip and my first
impression. The plane door opened at Bien Hoa and what it smelt like, what it felt like,
what it looked like, just your basic first impression. Then how I got off the plane, got into
formation, somebody walked over and said, “I need three volunteers. You, you, and you.”
One of which was me and I had to go burn body excrement. I kind of made the remark to
them, said, “Yes, welcome to Vietnam.” Then I just took them—I liked your term of not
necessarily war stories but stories of a war. I told about how hard it was being an FNG.
You remember that?
LC: Yes I do.
AS: I did lay that on them pretty hard about how now days we’re used to seeing
whole groups whether it’s an aircraft wing or a battalion of the 101st Airborne or
whatever. Guys that you have lived with, trained with, ate with, slept with, partied with,
but it wasn’t the case there. You were an individual when you got there. You didn’t know
anybody. You’re twelve thousand miles away from home. You walk forty feet and your
fatigues are completely soaked through with sweat. The mosquitoes are trying to eat you
up at night. Then there were some guys out there in black pajamas that wanted to do you
in. That’s the kind of stuff I really told them about.
LC: How did they react? While you were talking could you see them reacting?
What did you learn about that later on?
AS: Well, nobody fell asleep.
LC: Okay. I bet they didn’t.
AS: I did make two visits I think I told you. After both of my visits I did hear
from the teacher that, “Boy this class, I can’t believe the way they were listening and not
goofing around.” They were very attentive, they really were. They seemed genuinely
interested.
LC: How did your daughter do with that? Sometimes your dad comes in to talk,
oh my gosh. How’d she do with it? Was she respectful of you?
AS: Oh, sure, yeah.
LC: You can either pick this up or maybe she actually said to you, but do you think she was proud of you?
AS: Oh, yeah, I’m sure she is. On my first visit there I went home that night and I didn’t say anything, purposely didn’t say anything. My wife finally said, “Well, dear, I heard you were a big success.” I said, “Well, I don’t know, Natalie,” my daughter, “How was I?” “Oh, it was good, Dad. It was really good.” She said then that everybody had tons of questions so that’s why I got invited back. They had a list of questions they wanted to ask me.
LC: Is that what happened the second time, just a few days ago I guess that you went back?
AS: Yeah, the twenty-second.
LC: They had questions for you?
AS: Yes.
LC: What kinds of questions did they ask, Al? This is interesting.
AS: The first one was a shocker.
LC: What was that?
AS: Well, my first visit I had shown I think thirty-eight of my pictures that my niece, the teacher, had made into a power point. Really, really neat power point that she made. One of the slides was I took a couple of pictures there at Pershing when Billy Graham was there along with the Donut Dolly’s, the Red Cross girls. Viewing that slide I did at that time I made the comment, “Gosh, it was nice to see some women with round eyes.” Well, I guess that raised some questions. Anyway my next visit, the first question was and the kids were a little embarrassed to ask it, the teacher had to ask. “Well, Mr. Suydam they want to know what you did about sex.” They took from my saying, “Gee it was nice to see women with round eyes,” as we had sex with all these women. I was totally unprepared for that.
LC: I bet. How did you handle it?
AS: I just said, “That was not something that we indulged in.” Then somebody made the comment about the Donut Dolly’s/Red Cross girls. I said, “Oh, no. I only saw
them a couple of times, Donut Dolly’s. They were just there for an hour maybe and
they’re gone.” No, that was not something we nosed in at all.

LC: That’s interesting. Leave it to high school seniors, but what else were they
interested in?

AS: Well, let’s see. They asked a little bit about the food. They wanted to know if
I kept in contact with some of the buddies that I had made there. Let’s see. What else did
y they have? They did have some good questions, but now I’m going brain dead here.

LC: That’s okay. It sounds like you sparked off some wonderment at least in their
minds. That’s a pretty great achievement I think.

AS: Another thing they asked was about drugs. Of course I explained as far as I
knew nobody took drugs. We had a couple of guys that did a little marijuana, but we kind
of got them off to the side and said, “Hey, don’t do this anymore. We don’t want you out
t here splashing around in the rice paddy water at night falling off the dikes and raising a
big ruckus when we’re trying to be quiet there. You’re endangering our lives so knock it
off.” Both of them did. They wanted to know if we—I guess I was telling them about—
they wanted to know if we ever captured any weapons. I said, “Oh, yeah. We got a lot of
weapons and rice caches that we would find that the enemy had hidden.” They said,
“Well, what did you do with that? Did you eat it?” I said, “No, no. We had our own food.
We didn’t eat that.” Most of it was stolen from the villagers. Somehow they returned it to
the villagers to feed the South Vietnamese people would take it, who it was stolen from.

Let’s see. What else did they ask? They wanted to know if we ever captured any
prisoners. “Yeah, we captured.” Then they said, “Well, what did you do, just kill them
right there?” “No, we didn’t do that.” Getting in deeper and deeper I finally just said
okay. I got the feeling that they had heard. I didn’t know going into this whole thing of
what preconceived ideas they might have gotten from the generations before them about
us guys. How we were baby killers. We were drug heads. We were suicidal. We were
rapists, pillagers and plunderers. I just flat told them, I said, “You know, I don’t know what
you’ve heard but obviously you’ve heard some things. But I’m here to tell you that it was
not that way as I saw it.” I told them at the beginning that what I would say during their
class was what I experienced and I might inject my own opinion occasionally. I just
really, really, really wanted them to know that we weren’t just murders, and rapists, and
thieves, and savages like we were portrayed as being. I told them how every time we went into a village if we were platoon sized we would have at least a medic with us. If we were company sized we had two or three medics. How the villagers would come over to the medic, the old people that were sick or the young kids that were sick and we would take care of them, sometimes even calling in a dust off chopper to take them to a hospital. I really wanted them to know that we weren’t just out there trigger-happy, a bunch of guys that were just out to be savages. It just wasn’t that way.

LC: Do you think you got that across to them?

AS: I hope so.

LC: It sounds like you made a pointed effort to do that.

AS: I did. I wanted to. I could still go back a couple more days, an hour and a half at a time, but it goes by quickly. I really enjoyed it.

LC: Do you think it was good for you to do it, Al?

AS: At this point for me it was very good therapy.

LC: What makes you say that?

AS: Well, because just going along with the theme that I’ve got thirty plus years to make up for that I didn’t say a word about it. Now I do like talking about it. It’s time people know the truth rather than all these news media things that they were told way back when, all that kind of stuff that was just nonsense.

LC: Al, have you watched many of the popular films that have come out about the war?

AS: Yeah.

LC: Which ones have you seen, if you can remember their titles at all?

AS: Oh, Platoon, We Were Soldiers Once.

LC: Were any of them good movies? Which ones would you like young people to watch and which ones should they stay from?

AS: I don’t know. I would say none of them really I would really recommend watching.

LC: Why is that?

AS: I was telling somebody that after I watched We Were Soldiers it was okay, but it was Hollywood. Hollywood hasn’t figured out a way to put you really, really in that
situation where you can—I mean you know you could do it, but you got to smell it. You
got to feel it. You got to touch it. You got to hear it. Just looking at it on a screen is not—
it can’t be portrayed on the big screen. There’s just no way. Like I say you got to know
all the emotions leading up to it and the emotions after. It just can’t be done in my
estimation. *Platoon*, I watched *Platoon*. I went by myself to the theater and I watched it. I
thought, I don’t know if I want to do this or not, but I did. I was totally shocked at the
very beginning of that movie it comes on the screen Bravo Company 25th Division. I was
in a Bravo Company of the 25th Division. That kind of freaked me right there. I thought
that was probably a good movie. The best of the bunch I would say that I have seen. I did
not agree with the major theme of the movie. Two squad leaders were vying for control
and end up shooting one of them. He shot the other one. That is the wrong thing to
portray, even though Oliver Stone, I believe he wrote and directed it.

LC: Yes, I think that’s right.

AS: He actually lived that with the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry of the 25th
Division. Did you know that?

LC: No, I did not.

AS: He actually participated in that and that was the battle of—and I can’t think
of the name of it now, but it is a major battle. The movie portrays that, but he was
actually in it. Unless it was that way with the guys he was around, where the both of them
were—we didn’t do that amongst each other.

LC: There wasn’t that kind of tension?

AS: No, no. I mean if anything you didn’t want to be the one to say, “Okay, guys.
Follow me and do this.” I mean at times you had to, but as far as guys killing each other,
GIs killing each other over wanting to be in control that’s bogus to me. We just wanted to
be—can you hold on a second?

LC: Sure.

AS: Okay. Overall it was a good movie. The sound effects were good in it with
the M-16s. They sound like real M-16s. Yeah, other than that part it was—it had a lot to
do with the emotion of the people in it too.

LC: Al, some of what you said makes me think that I should go back and ask you
about this time at Pershing where Billy Graham was there. We didn’t talk about that last
time and I wonder if you can just describe what happened? Did you see him? Did he
preach? What happened at that incident?

AS: We had been on a night ambush before and we were in camp the next day
where we’re filling the sand bags, build a bunker, tearing down a bunker, working
anyway. All of a sudden somebody say, “Hey, Billy Graham.” “Oh, okay.” Two or three
choppers land and Billy Graham and I guess some of the top brass, and oh six or eight
Red Cross women were there. I think the Red Cross women maybe played some games
with some guys with cards or something. I just remember him standing up there in line
with all these women and talking. I don’t remember much of all what he said, but I was
close enough to hearing the most part.

LC: Did it mean much to you to have someone of that stature come out to a FSB
(fire support base)?

AS: Yeah, it really did. Geez, this guy is famous. I never get to see him at home
and here he is out here in the bush you know and saying a prayer for us. Yeah, it was kind
of neat.

LC: Were you much of a religious guy?

AS: No.

LC: Did that change at all from being over there?

AS: Oh, I guess. My biggest religious moment was after we landed back in San
Francisco coming home from Vietnam. We were waiting to get processed back in-
country and getting some new uniforms to wear home. I just kind of meandered out of
this building. It was like two o’clock in the morning or something. I just kind of
meandered out of the building on this loading dock and looked up at the bight sky and
just kind of thanked God that I was home in one piece. I was serious about it.

LC: Yeah, listening to you I can tell that you were serious about it. Al, can I ask
you some questions about American policy? These are kind of big questions. I know
you’ve spent some time thinking about this in the past couple of years. I wonder if you
can say what you thought at the time was the reason that the United States was involved
militarily in Southeast Asia and has your thinking about that changed now?

AS: Yeah. Of course everybody knew that we were there to prevent the spread of
communism. I think we all pretty much felt that it was a justified reason for having us
there. We were given a job to do and we were going to do it to the best of our ability in most cases. Over the years I had a period of time there where my thinking was, gee, let me think this out here for a minute. It’s a very, very, very poor third world country. When we went over there, they had absolutely nothing. If they in fact did have total communism at least they would have had something. Man, I went through a period of that kind of thought. I still think we were totally justified. I read these bumper stickers, “If we lost the war in Vietnam, why aren’t we speaking Vietnamese?” Yeah I agree with that.

LC: Do you remember 1975, the spring when Saigon finally fell and Vietnam was unified under a communist government?

AS: Yeah.

LC: Did you have any feelings when that happened? About it’s happening and about what that meant for your own service and why we had been there?

AS: I can’t really remember anything in particular. I guess that was still the point in time where we were still, or I was still hiding all of that.

LC: It didn’t really surface around that time, the fall of Saigon?

AS: No. I said, well it’s over now. I guess I just really didn’t have too many thoughts one way or the other.

LC: I see. In the forms that we asked you to complete you mentioned some tactical questions that I thought I might just kind of throw out there and see what you have to say about them. These are questions about tactics. About what actually you were doing for example when you were out on LPs. I think in the forms the material you provided to us you used the phrase that we were bait. Can you talk about that a little bit and whether that was the right thing to be doing in that situation?

AS: I know Army tactics are Army tactics, but yeah now I do believe that we were—I don’t know how else we would have done it, but yes when you’re out there in the boonies looking for enemy you are bait. If you would find them they were always well hidden. You were just open to an ambush all the time. So I guess what else were you if you weren’t bait? What other tactics we could have used I don’t know. Yeah. I think listening posts were probably not something we should have done. In my experience on being on that six man LP the night of October seventh, it could very easily have been the
black sedan is pulling up in all of our parents driveways real easily. Then another incident
of April 27th of ’69 where another big major ground attack in the Boi Loi Woods that I
was involved in.

LC: What happened that day?
AS: Pardon me?
LC: What happened that day? I don’t think we talked about that at all.
AS: Well, it was a situation, about the same kind of situation as October seventh. We had been out all day, as I’m remembering this anyway. Again it was after dark. They said, “Hey, one of the other companies,” I believe it was Delta Company had made contact with a large unknown enemy force, size wise. They wanted everybody to go that could go. Yeah, okay we’re going. I remember at the time I had something like eighty-eight days left in-country.

LC: Mm-hmm, that sounds about right.
AS: I had this little black guy, MC McCalister. He had like ninety days. We only had thirteen guys in our platoon at the time. Orders were for us to fill two ships, two slicks for an Eagle flight. So that’s twelve people. That means one did not have to go, which in reality should have been me. In fact I think I was told to stay back because we are bait and knew what was going to happen. Well, this little MC Macalister he was really an ok guy. He was pretty much losing control and actually shed some tears I do believe because he did not want to go. I ended up saying, “Hey, MC, why don’t you just stay here? I’ll go.” So I did. You never volunteer for anything in the Army, but I did. That’s twice I did that. Well, anyway, again getting back to the LPs. We got out there and done the night logger thing, put up the concertina wire out in the open and right close to the wood line. A couple of LPs were sent out. Again the same thing, the mortar attack and then the ground attack, but word was don’t shoot. The LP’s aren’t in yet. Actually the enemy got to us before the LPs did. That’s mayhem.

LC: I was going to say and what kind of strength, was it VC? Was it NVA?
AS: It was NVA. It was just total mayhem. We ended up getting nine guys killed and the enemy actually dropped grenades in our foxholes and that’s how most of our guys got killed. They were right in on us. So it was a pretty horrific night.

LC: Did you get wounded that night, Al?
AS: No.

LC: Where were you?

AS: I was in a foxhole right there.

LC: They just didn’t get to yours with a grenade?

AS: Right. They weren’t too far down the line. Again, it always totally amazed me how much the air could be completely filled with bullets and shrapnel and not more guys got hurt than did. It always amazed me situations like that. Tracers flying everywhere and explosions all around you. This night was just kind of total mayhem because of the situation and how it happened. Like I say it just totally always amazed me how you could somehow avoid all the bullets and the shrapnel flying.

LC: How did that engagement develop and end? Can you say for people who might be interested in that engagement?

AS: Oh, it was just like all the rest of them. When about the sun come up it got light. Everything’s subsided. It wasn’t pretty when the sun came up and there’s nine body bags there. Well, that night, I think it actually made the papers here. There was right at a hundred NVA lost their lives that night. I’ve actually still got a newspaper that I’ve brought home with me called *Tropic Lightning News*. It has an article in there about that. One of the last things is in the—and I may send that to you too, the photocopy. It makes remarks to how some of the enemy had ropes tied around their necks with a little length of rope from that, you know, if they got killed or wounded they could be drug back by their fellow soldiers. Some of the stuff was confiscated afterwards was like a Playboy magazine that the centerfold is missing in. They were young humans just like we were. All is fair in love and war. They’re shooting you. You shoot at them.

LC: Is that what you spent the night basically doing, Al? Just hammering out as many shots as you could or what were you actually doing?

AS: For the most part I was carrying an M-16 then, but it was one of those nights when it was just so dark till the flares got up and then the word was don’t shoot because the LPs aren’t in yet. It was just really hectic.

LC: Did the guys who were out in the LPs make it back in?

AS: I think that yeah they finally did. There has been some stuff written about that too by some other guys that were there. Like geez did we need LPs and I got to
agree. I think that was probably part tactically, Army wise that was probably not a good
thing to do. You knew what was going to happen. Why endanger two or four, five, six
guys out there. Even December eleventh was the same thing. Had guys out there LP’ing,
to me it was not—you knew what was going to happen. Nobody was asleep anyway. If
there was there would be enough guys awake to wake everybody up. When the mortars
started, believe me, you’d be awake. So you knew what was going to happen. I thought
that was pretty senseless. Well, in retrospect I guess, to have anybody out there in a
situation like that. April twenty-seventh turned out to be—maybe those nine guys
wouldn’t have got killed if the LPs wouldn’t have been there. I don’t want to second
guess anything. That’s what you were told to do. That’s what you did. But you know
what the strange part about it is too and I told my therapist that it’s funny how April
twenty-seventh was my mother’s birthday and my mom and dad’s anniversary and
October seventh is my sister’s anniversary. So I guess you could maybe refer to them as
near misses for me. Like somebody was trying to earmark those days, days of joy that
might be days of sadness.

LC: I know you had said before that the seventh of October was real important
for you.

AS: Yeah. That’s another reason. I guess in the Bible the number seven is a very
good number. I’ve turned that thought around into thinking that it was a good number. I
obviously survived so maybe it was. Somebody was trying to make it very memorable for
all the wrong reasons to my family, but maybe that’s what made it turn around and to be
a safe thing for me. I don’t know.

LC: And that’s a way for you to think about it too.

AS: Mm-hmm.

LC: Al, I want to ask about—well, actually first of all let me ask whether the
fight that you just described that happened on the night of the twenty-seventh of April
was the last major engagement like that of that kind of severity that you were involved
with?

AS: Yeah to that magnitude, yes.

LC: I assumed that you continued to have other less intense engagements along
the way. Right up until practically the time you left, is that right?
AS: Well, it was kind of an unwritten thing. When you got down to thirty, forty
days you pretty much stayed in camp. Or maybe you went on a road security thing or
maybe did this or did that. I don’t remember going on any ambushes or anything with
less then twenty, thirty days.

LC: Was that kind of out of respect? How did that get started? Do you know?

AS: I have no idea, something to do with pass down. Like I say it was totally
unwritten. My God if you made it eleven months why would you—I mean you’re still out
there at the fire support base, snipers around and mortars every so often. I mean you
weren’t exactly a hundred percent safe, but it was a hell of a lot better than going out on a
night ambush with that much time left. MC McCalister he just couldn’t handle it. I guess
nobody thought any lesser of him for that. I didn’t. Of course he never did say thanks,
which so what?

LC: I assume you weren’t doing it so he would be grateful to you. You were
doing it for some other reasons that were your own like being compassionate or
something.

AS: I don’t know, really don’t know. I just know that they needed twelve guys
and he was not in any shape to go anyway, like that. He wouldn’t have been any good out
there.

LC: Exactly. Al, let me ask you about again general strategy with regard to the
war. This again you’re thinking now about President Nixon’s withdraw strategy from
Vietnam. You were over there when Nixon came into office and that was in January of
1969. He did eventually secure a peace agreement of a kind in 1973. I wonder if you
think now that that was the right thing to do for the country?

AS: Oh, gosh, I had never really given it much thought.

LC: Okay.

AS: Well, I know there was a lot of pressure for somebody to do something. I
guess it was probably time for it to be over with. Win, lose, or draw I don’t hate it when
somebody says we lost that war. In fact I even e-mailed Matt Lauer one day. This has
been way back when Senator McCain was going to run for the Democratic presidential
nomination. That morning—I always watched him in the morning getting ready for work.

LC: He’s a broadcaster on NBC (National Broadcasting Company) I think.
AS: Yeah. He says, “Oh, we’re going to go to Senator McCain today. He’s back in Vietnam, the war we lost.” That just floored me. It just absolutely floored me. Maybe it was just that point in time of life for me that struck me that hard or maybe I had never heard anybody say that before or whatever. I sent him an e-mail that day. “Hey, I shed blood in that country, pal.” No, I was really nice. I didn’t say pal. I said for you to say something like that just crushed me. I went on to tell him. I said I think in your next morning, you ought to apologize to all the Vietnam veterans for that remark. Of course I never heard anything back, but they’re not going to banter back and forth with a guy like me.

LC: I’m interested that they didn’t even respond. They didn’t even acknowledge that letter, thank you for your comments or anything?


LC: That’s interesting.

AS: I even wrote at the beginning of it, I said, “Dear Mr. Lauer,” I said, “I really and truly hope this gets to your desk so that you may read it.” I was real nice. I still don’t like the guy. If the guy walks in here now I would bloody his nose. He’s no better than anybody else. I have a real, pretty much a severe dislike for any news media people anyway. I mean I’m not going to be hostile to any of them, but I don’t like them. They have too much authority, unwritten authority, and they don’t answer to anyone. They say what they want. They control too much. I actually wish I could get a room full of them together and say, “Hey people, you got to realize what you’re doing now. You got to realize there are too many people that’s living and dying what you say in the morning news and what’s your opinion that you pass out that’s not good for the country period.” Boy, that morning it just really crushed me. My wife knew I was mad, or not that I was mad. I don’t really get mad, but she knew I was upset about it. “Why don’t you just e-mail him?” I said, “By gosh I will.” And I did.

LC: Did you just e-mailing him even though you didn’t get a response did you just doing something help you feel a little better about it?

AS: Yeah I think so.

LC: At least you did something.
AS: Yeah, I mean what right does he have to say that? He was still crapping in diapers when I was—I don’t know how old he is, but I’m sure he was when my buddies and I were shedding blood over there. What right did he have to say that? Just bothers me.

LC: Al, what do you make of Sen. John Kerry who is going to be the Democratic candidate for president this year?

AS: Wow, that guy is I guess, well, there are a couple of terms I like about him. One is Scary Kerry and the other being John Fonda Kerry for his initials. Like Jane Fonda you know. I have no—maybe I read too much negative about him, but there is a lot, I mean there’s guys like me, I don’t know if anybody that would say anything good about him. I think he’s a phony. It’s another one of those deals that when I go to the polls, gee, again I’m going to be voting the lesser of the evils and that should not be that way.

LC: Now, why do you feel that we could do about him and what is it that other veterans are saying about him? He was over there in uniform and just wonder what you guys are saying and thinking about his candidacy.

AS: Well, he was a brown boat pilot for one thing which I never was a brown boat person or brown water. Well, for one thing I disliked his whole life was outlined a long time ago, an outline that he had drawn up. Okay, I’m going to go to Vietnam. I’m going to get three Purple Hearts, band-aid purple hearts. I’m going to get me a silver star or something, bronze star and I’m going to do this. Then I’m going to run for office. It was just like he outlined his whole life just strictly for him. Yeah. Then he came home and wrote the book and testified in the Winter’s Soldier saying—all I was just reading today that Mr. Burkett that wrote Stolen Valor he did in fact prove that at the Winter Soldier hearings where the Foreign Relations Committee.

LC: These would be in 1971?

AS: ’71 where a lot of the people that he got to testify—I guess he and maybe Jane Fonda can try to get this group of supposedly Vietnam veterans as well. Mr. Burkett actually proved that a lot of those were imposters. That tells you a lot. As far as his service goes, well, he was there. It wasn’t just like he according to his plan that—I could have had three or four Purple Hearts. I think all the guys around me could have, but we said you know after the first one like, “No Doc, don’t write me up. Put a band-aid on it.
I’m going to go.” Again he’s probably—in the book *Stolen Valor*, there might be a whole chapter on him.

LC: Your sense is that he kind of posed for the Purple Hearts and that kind of thing. It was just a way to get a political career going?

AS: I think so. I think his whole big outline of his own life, how he wanted it. As far as what he did in the *Winter’s Soldier* and reports and being a Vietnam Veterans Against the War and all that. He’s not one of us period, and he can’t be. He just cannot be a real Vietnam veteran.

LC: That really doesn’t have to do with whether he was in the Navy or not, but it’s more about what kind of service he had over there, that kind of thing.

AS: Yeah, exactly. Well, I don’t know. Like I say I wasn’t down in the IV Corps and the Delta, or on the riverboats. Yeah, I don’t know what it was like, but I know he probably slept on clean sheets every night or whatever. He just is not one of us period, in my book and a lot of other books too, guys like me. The big thing I think, I truly hope that he doesn’t get elected on the premise that oh gee we treated these Vietnam guys so bad when they came home. Hey, let’s vote this Kerry guy in and do a little make-up here. That would be truly sad. That’s my hope anyway about the situation.

LC: Okay. Is there anything else Al that you’d like to add that maybe I didn’t ask you about? In failing to ask you about I have not given you an opportunity to talk about?

AS: Oh, gosh, I don’t know what it would be. No, I guess not. I’ll probably think of something later, but not at this point, no.

LC: Okay. Al, well, I want to thank you for participating in the Oral History Project.

AS: Mm-hmm.