Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Leonard Hernandez on the 14th of January, 2002 at approximately one o’clock p.m. in the afternoon. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Hernandez is in Midland, Texas. This interview is for the Vietnam Archive Oral History project. Sir why don’t we start with a brief description of your early life and if you would when and where you born and where you grew up?

Leonard Hernandez: Okay, I was born in Midland, Texas in 1941, November the 6th. I grew up here and went to school here in Midland, Midland High. Graduated from Midland High in 1960 and after that I went to work for an oil company, Cities Service Oil Company and when, during my time working with them, I went to Odessa Community College. Then went to work for City Service Oil Company and during that time, during the Vietnam that started and so I got… I wasn’t married, but I was planning to get married in ’66 but I got my notice in ’65 so, but anyway so I just…you know….while I was working for the Cities Service I got my notice and I has to report in March the 21st or 22nd around in there, I can’t remember the date, but I think it’s the 21st of March of 1966 [means ‘66]. But in between that I got married in February of 90…1996 [means ‘66] and then I was married for a month and then I went into the service and took my test and everything in Abilene, Texas and from their we had choices that we could go into the Air Force, Army, Navy and Marines and they told us that the Army had three years, the
Air Force had four years and the Navy four years, the Coast Guard had four years, I think at the time that they told us and the Marines had this special program that had a two year enlistment. So I said well I’ll take the Marines. I already had a job and I was you know, wanted to you know…and I had just got married, so I wanted to get my two years of my obligation done and return back to civilization I guess and that’s about it.

SM: Let’s talk a little about your time in Midland. What was it like growing up there? In the 1940-50’s?

LH: To me…well I was kind of a…what do call a… just a loner, I wanted to be mostly in the house and play basketball by myself and once in a while I had my neighbor come over, but most of the time I was by myself most of the time. It was…cause I was you know I was trying to better myself. I didn’t want to be around other kids that had been in trouble and so but it…really, at the time here at Midland wasn’t that big of a problem in drugs…to me I had something that I wanted to accomplish, you know, I wanted to go to school and I wanted to…you know have a good job and you know stuff like that. But, no Midland was, is still is kind of a real nice little town you know, but you know that’s about…I had a couple of friends, but you know…once a while went to the movies and that’s about it. I wasn’t one you know, one of those guys that go out to get drunk all time, you know or that kind of stuff, I was just kind of more by myself here at the house you know, doing my work, you know just stuff like that.

SM: It is predominately farming and ranching right?

LH: No sir, it’s most oil business.

SM: Oil?

LH: Yes sir. Most of it at the time it was a whole bunch of oil companies here and if you lived in Midland didn’t work for an oil company, then you had to work in the farm or the ranch or something like that. But most of it and now is diversified, there is more other restaurants a lot people can work and there is a big mall, there is a lot of stores, you know… but at that time you worked for an oil company, you know, rough neck or in the office or pumper, or you know stuff like that.

SM: What were…was is like as far as the atmosphere regarding race relations in Midland when you were growing up and later say in the 1960’s when things were getting a little bit rocky in other parts of the country.
LH: Like I said to me it didn’t bother me, in school I was in track, I was in sports
and to me they treated me just normal, I mean just like, you know, cause I was on the
track team not only the Hispanic on the track team but they treat just like they did, all
coach and everything so…you know maybe…other guys…I guess because I was more to
myself and kind of you know, be quiet about it and I didn’t talk about a lot of stuff, like
most of the guys…Hispanics that were in trouble all time…smoking and all that stuff.
But, you know I was trying to always stay away from that but…no to me it didn’t bother
me not…if it was it was just you know…probably I didn’t see it that much…maybe some
other kids did but to me I didn’t see it.

SM: What was the population of Midland while you were growing up?
LH: I think it was about 50,000.
SM: Good size amount.
LH: And now it is almost about 100,000. It; kind of doubled.
SM: You mentioned that one of the things you would do on occasion is go to
movies with friends?
LH: Yeah!
SM: Any particular movies stand out as being, you know, particularly important
to you?
LH: Yeah, well I don’t know the names but mostly I liked war movies.
SM: World War II?
LH: You know like Pearl Harbor movies, something like that when it happened, I
mean they just show a lot of that… highlights they didn’t show a movie like that, but I
mean they show a lot of movies…a lot of movies…old movies.
SM: Did you have relatives, your father perhaps or uncles that served in World
War II?
LH: No, my dad no…but I had two brothers that…a matter of fact three brothers
that served… one of them retired from the Air Force and two of them…my other brothers
were in the Army.
SM: Did they serve in Korea? Or Vietnam?
LH: No, none served in Korea cause it was already over and they serve in
Germany and then the one in the Air Force, he kinds of just…he served in Vietnam too!
But that’s you know that’s about it.
SM: You had mentioned you enjoyed some sports, what subjects did you like in
school in particular in high school?
LH: Math.
SM: When you started going to school after high school again, was this a little a
local college or…?
LH: Yes sir. Yeah, just a local college here in Midland.
SM: What were you leaning towards?
LH: I was majoring in…it was drafting and architect. But I only went two years
cause that is all they had at the time and then I went into the service and then you
know…like I said and then I got married and then I came back and I …I should have
continued my school but I didn’t cause you know…like I said cause…then we had a kid
and then sometimes…but there is no excuse I should of continued but…
SM: Well, it’s hard with a family. When you have children it’s hard to go back
to school. What drew you to drafting and architecture?
LH: Sir?
SM: What interested you in drafting and architecture, when you went to college?
LH: My dad was a carpenter and I always was…I liked to work with wood and
you know… I used to kind…I used to go with him when I was a kid and used to
draw…he’d well we’re going to build this house and this and this and I just look at the
blue prints and I said “Yeah I can read those.” So…you know at the…well…when I first
started, I was about nine to ten years old in the summer; I used to go with him. He used
to tell this, is you know this and this and then I … I kept asking I said, “Who does this?”
He said, “Well there is another man that does the drawing and this and this” and I never
met the guys or anything like that, I was just interested in that when I was in high school,
they had mechanical drawing and that was how I said “Hey, this probably what I…” so I
got mechanical drawing one and two so it was two years and then after that I got…that’s
when I really excited about it and I really loved it and you know.
SM: When you graduated from high school and you went to work and you went
to work for one of the oil companies is that correct?

LH: I was still… I was going to college at the Community College and I work
there and I started going to school and then one of the Professors there said “You know
what… he said… I like the way you are interested in this thing, let me see if I could get
you a job or interview with this company that my wife works for.” And I said that’s fine.
But you know I had heard that before and so he went ahead got me the interview and I
went and talk to the guy and he said yeah you can start as a beginner and you can do this
and this and this… I said that is fine and well is it a permanent job and is it a full time
job? He said yes it is eighty hours and you don’t work on Saturday or Sunday and you
know, I said I like that so… that’s how I started and then from there I was still going to
school at night… cause I changed it from day to night and then I start working.

SM: What was this company again?

LH: Cities Service Oil Company.

SM: What did you do for them?

LH: I started out as spotting wells, which is kind of locations of the wells… I’m
not sure if you are familiar with the oil patch?

SM: Not very no.

LH: Well, what it is… is kind of a surveyor that kind… that’s going to build a
house, you go up there, they survey the lot where they’re going to build the house and
that’s the well spotter did. Then after that they gave me more other jobs to see if I can do
it and then from there I just… started… it was real interesting job. I did that for about
forty years.

SM: When you said when you graduated high in about 1960 and 1965 the Gulf of
Tonkin incident occurred, do you remember that?

LH: The what?

SM: The Gulf of Tonkin incident?

LH: No I sure don’t.

SM: Well… what are…

LH: Well see when I graduated, I started in school and start working and then ’62
I think, I got my two year diploma from finishing that course and then we… I was still
wasn’t at the time or anything like that and well I said I well I’m going to start school again and the finally…and I didn’t and then I said I’m going to let this year go by and then I started going with this girl and after that I found out I got my notice, drafted and that’s how it happen that I got married. But no, I cause in ’64 in ’65 no I, because I really my mind was on something else, I don’t think, cause I didn’t know even when I was in boot camp, they said Vietnam and I said I didn’t know where the heck Vietnam was? You know what I’m saying.

SM: Yes, absolutely.

LH: I mean, my mind, if I had my brother’s here, they probably if I would have asked them where it was, cause one of them went about three times and one was in the Air Force but that other one didn’t but he spent a lot of time in Germany, but anyway that’s the way.

SM: You had your mind on other things.

LH: That was in ’65 right you said?

SM: Right ’65 well, ’64 I’m sorry ’64. And you got your induction notice in 1965? You had into the service and you chose the Marine Corps primary because they had the shortest term correct?

LH: Right?

SM: Why don’t go ahead and describe your introduction into the Marine Corps. Where did you go for your boot camp and what do you remember most about your boot camp?

LH: It was like I said, March 21st of ’66. We got inducted in Abilene, Texas. From Abilene they flew us to Dallas and then from Dallas to San Diego and that is where I took my boot camp and from there, we were there for I guess twelve weeks, basic and then from basic-I went to, they call it Panufrey(?) it’s a base in Camp Pendleton, for Infantry Training, they call it ITR and after I think it was about four weeks that basic training and after that we went to another ITR, more special training for infantry and then from there they gave us a ten day leave and at that time, I think it was around July the last part of July and then we, I reported back to Camp Pendleton and from there we had some training and what was it like said, it was the last of July I reported back and then it was August the whole month of August we trained more infantry, with all kinds of guns. You
had to fire all kinds of guns and cause all Marines are Infantry, so there were all kinds of
guns they tell you fire and be familiar with it and then after that we took another course
on to be a medic, or just not medic but kind of prepare in case you are in the field and you
see somebody wounded real bad or cut and you got an idea of what to do. After that we
got orders to go to Okinawa, we were going to Vietnam. But we stopped in Okinawa and
we took another couple of weeks of training there, to get our body accustomed to hear or
the weather, then from Okinawa they flew us to Danang, Vietnam. Then from there,
when we landed there, there was a Sergeant there and he started reading names and said
you go this company and you go to this company, so after that I got into 3/1 Mike
company, which is the 3rd Regiment 1st Marine Division, Mike company. After that they
came and picked us up, cause we were new replacement, so as soon as I got to that
company which was pretty close to Chu Lai down south, I don’t about eighty or ninety
miles from Danang and then we were there a couple of months and after that we went to
another place close to Marble Mountain which is another, I would ten to fifteen [miles]
south of Danang and so there was another couple of companies there, we were just kind
of, the probably the supported companies at the time. After that, you know another
company took over and we move up and we were around the Marble Mountain closer to
it and from there we started running operations East and no I take it west, we were
running more of the operations Southwest of Marble Mountain.

SM: Let me...I’m sorry…

LH: Go ahead.

SM: I want to take you back to boot camp for a minute, talk about a couple of
things. First, what was the most remarkable, most striking thing about your boot camp
experience that you remember?

LH: Probably the DI’s, they kind of get in your face and holler at you for nothing
hardly at all, just trying to motivate you, probably not motivate you, they disciplined you.
That’s probably the, cause you know, I was kind of pretty disciplined myself, I wasn’t, to
me I didn’t think I needed that, but I mean I just went along with the program. I didn’t
argue, I didn’t say anything to them, I’m hear and I just want to do my time, so you can
holler at me as much as you want but you…but it was the most, I had never had anybody
curse me and tell me all this and I couldn’t do anything. But it was the scary thing that I
went…the rest of it was not too bad as long as you were in good physical shape, you could do just about anything you set your mind to do it. But that was the only bad thing. Yeah!

SM: Now how did they enforce discipline, if one of the trainees got out of line?

LH: What they did if you were talking without permission or something, just like in school, they tell you give me fifty push ups and squat thrusts and just stuff like that. Or they tell you go run to the fence and it was just a whole bunch of dirt, not dirt it was sand, you couldn’t run very well especially with those big boots and stuff like that, they just kind of…try to…and some people they didn’t even listen…they said what are you looking at? Well I’m not looking…okay give me fifty push-ups or run three miles or you know stuff like that.

SM: Was there much physical contact between the DI’s and the trainees?

LH: No! No! I didn’t see any let’s put it that way, maybe something that I didn’t see but close to me I didn’t see any of that. They get so close to you that you think that you…they almost touch your nose with theirs, but that’s about it. They used to…they do curse a lot…tell you your mother’s this or that and but…like I said I just went along with them. I had some friends that had gone to the Marine Corps and when they got back, they told me a lot of that stuff so I was kind of…I had a little idea, not…but…but that’s about it…the rest of no, it…I’m not saying it was easy, but it wasn’t as bad as when they got you…at your face and curse you out, but the training was I expected that, I went along with it, the three miles, four miles runs, like I said I used to be a runner, so it didn’t bother me. Then only thing is sometimes blister because of the boots, cause I wasn’t used running with boots, but it’s about it.

SM: What weapons were you trained on at boot camp?

LH: We were trained…they first gave us a weapon, it was after probably, the third, fourth week, they gave us an M1 rifle and we weren’t shooting that or nothing, we just had to carry it to get used to it, everywhere you went you took your rifle and this, this and then after I would we were there probably six or seven weeks, they took us to a rifle range to qualify and they gave us an M14 rifle and then with that we had to qualify, but with the M1 we still had to shoot the M1 and be familiar with it to, but we didn’t qualify, we just qualify with the M14 and then we, we were there I guess two weeks on…they
train you on a whole bunch of positions to see...in all kinds of...for two weeks and sit
on...because everybody had to go through that really...they always want you to be
familiar with the rifle, so that is why they gave us two weeks, but I mean it was from six
o’clock in the morning or six-thirty till about four or five. We just had to clean the rifle,
doing this that...I mean it went for two weeks and it seems it was longer, but it was only
two weeks.

SM: Anybody ever misplace their M1?

LH: Yes, yes a lot of people, a lot of guys did. So what they did they come in
and he said well they already knew because they put everybody at attention and if you
didn’t have your rifle, so they walk up to them, they said okay and you had to hold your
rifle at first they curse you out and tell you all kinds of stuff and then they say okay you
stand up here by yourself and hold that rifle on top of your head, until I tell you when.
Boy I tell what, I seen some guys crying and all kinds of stuff. Besides that...they
explain to you why, they try to put all that because...that is when they start telling you,
you going to Vietnam and you know what is over there, and you know this and this... and
most of those DI’s had already been there, but I don’t know if they...that is what they
told us, I just put it that way. But they...I just want you to...if you were in a fox hole and
you didn’t have your rifle and your buddy here was asleep, because he stayed up all night
and you sleep and you didn’t have your rifle all of sudden, what do you think is going to
happen to him and you...said why?...because I didn’t have your rifle, stuff like that, they
try to put into your mind.

SM: What did you think about the M14, when you had to qualify with it?

LH: The M14 was real nice; it was I think it was the best I ever fired. I never did
have the M16’s because we took the M14’s with us, at the time I don’t think they had the
M16’s, I think they were working with the M16’s, but I really enjoyed it was a real nice
rifle. I never had jam with it, all the time that I was in Vietnam with it and you could run
through sand, dirt, water, mud, you know, through the rivers and you know get out an
fire, and fire. The only thing is that I can really remember on the second ITR that they
told us as long as your rifle is clean, that is your life right there. Just keep your rifle
clean. I learned right then and there and I said well...I was always cleaning my rifle; I
wanted to fire so...that’s about it on that.
SM: You mentioned that your DI’s had been over there, do mean, your DI’s
Vietnam experience or Korean War experience or both?
LH: No, they told us that they had been in Vietnam.
SM: So they were part of that first rotation group?
LH: Probably, because I think…unless they were advisors or something because I think it really start in ’65…start getting real…and this training it was already in the last of March or April, so I could see they made their six month tour and then come back or whatever tour they made, but…because I remember on my way when I got back, they wanted some DI’s, but I didn’t have enough time, they wanted me to reenlist…so I could see…but anyway to me it was a figure they were older than I was and they probably knew then I did at the time and especially about that so, you know I kind of look and listened and took everything, I wanted to take everything like a sponge, you know make sure I was doing the right thing and you know so…
SM: I know what I forgot to ask you about your rifle. Did you ever name it?
LH: No, I never did. People did, they put it on their stripe. Yeah…a lot did…but…like Dolly and Linda or you know…a lot of people did, I never did. I knew it was just my life, maybe it was…maybe I did name then…my life…but because I knew if I could have it cleaned all time, you know it was my life, you know so…everywhere you went, went to restroom, you went, no matter where you went you took your rifle…you went to sleep you had your rifle right there with you and you know.
SM: What do you remember about them telling you about Vietnam?
LH: The only thing is before we went, we were at Camp Pendleton and had just finished the training and they….we had just come from leave, we went back told us after this training you are going to Vietnam and he said the thing that you all need to remember is that those guys over there, they used to say “gooks” but I don’t like call them “gooks” but anyway they used to call them “gooks” and the said there about 4’5”, 5’5” or he said if you get one that is 5’5” he said that is pretty big, but most of them are less than five feet and they weight about ninety pounds or eighty pounds and he said they don’t wear any shoes and they have black shorts or black tops or black pajamas and he said they like to work at night. People say what do you mean work at night? He said fight at night, you know and he said your night will be your day and your day is going to
be your night so you better remember all that, so that’s is why I remember more, most of it, but what the DI told us about the Vietnamese, how big you know, that’s about it.

SM: When you left to go to Okinawa on your way to Vietnam. What did you think that the United States were trying to accomplish there? Why was the United States involved in Vietnam anyway? As far as you at that point.

LH: As far as I knew, I think they were just…to me I mean, they were just trying to keep peace between the South and the North, I mean you know, that’s how stupid I was, but to me I thought that is why were there for but it changed real as soon as I got there. I noticed what it was totally different. We were there to protect the South Vietnamese, but we couldn’t fight the way were taught to fight. We had to wait until they fire at us, we couldn’t put a round in the chamber, we couldn’t…a lot stuff we couldn’t do and then that is when I realized I said well shit what kind of war is this, you know, but I noticed I got that real quick. The first week probably I was there, the first couple of days.

SM: When you left to go to Okinawa, did you have any specialized training to be a mortar man or something else or were you just going to be rifle infantry?

LH: No, I was just rifle infantry, 0311, is what they called infantry and I was…my MOS was 0311 Rifleman.

SM: Did you take a rifle with you or were you issued one when you got to infantry?

LH: No, we took it from here…well, it was issued here and we took it with us, yeah, on the plane.

SM: This is your M14?

LH: Yes sir!

SM: How long did you stay in Okinawa before you went to Vietnam?

LH: I think about two weeks or maybe, it seemed two weeks, I would say ten days maybe or seven days or something like that.

SM: It is just to acclimate you or something like that?

LH: Right.

SM: What was it like in Okinawa? Do you remember much?
LH: It was pretty nice; I liked it you know it was, something different that I
didn’t see in the states. I saw a lot of, I don’t know what, if they were Japanese or
Korean’s, I don’t know what nationality they were, but I knew they were different. I
didn’t know too much about what country it was suppose to…Okinawa was, you know
so, but I think it was a lot of Japanese to me, you know. But at the time I didn’t know,
you know what I’m saying?

SM: What do you remember most about going…you said you over in Da Nang
correct? When you flew over to Vietnam. What do you most about when you got their,
your first impressions when you were getting off the plane in Da Nang?

LH: I was real scared! I was…because there was so many planes going in and
out and you could hear so much noise, you know, you know, I was just scared. I didn’t
what to expect or anything until…I mean it wasn’t any…well that night there was
mortar’s, but I mean you know… to mean after a while I thought it was just another
plane, you know what I’m saying? Just taking off and but…that’s about it, I mean it was
noisy, humid, you know, and hot. That’s about it.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe how you were moved around, when
you got there to Da Nang, they take you to a replacement company? Did you get any
kind of briefings there?

LH: No, not really, the thing is when they, when you first get there, like I said
they assign to a the 1st Marine Division or the 3rd Battalion and, 1st Marine Division and
because the 1st Marine and the 3rd Battalion and the 7th, I don’t remember the 9th
Battalion, were there, protecting the airport of Da Nang, but they were not right there,
they were a way South of the airport and there was one company or I don’t know if it was
the Nine Marine Division, they were right there by the Marble Mountain, but anyway, I
was with the 3-1’s so they ship us way back there by Phu Bai, Chu Lai and then after
that, I guess maybe we were there like I said you loose time day and days and everything
and they told us that the Army was taking over that base, so they move us North, because
North it’s, Chu Lai is between Da Nang and Phu Bai, so North to us was moving more
towards Da Nang. Did I make myself clear there?

SM: Yes sir!
LH: So we were there and then from there as soon as the other divisions move
out, they move us more close, so you know, then they put another division behind and
you know just, just like that and then…I think it was…let’s see…I got there in
September…October, November, December…on December, I got to…I had to R&R and
then came back and after January they move us back in closer to Da Nang, and then on
February I got wounded and they sent me to hospital there in Da Nang and then I went
back…I was in the hospital for eighteen days, so I went back to the my company, 3-1, my
company and then from there they move us back North again and then after that I think,
we, I went to another R-R and think it was around in August, maybe and then I came
back and then, our company was still there, so we stayed there and then in September, we
went North a little bit more and then stayed there in October and the end of October I got
my orders to come back-back to the States.

SM: Let’s talk a little bit more specifically about you time there near Marble
Mountain, when you first arrived. Could you tell me about the month in’66 when you
arrived again?

LH: I got there in September.

SM: September ’66? What do you remember about your first operation, your
first patrol?

LH: Like I said…We’d spend one night in Da Nang, which is where everybody
goes in and from there it was kind of late and they said well in morning you can you go
and report…they come and pick up at your company, so I got there with guys which was
my company and then they assigned me to a squad and then the squad that afternoon was
going on patrol and the Sergeant there ask me and said since you just got here you are a
relieve. He said you are going to be a point man, I said okay and I said what time are we
leaving? And he said probably about six o’clock that afternoon and I said, well I said,
this is a stupid question, but I like to know how can I tell the incoming from the outgoing
rounds? He said you’d know real soon, you’ll know tonight. I got real scared. But
anyway we…and I also ask him, well what time how long are patrols are going, he said
we won’t be in until six o’clock the next day. I said you mean we are going to stay all
night, he said yes, we are on patrol, we don’t sleep, and we just walk and walk trying to
find the enemy. I said okay. Then I said and you want me to be the point man, I said I
don’t know the…he said there will be another guy up here where to turn, right behind
you, he’ll tell you where to turn, I said okay so, and that’s the way, and I found out that
same night the incoming and outgoing rounds, we got hit on, they hit us, they fired at us,
for about fifteen – ten minutes then they disappear, then follow them. We’d, they didn’t
fire at us anymore till the in morning we were coming back and they fired at us again,
they tried, we had a little firefight and then we come back and after that you know, most
of the butterflies or whatever I had, but I mean, don’t get me wrong I was still scared, I
was scared all the time I was there, I mean it was just shoot at us all the time, but I mean,
you get, I don’t how to explain, you get used to the firing at you because they fire at you
all the time, but then you can’t see them and you don’t know where they are so you keep
looking for them, looking for them, you know. But yeah, I was scared all time I was
there.

SM: When you made contact with the enemy, did your unit suffer any
causalities?
LH: No, cause most of the time, they one…most of the people that we were
fighting there at the time I think, they were, they were just trying to scare you or
something, because they hit way in front of you or go through your hair way back, so to
me they were not real good fighters, you know what I’m saying, but, but no later on as
the time went in they’d move the Viet Cong’s that knew what they were doing, but at the
time when I got there, most of them were probably still at the North part of Vietnam, they
were probably moving in, you know, cause I think most of the time when were fighting,
at the time there was probably just one or two that were trying to train some of the other
Vietnamese or but, after a while we got hit real bad.

SM: What did you think about this idea of putting the newest guy right out there
in the front on the point?
LH: To me it didn’t matter, because they had already told us that down here in
training, most of the time that everybody had to be the point man and sooner or later at
one point but the only thing is that I was already…if I could do my two or three weeks or
a month until another guy gets here, I’ll be okay, you know, and I was only there for
about two weeks as a point man until other guys came in and they put them in and I got to
be in the back, not in the back but I mean you know, I had to train that other guy a little
bit. At that time I didn’t know that much, but I knew more that he did and if I had any
questions, I would tell the Sergeant and he would tell me, well you know, especially
during the day, you know, cause we had kind of a twenty four hour patrols, some come
in, some go out and sometimes you get to go during the day and sometimes you… like
when we go in, like if we go on patrol at six o’clock in the afternoon or we come in at six
o’clock, okay, another squad goes out at six o’clock in the morning and comes back at six
o’clock in the afternoon or ten o’clock or whatever, you know what I’m saying, unless
they got to, they need help and then everybody goes. We had my, when I got to be a
Sergeant I got my own squad to and we got into some trouble so we had to call in and get
some help, there was too many for us and we knew we couldn’t…we were going to be
dead so, we got help real quick.

SM: I want to come back to that, but before I do. What kind of training did they
have for you, when you first got your unit?

LH: When I first got back to Vietnam?

SM: Yes, did your unit train in you in any way? Booby traps or?

LH: No, most of it, it was here in Camp Pendleton, the ITR- Infantry Training-
and both ITR2 and ITR1, they teach you all that, all the weapons and what to look for, for
mines and booby traps and all that. They teach you all that here in states. They had a
kind of a small, little camp like Quonset huts and like their little villages they had in
Vietnam, they had, they build one here, in our training, so we knew what to look for, but
I mean it is totally different when you are in training and you go in real life, you know
what I’m saying. But you know at least we had an idea, what to look for and the little
rice paddies, were just little trail, and you know stuff like that. They built it kind of…you
know but at least they give you an idea, then they show you some slides and film, but just
a little bit, you know like a thirty minute film. They show you this is the way it looks,
this is the jungle, this is the rice paddies, this is the villages, from one village to the other.
Just stuff like that.

SM: What about patrolling techniques, was it pretty much single file?

LH: Yes sir! I would say about between fifteen to twenty yards apart, you know
not that close and when you were, if you hit a booby trap or something, you know, that is
why they want us that far apart, because at least you get one Marine hurt instead of two.
I mean you can hear the blast and you might get a little bit of scrap metal, get a little bit but not much and but, we were like I said about fifteen or twenty yards apart, except when the Lieutenant and the radio men, they was the middle of the line were more close together like you know about three or four guys, but the rest of them were far apart. They knew who to fire at, you know the guy next to the radio. Because at the time the radioman had the little antenna and they knew.

SM: The area in which you initially worked there, around Marble Mountain. What was the foliage like and what was the terrain like, obviously by the name Marble Mountain and we are talking about a very hilly, rocky, mountain area.

LH: No, it wasn’t really hilly, it was hilly but it wasn’t rocky it was more sand; real sandy on it was a lot of bamboo trees. We were, I can’t…I would say were about ten maybe seven miles east of the ocean, you know, so I guess that’s why it was so sandy, I mean, you know just like that…in camp Palto where we trained it was sandy to, like on the beach. But you know, it was…at night you couldn’t see anything, it was so dark, because the bamboo trees, it was, the only part that was real light was in the rice paddies between the villages, when there was no bamboo, cause what they do, it’s just like here in West Texas, you got a lot of mesquites and if you got a couple of acres you got a lot of mesquites, you get someone to pull those mesquites out so it was just a clean deal there and but on the other side it was mesquites and this other side it was mesquite but in the middle it was clean, and that is why most of the village separate themselves by the rice paddies. Did I make myself clear there?

SM: Yes, you sure did. Was it very thick, the bamboo and other plant life?

LH: Yes sir. It was a lot of green stuff cause rained quite a bit, over there. Especially in the monsoon season, but most of the time it rains quite a bit and then it was a lot of green vegetation, real green. Yeah, the bamboo was pretty tall, probably about telephone poles here.

SM: That thick?

LH: Yeah, they are pretty thick. Pretty thick. Well like I said at night it get so dark you can’t even see your hand in front of you. But you know your eyes get used it after you have been there a while and you can see and then we also call for illumination, you know when we were, not right on top of us, but we way in front, so we make sure
that we were going in the right direction and we can spot somebody running or something
that illumination will light it up so we can see them.

SM: Would you call illumination from artillery, naval gun ship, both?
LH: We usually it from your own battalion.

SM: Artillery fire illumination. Did you work much, the base camp that you
worked out of, was it near some Vietnamese villages; we’re there any Vietnamese people
around you, near you?
LH: Yeah, they weren’t, they weren’t to far away, they were about five miles
away, but I mean you know, they’re not…the closest town I think it was Da Nang, but I
mean you know, yeah there was a lot of villages, that you, you go inspect those every
day. You go by them and you talk to the people…cause I could understand…but they
always lie and tell you different things, but you know, but yeah you see a lot of people,
most of them were women and old men in the eighties and little kids. You never saw
any, eighteen through forty or fifty, you never seen of them.

SM: You mean men?
LH: Men. Yeah, right.
SM: Fighting age men.
LH: Right, you never saw them.

SM: Were there any ARVN units or ARVN Marines that fought near you?
LH: Yeah, it was later right, like I said it was right before I left, it was, this was
probably started, in August or maybe in the last part of June when we start moving more
west and cause we, they told us to move more west cause they were getting a lot of
people from the west coming east and yeah, you could see those, some of those, that we
killed had uniforms, but the ones that when we were there, I would say my first five, six
months, no they were just kind of a guerilla fighters, you know just, I don’t know they
could be just local ones or you know they were most had those black pajamas on.

SM: The base camp that you worked out of, how large was that?
LH: It was a four companies, it was one Battalion, I would say probably about
twelve hundred, about twelve hundred soldiers, marines, you had artillery there, the
mortars and all that in there, and you had to protect them. So what it is it’s like a
parameter around the whole, and then from there we run our patrols. That was our house,
our home. We only had a whole bunch of tents, but at least when we had time we would
go up there and sleep, but you know.

SM: So did you guys, did you have to build bunkers?

LH: Yes sir. We, we every time we moved, we had to build the whole perimeter,
but we had the Seabees, that’s part of the Navy and they come in and what it is they pull
the dirt with bulldozer’s all the way around and they just leave a place to get in and then
from there, we start building bunkers and then each corner they built a big tower.

SM: How frequently would you move?

LH: Sometimes, it seemed to me, every other month or something like that we
moved. It seemed to me sometimes, I know we moved about four times, we moved, so to
me, you know, every other month.

SM: What other patrols do you remember while you were there in that first
operational area, around Marble Mountain? You mentioned, you talked a little in detail
about your first patrol, what were some of the other more memorable patrols that you
went on in that area?

LH: Well, most of them were about the same. Every time you went out you get
fired at, they snipe at you, just about every time, but the worst one is when you into
operations, when there is another, say battalion. What usually, when they call an
operation, that’s because in certain areas, you got sniped at a lot of times, like we did,
okay and then what they do, they call another battalion to like, a blocking force, like one
on one side and you go on the other side, so it takes you know, sometimes it takes four
companies, over there, sometimes it takes two companies, it depends on how big the
officers, because we never know any thing about, just they tell you well, you have to run
an operation or you got to run your patrol or you know, we were never, the guys who did
all the work, never were telling you, or well, I mean we were never told that it was a big
operation or it was a…you know what I’m trying to say. I don’t know if you know if
I’m…

SM: I think I do.

LH: Okay, but anyway, they just say when we go on patrol, they, cause we got to
patrol that in, but at the time I didn’t because I just a PFC and then well I was Private,
then a PFC and then, Lance Corporal then Corporal then a Sergeant, but as you are there
and a lot of people get killed or wounded or something, you would never see them again, so they, you have to have so many Sergeants, you have to have so many Corporals to take over, so, most of the patrols almost about the same as your first one. I mean they were little different, some of them you get in contact more, but I mean most of them, the only difference is like I was saying is the operations. If you are in blocking force or you’re the sweeper, the sweeper is the one that you pushing whatever is in there. They’re enemy there you, they see you coming so they need to get away and that other battalion or companies or whatever, they’re on the outskirts of that village or whatever, you know what I’m saying? So you’re pushing them and then you got another blocking force that usually come in helicopters and drop ‘em. So they won’t see them, so they won’t have time to get out. Then this other company is pushing in, going in that village or where they would think we are getting a lot of sniper from. Sometimes, you know, it was a big fights, because, there were, we just thought there were just a couple of sniper, but they were big, big troops there and we got our little butts kicked a couple of times, but you know. But its, most of it your patrols were about the same, you know. I don’t know if I explain it, you know?

SM: Do you remember any major operations that you patrolled with?

LH: Yes, but like I said, I don’t remember the names because we weren’t told, they said, you get your gear ready we are going on an operation. We knew in operation, we knew if we weren’t the sweeper guys, we were the blocking force. One of the, that I can really remember was the main one that I can remember, I think it was ah, I can’t remember the month, but it was ah, I can’t remember the month or the day, but I was already there about six or seven months and we were suppose…we were suppose, there was one of a, another upset, I think it was the 7th Marines or something, they got pinned down, because they were on the operation, with two companies sweeping and two blocking and they got pinned down on the valley, between two mountains and they were…so they call us in there, so we got our ass whipped too, I mean, we had…lost quite a few people, out of our company, cause they said we just need one company, so they sent our company and they took us…I think we lost two helicopters and they just come and drop us and the helicopters are starting to up and they go down. But they got us in between the two mountains, and they were pretty good size mountains but, as for the
other companies were pinned down, you know, they couldn’t…you know…so…we tried
to go around but it was so high, you know and they were on top, they were on the side of
the mountains, you know, so we had to call the…we call…what do they call
it…Napalm…to burn them out, so we could see them, like I said, you can’t…it was so
green, so like a jungle, you know, the only thing is on that valley, it was wide open, you
know and they had run so many patrols, through there, I think it was the 7th Marines, I’m
not sure, but so, they got pinned down and they needed some help, so they called us and
we went over, and we, you know, we did, we got them out, but we lost quite a few, not I
think we had about two hundred and fifty something and we only had about thirty or forty
people you know that weren’t dead or wounded, I mean they were fine, you know. So to
me it was probably one of the worst ones to me because, there so many bodies there and
you know and I didn’t think I remember seeing so many bodies laying, and we would just
get them…finally the next day or two, we just get all the bodies together and then we just
throwing like, you know, well we had them in those black bags, they call them green
bags, we just put them in there, you know, and we just put them in the helicopters and
they take them back to Da Nang and the probably from there they ship them home, I
don’t know. The rest of them were, you know, were, were I would say they weren’t as
bad as that, I mean they were still bad, but I mean not as bad as that, I don’t think,
because we, we got hit since we landed until the next, we just you know, fire, fire, fire,
mortars here and there, but you know we lost quite a few Americans, but you know, later
on they said there were a lot of wounded, but I saw a lot of dead ones two so…but they
never you know…when you’re just a grunt they won’t tell you …the Lieutenants or
Captains all that, they won’t tell you very much, you know, even if you ask, they say well
we just lost so many and that’s it, you know. I don’t know if all that was coming in from
headquarters or higher up, but the said well your not, your not suppose to say anything or
just this and that. That’s about it.

SM: What was the largest, when you were in the Marble Mountain area, what
was the largest enemy unit you encountered on patrol? That you remember?

LH: I can’t remember. We just got hit in an ambush and but…really the thing is
you could never tell, you know how big or how small, or anything they were, because
they hit and run, you know what I mean…they just fire…you know…they hardly ever
stay, you know…but if they had a big outfit themselves, they stay and fight, but I mean if
they had twenty or thirty, forty people, they won’t stay and fight, no matter, like on
patrol, we only had fourteen guys, you know every time we go on patrol, the…the…they
can see you, how many you had but they still won’t…but if…if you had fifty or hundred
they stay and fight, but if they had less they won’t…the…just fire and take off. Who
would go out on patrol…who was the highest-ranking person out on patrol with you?
LH: Most of them were the Sergeant and then the Corporal.
SM: That was just a squad leader or was he team Sergeant?
LH: Yeah, the squad leader. Once in a while, you know if…we had...because
we…I had so many Lieutenants that I can’t tell you how many I had. Because
they…once in a while…they…they go…they go with you, but you know, they go
with…they’re trying to make it with every squad, cause on a company you have four
squads and they try to make with every squad, you know, some of them, you know, like
with me, I had some, but they, I didn’t like them, because they want to do everything by
the book and I prefer, me…to go take my squad at night, because we could do whatever
we wanted. If you go with a Lieutenant or a Captain, you had to go, as soon as you got
on battalion…you just carry your rifle, your not suppose to put a round in your chamber,
your not suppose fire unless they fire at you, you know stuff like that, that it didn’t make
any sense. But like I was saying, with the Lieutenants, they…because every time they go
out they know where they get in the middle and they got the radio men and they…if
they’re fire, they fire right in the middle, because they’re closer, you know, I would say
they are probably about four or five feet together, apart…you know and the rest of them,
like I said fifteen to twenty meters apart…so if you are going to fire at one you are trying
to kill one of the Marines, everybody’s got to fire at that guy, because they weren’t that
good of a…but the…you know if you fire at the middle of it, that closer and they were
going to hit the Lieutenant and the radio man, we lost a lot of radio men and Lieutenants
or Captains because of that, then finally after a while they realized, you know, how they
were doing it…but then we lost of people. I wouldn’t say all of them were killed, but
wounded enough to get them out of Vietnam.

SM: What were the rules of engagement? How were they explained to you?
LH: They weren’t explained.
They were not?

No sir!

SM: You mentioned, for instance that you were, you on a patrol, that you were not suppose to only fire when fired at, you weren’t suppose to have a round chamber?

Well yeah, but…you know…like when I take my squad, when I finally became a Sergeant I took my squad, I load them up before we got out, out of Battalion. I said load up and put a round in the chamber. If they say anything, tell them I told you. I wasn’t going to loose any of my guys just because of their stupidity. So you know…I was lucky enough I got a couple guys wounded not dead, in my squad and all…I was squad leader for I guess about three months maybe…maybe four before I went back to the states. But I didn’t lose of my men. Even in operations I didn’t lose any. I got two wounded like I said but that’s about it.

SM: What else besides chambering a round and not firing until fired at? What other operating procedures…?

No smoking and…no smoking at night and don’t talk…not talking and don’t light up cigarette lighter…you know little stupid things like that, I can’t remember all of them, but…just a little stupid things like that didn’t make any sense, it mean to me it didn’t. I could see at night, you know…because at night it carries more, noise and light and stuff like that, but during the day it just didn’t make…cause you know the planes are flying through and you know you could hear them and everything so…I mean you know…it just to me…I’m just talking about personal opinion. It didn’t make any sense to me.

SM: To have those restrictions during the day?

Right, right.

SM: What about using paths?

Using what?

SM: Paths. A path? Were you supposed to stay off paths and roads?

Oh a path? It depends you know; once you are…you always had guys experience, that they could tell if those things were been walked through and not. You know they…after a while you know, they teach other guys what to look for. So…no…sometimes we went through them and sometimes we didn’t. Especially
when…when it rained quite a bit and it you know…then we kind of stayed away from
them, because we couldn’t tell, but most of the time we stay on the path or we make our
own or we stay…you know…ten or fifteen yards away from it.

SM: Now, did you personally as the point man, did you encounter many booby
traps?

LH: No…no I never did. I saw two that I stopped. But I never…I never tripped
one. But yeah I saw two.

SM: What kind were they?

LH: They were just regular…uh…that had a whole bunch of nails and they were
just a home made…look like it was some kind of pipe, big pipe…then when they finally
took it apart, it was just a whole bunch of nails and glass and everything they could put in
there, just to…not enough to you know…kill you I don’t think, but enough to hurt
you…you know…to slow you down.

SM: What about wild life in that area?

LH: No…well once in a while you see a monkey, but that’s about it. Cause there
was a lot of banana trees. But no I didn’t see any lions or any tigers or anything like that.

SM: How about snakes?

LH: Yeah, snakes there were a lot, there were a lot of snakes.

SM: What kind of snakes?

LH: Well, they had those water snakes and they had one they called it a three
steps snake. They said that if those bite you, you only have three steps and you would
die. You know…but I saw a lot of them, but I wasn’t going to stare and look at them to
see…you know what I’m saying? To see what color they were or what kind they were.
But no…there were a lot of snakes.

SM: Were there mosquitoes and other insects bad there?

LH: Yeah, they were real bad. We had…we were suppose to…I always did, they
give you a mosquito repellant, it didn’t do any good. They give you malaria pills and I
always took that every day, because I was…those suckers were big, they could carry you!
I mean those mosquito’s were BIG mosquito’s and they couldn’t even let you sleep
sometimes. Because they just…you know…they like to get around your ears or
something. Boy it just drives me crazy. But during the day it wasn’t that bad, but at
night they were. I think it was why a lot of people like to light up a cigarette, you
know...cause I guess the smoke helped them...I don’t know...but some of my guys I
would tell them...just get your pancho and cover up if you want to smoke. That way you
wouldn’t see any light or anything.

SM: Now, when you would go out on patrol, did you have any intelligence
briefings beforehand, telling you well we suspect there are enemy units at a particular
area, that kind of thing?

LH: No. No. The only thing they tell us, that this is the...well we had a little
briefing, you know like me and the Captain or me and the Lieutenant. Here is the map;
this is the route you’re going to take. It depends, like...if I was taking on the afternoon
and come back in the morning, I usually all for illumination at certain parts, to make sure
I was on the right tack, in case something happen, you know...to call in mortars and
whatever strike or whatever we need. I always at night, every hour, I’d just call in, way
ahead of us on the next point, cause I had coordinates just tell the radio men to call...call
these coordinates and it was always, I run ahead...you know what I’m saying...I had to
met...instead of being at this point at a certain...I call it in front of me. You know it
was...I just want to make sure that we were on the right course in case we need help.
That way I just could tell them, hey we are at this corner, because there were some people
from other companies that got killed like that...no telling...they got off on the wrong
path or on the wrong coordinates and when they call it in they right of top of them, you
know what I’m saying? So I always...I learned that by just listen to what is going on.

SM: When did you leave that first area around Marble Mountain?
LH: I never left it. Like I said we were south of that, then we just keep moving
north of it. Until I got back to the States, until I got my orders to come...

SM: Oh, so you did stay in that area?
LH: Right!

SM: You just moved around a little bit more?
LH: We just move a lot. We went north quite a bit, north of uh...like I said in
operations, sometimes north of Da Nang, because of other companies, other battalions
had big operations and they needed another couple companies to take care of their
perimeter, you know what I’m saying, so we went like that.
SM: You mentioned in the questionnaire that I sent you; you mentioned that there was an incident where a gunny Sergeant stood in front, in the middle of a rice paddy. Firing his shotgun. Why don’t you tell me about that particular operation?

LH: Okay, we were, I think we got ambushed at that time…because we were crossing a rice paddy and it was a whole company, that was…we were going back to our own, I guess…the landing zone where they could pick us up, LZ they call it and we were going and we needed I would say a couple of miles, but it seemed shorter to me, but it could be longer, but it didn’t seem to me that long, cause we were in the front, the front of the company, we were the first…my squad was the first one’s in front…so when…it didn’t seem to me that long… and then as soon as we would cross this rice paddy…this wide open area we…we kind of figure we might…cause they told us, be on the look out, they said don’t get to close, cause it’s a wide open area and as we were walking, yeah we got hit as soon you know I guess there were almost…half of the company in the open area and the first sergeant gunny was in front, first side I mean gunny almost was in the middle of it and they start firing it. We start firing back, but we got down, in the rice paddy and he didn’t. The only thing he had he hit a 45 and a shotgun. Said, “Come on you son of bitches, come on, get me, get me!” He kept firing moving towards where the…but like I said they only hit and took off, you know, they hit you for I would say about a minute, you know and that was about it. Nobody it got hurt, but…the gunny just you know…they would just fire with the shotgun and he keep cussing at him…come and get me…come and get me…but…

SM: You mentioned that one of the worse missions you were on did occur when you were the squad leader and you had to call in for support.

LH: I think it was on that part that got us in that valley. I had to call for support, because they got one of my Captain and my first Lieutenant, they got the first Lieutenant, so the first Lieutenant call me, he said sergeant, you need to take over this and call artillery cause we need it, so I talk to the radio man, gave him the coordinates and we…we…you know I don’t…I don’t know if we got saved by that or…but anyway he put me up for a silver star and then…I don’t if it was for the silver star or not but they gave me a silver star. But I don’t know…I’m pretty sure it was because of that, cause I went ahead a regroup everybody, cause I was the only one, I was the only Sergeant. The
rest of…the high…I was the highest ranking guy there…so you know I went ahead and I
got everyone together and I said you know…let’s get a count, see what we got and
regroup and then you know…and finally the Lieutenant said you take over. You know
what to do and I said okay.

SM: What was this part of do you know? Was it part of a larger operation?
LH: I can’t remember the name of the operation.
SM: When was it do you recall?
LH: It had to be probably…I don’t know…it probably had to be around July or
August, I’m not sure. Knew I was already, I wasn’t a Sergeant then.

SM: Oh you were not a Sergeant?
LH: No, I was a Corporal.
SM: When did you make Sergeant?
LH: Maybe I was…I made Sergeant in April. Maybe I was. Yeah, I think I was
already. Yeah, because I went in, in March, I made Sergeant in less than a year. So
yeah, I think I was a Sergeant already then. Cause I made Sergeant in a year…cause see
I…when I came back the states, I had about six or seven months already in grade as a
Sergeant. Yeah…so it…I hate to tell you but I just can’t remember.

SM: That’s alright, I was just curious if you remembered. You said there were
just a few guys that got wounded in that operation?
LH: No, in that one no we had a lot of people killed. We had quite a few
wounded and a lot of them killed. Like I said that operation is the one that we lost a lot
of our company. We had, we went in there with the whole company, two hundred and
fifty-five.

SM: This might have been part of Union-1?
LH: You know like I said, cause my nephew was telling me that what operations?
I said I don’t know how many operations we went to…I said cause they never told us.
You know…he told me he’d say…well I can get you all that information if you
could…on some of those I can remember the month’s but the days I don’t…you
know…because all the days were about the same for me…I mean the month’s, I was
marking the months, because I knew when I was coming back and after a while I quit
marking those because it started getting to close, like about four or five months and a lot
of people said, when you get that close, that is when you get shot or killed, he said so quit
marking them. So I quit marking them.
SM: When you…that operation where you had to take over, when the Captain
got killed, or was he wounded?
LH: No he was wounded.
SM: But when the officers that were wounded, do you know whether you were
up against the Viet Cong or a PAVN Unit the North Vietnamese?
LH: We didn’t know. The only thing we knew it was a big…big
enemy...because they had that other two companies already…I think it was two or three
companies already pinned down for more than a day. So, to get them pinned down, you
got to be big.
SM: How many battalion commanders did you have while you were there do you
know?
LH: No, I really don’t remember.
SM: I didn’t know if they rotated quickly or not?
LH: Well, they…I only remember one Captain really and the rest of them
if…Lieutenant…like I said they come in and go.
SM: When you became a squad leader and you were promoted to Sergeant,
became a squad leader and you got your own squad, you mentioned that some of the rules
you would set aside because you didn’t think they were good ideas?
LH: Yeah, I would just break them. But now if the Captain or the Lieutenant was
with me. I didn’t have a choice, right, because you know…I would just say…because see
before we get grief, they call me into the office and they say we are going to run this and
I’m going and so I come back and tell my squad, okay get ready, I’m taking enough
ammo and this and this, cause the Captain or Lieutenant is coming, so you all better
watch it and that’s it. Everybody knew once you tell them that, you know…I think a lot
of them take the radios with them too. The little transistor radios, yeah. A lot of people
took their cameras, you know a lot of stuff that they weren’t suppose to. But you know
once you are in the fields by yourself, you’re going to need something to entertain
yourself or something. A lot of people take books or magazines with them, because you
know that is a long day, we just go and work for two or three hours and rest and take off
and work for another two and rest. As long as somebody is watching all the time, it was what…I always keep telling…I said…at night, if we had to make our own fox hole or something, like in operations, I always put two guys to a hole and one up and then I then I get up in the middle of the night and go around and make sure that somebody is awake. SM: What about other patrolling techniques, did you change anything with regard to the nature of the patrol, that is the actual…?

LH: No, not really. Most of them were…that was the only…a lot of that stuff that I didn’t like. Most of the time when they give you route on where to go, you kind of had to follow that. Sometimes I didn’t like it, I wanted to break that, but you know, I knew that if we get in trouble I need to in and I could have been way off and I would get my people killed, so I kind of followed through that.

SM: As you mentioned before, that actual happened to you. When you went out in patrol, you did get in trouble? Why don’t go ahead and talk about that? Is that the same one where the captain got injured?

LH: Yeah!

SM: That is the same one? Okay. Well is there anything else as far as your patrolling and those experiences that you want to talk about, anything else that you remember?

LH: No, that’s about it. We had…it probably…

SM: Actually, I forgot to ask you. What weapon did you carry with you in Vietnam?


SM: The whole time?

LH: Yes sir! The M-14. As soon as a I think, they came into Vietnam, I think in October or something, but there, as soon as…I was there almost, two weeks when they came, and they were testing them, there in the battalion and everybody…I fired that but I didn’t like it, cause everybody wanted to you know…they only had so many because they weren’t…this is when in the beginning of ’67. I don’t know if the Army had them already or not but we didn’t…I think it was the beginning of ’67 or maybe the end of ’66, not the end of ’60 or the beginning…I don’t know or around…or maybe at the end. No it had to be at the end of ’67, because, see I go there in ’66 in September and I made all that
year. No it had to be, yeah, October, I think of ’67 when they start coming in. Yeah! No
but I had the M-14 and all that time I was there except for a couple of patrols, I took the
M-60, M-79, it’s like a little shot gun, you know, I had the gun, but most of the time I
preferred my rifle.
SM: Did you ever go in any joint operations involving, like ARVN Marines or
ROK Marines or anybody like that?
LH: No, no!
SM: Let me ask you some questions about just of life in-country generally then.
What was the food like?
LH: We had C-rations, we never went into Da Nang or anything like that…we
never eat…the only thing that eat a lot of rice and dry fish and potatoes they had a lot of
those in the villages, they had them spread out, so they’d dry. But no, most of our, where
I was and everything, most our guys we had C-rations; we never had hot meals or
anything like a lot people think we should, hell no. That was why wanted the packages
from here from our parents, you know, like crackers and Tabasco sauce and cookies and
all that stuff. Most of us, everybody who had a package, everybody shares, you
know…you know, you picked whatever you want and then…okay you can have it…but
you know it was kind of like a big ol’ family.
SM: What was the composition of your squad and platoon was it very ethnically
diverse?
LH: Yes, it was…let’s see when I first got there…I got into my Sergeant, was
Hispanic, we had two blacks, three Hispanics and the rest were white. Then as we get
on…the more you stay their more people get wounded and stuff like that…and then there
were less black, I saw less black than anything else.
SM: Were you ever wounded?
LH: Yes sir!
SM: What happened?
LH: We we on a patrol, I was…I was a Corporal and this…I just been promoted
that month…the first of the month to Corporal and my squad leader got wounded and
they put another Corporal who had more time, as a Corporal than I did to be my squad
leader and we were on this patrol and we got hit from two sides and he got killed and I
got wounded and the radio man got wounded and I think the point man got wounded, but
only the other squad leader got killed. I think this one…I remember that day it was in
February and I think it was 25 or 26th around in there…when I got wounded.

SM: How long was your recovery?

LH: Eighteen days. I stayed there in land. Most of the time if it was real serious,
they take you on a…they call it a floating hospital, but no it wasn’t that serious, you
know. They were afraid the infections were, because it was so humid all the time, but, I
just, on mine it wasn’t that big of a deal. That is what they said, along with them. So…it
took me eighteen days and then they send me back to the same, same company.

SM: What did you guys do for recreation? When you were in your base camp?

LH: If we had time we would play football. We play football and listen to
records and once in while they would bring in some hot beer. But we like to see the
Seabees come in, to do some job because we could always, like a Sergeant would
always…Hey guys go tell them next time they come in, bring us some beer. So we pitch
in some money and give it to them and the next time they were in, or sometimes they
send it to us…through the mail…because we had a mail truck that runs everyday…back
and forth and sometimes they…but sometimes you had to go out and patrol and by the
time you come back there was only one or two beers left and you put ten dollars and
everybody would say hey what happened to my beer…but we had a lot of water…to
drink…we didn’t have very many cokes and stuff like that.

SM: Did they truck in water to you?

LH: Yes. This big ol’ buffalo. Let me tell you another thing. One time we came
in from patrol and that time we came in about five o’clock in the morning, or four
o’clock, I think, cause it was raining so bad that you…they call us in and tell us to come
on in. The first Sergeant had us some cokes and peanut butter sandwiches, and that is the
first time in my whole life that I eat peanut butter sandwiches, I had never had it mixed
and I had peanut butter and jelly sandwich and I tell you what it was the best peanut
butter and jelly sandwich…and I tell everybody that…I had the best sandwich…and they
say what was it…said peanut better and jelly…but you know if you never had
it…especially over there.
SM: And have MRE’s all the time, not MRE’s, c-rations, excused me. Speaking of food, what about the stuff you could find growing, you mentioned there were a lot of banana trees and stuff in that area…

LH: Yeah, you had…they had jalapeno peppers…you won’t believe that…they had jalapeno peppers…they had onions, they have bell pepper, they had carrots, they had potatoes, that’…think that is all I saw.

SM: Would you guys grab some of that fresh fruit when you saw it?

LH: No, I mean…you know we just kind of…we just…trying to destroy instead of grabbing it, you know what I’m saying…we just trying to be mean, but…no we…not in my squad… I would just tell hey…if you want to do something destroy…cause we didn’t know, I didn’t want say go ahead and eat and them get sick or something, you know what I’m saying…so to me I would just tell them…but a lot of guys say we ate this and on that patrol and but I say well…I wasn’t going to take the chances for the people I’m responsible for, so…but they do, that land really grows a lot of that stuff, but I think to me it was the jalapeno peppers, I couldn’t get over that.

SM: Did you ever grab any of those?

LH: No.

SM: You mentioned beer, what about any other recreational beverages…or…?

LH: Sometimes when guys are going R and R from your squad or you company and if you knew the guy, very well, you know, just tell him…hey bring us a bottle of Seagram’s Seven or a bottle of this or that and when they come back, like I said it would probably be three or four days or more till you see the guy or maybe a week and then you have a party and get everybody in you squad and say hey man we got a bottle of Seagram’s Seven or we got a bottle of this…and everybody brings their own canteen and we put some in it and but beer hardly…I think if I’m not mistaken I only drank about three beers all the time that I was there. But hard liquor yeah, I had probably had more drinks in that than beer, because when they come back…you see like beer you could sometimes, like I said if the Seabees could get it for us, but sometimes they maybe come back, well I think I only saw them three time…the Seabees all the time that I was there, but sometimes two or three weeks, then leave and then there is another, they finish their job and then
they leave. But, you know it’s…a lot of other guys…depending on where you
were I guess is…you could have more, but…a lot of guys that live here in
Midland, that were in the Marines and they were there in ’68 and ’69 and they tell
me hey…I said nah…where were you? And I say we…well I was never there on
that part…did you ever you to Da Nang PX’s, I said no. But we never did we
always…you know we were always doing something, we never…as you go in R
and R, then that way they get you out that morning or that afternoon and you
leave next morning, on the truck man and they take to Da Nang and then from
there you go and turn or just check in and tell them you are here at R and R and
then they say well…you got two choices…this or that and then you pick the one
you want to go and then they send you and that’s…and you come back and you
know that’s about it.

SM: You answered on your questionnaire that there was also some drug
use that you were aware of?

LH: There were quite a few, small little kids from the village, every time
you patrol or something, or you would be resting sitting down there, outside the
village, they come and they had little baggies, full of marijuana…hey…hey get
out of here. But the little kids, the nine and ten year olds, were starting to sell it,
yeah, it was pretty…pretty…just about every time you go on patrol, they try to
sell you some.

SM: So it was very prevalent?

LH: Yeah, I don’t know where they got it or how, but it was yeah…it was
there, if you want it you could have it.

SM: Like you said earlier anything will grow there?

LH: Yeah!

SM: Was that used by any of your…?

LH: No! No I made sure of that from my squad.

SM: How about in the company of battalion?

LH: That I don’t know, but I could smell it, let’s put it that way.

SM: You could?

LH: In the battalion, yeah!
SM: To you knowledge was it a problem?
LH: No, not to my knowledge. No. Well I can’t say that all of my squad
didn’t smoked it, if they smoke it, they didn’t smoke it in front of me or I couldn’t
smell it, you know what I’m saying. But, no you could it was there it was in the
battalion, but I mean I made sure that every time I check my squad I made sure
that they weren’t going to take any or smoke any or my deal.
SM: To your knowledge was anybody ever kicked out of the unit for
using it? Either your company or the battalion?
LH: No! Not that I know of.
SM: Were there any crimes committed that you were aware of?
LH: Yeah, there…there was one on our company…these two…it was one
black and one white, they…they were reported that they raped a Vietnamese lady
and we never saw them again, they came and…MP’s came in and got them from
the battalion and we never saw them again. I saw one of them here in the States
after I got back, but I never did ask him what happened or anything. I don’t know
if they just moved…you just…kick them back to the States or they you
know…but cause see nobody knew if it was true or not. They were just reported
and most of the time once it gets to the battalion…battalion always wanted to do
the right thing, you know…and but if it was right or wrong, they still wanted you
know…I think to please the Vietnamese people, I guess…I don’t know. But
yeah, that is the only…the only thing that I…that I saw those two…two guys.
They were accused of it.
SM: They were accused of it, but you don’t know if they actually did it or
you don’t know about the trial or…?
LH: No! No!
SM: What were the race relations like in your unit?
LH: It was you know…all for one and one for all…I mean…there was
no…once I got back to the States that’s where the problem was, not over there.
Over there it was you know…you are my brother, you’re my you know…. you know
they say hey…I like your sister or this and that…you know just like playing all the
time…but I mean it was never, you’re a black or you’re a Mexican or none of that.
Everybody was one. Everybody…something happen…another guy from another company is trying to pick a fight with this guy and everybody come and say…hey…hey you go over there and stay with your own company and leave this guy alone.

SM: Did that happen at all?

LH: Once in a while it did. It just…but…I guess that’s because they were already…because once you get wounded and everything, if it’s not…it’s well…you can’t say it is not serious but I mean once your wounded your wounded. Like on mine, I stayed eighteen days but some people spend more and then after a while they send you back to your unit and they tell you, you have to have light duty for about a week or two weeks. And what they do, they put you on the perimeter as guards at night and that’s how you meet other guys from other companies. That is sometimes how it starts.

SM: Was there any thing else that you wanted to…oh wait…I know wait R and R. Where did you go on your R and R?

LH: I went to Hawaii and then I went to Kuala Lampur. Then to Okinawa.

SM: Have a good time?

LH: Oh yeah! Real nice time, yeah the first time I went, I think it was for Christmas, yeah, cause got I there at…that guy that was suppose to go…it wasn’t my turn got wounded and first Sergeant said…well we need to keep the quotas because if we cut the quotas they won’t give it to us on the next month. See cause that month…see cause every month goes on R and R and if you don’t use it, they give us five I think, five people in every month for R and R and if you didn’t use it the next month they give you four and so I told him I said look…I don’t have any money…he said well here…he gave me two hundred dollars and he said you’ll pay me one of these days. I said I can’t pay you, I’m sending all my money home. I said I’m married and he said that’s okay don’t worry about it. Anyway I went to, Kuala Lampur and then when we got there, the Liaison people were waiting for us, they took us the motel and then which it was…we didn’t have to pay for any motel or anything, you pay only for your food, if you go out of the Liaison office, it’s a big motel they had in Kuala Lampur and everything…as long as you stay there, everything was free, your food, your drinks and I guess the Liaison people pay for all that, but then…I think it was the second day, there was a, they call it…cause every morning we had to report in, make sure that we were there and nobody got lost or
anything and there was a whole bunch of people from Exxon Oil Company, that they
want to take some people to their...cause I think Exxon had a big complex in Kuala
Lampur and I said, yeah I’ll go. So I went with this couple, they were from New Jersey
and stayed Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with them and then the next day they
brought me back. It was a real nice they had two kids. I had a real nice time and then the
rest of the time I spent there at the park or I went to the zoo, but most of the time I spent
it sleeping. I sleep I guess about fourteen or sixteen hours and then I would get up and
sometimes I didn’t eat...I went well...you didn’t ask me about my weight?

SM: No!

LH: But, when I left the states, I’m not a big guy, I’m 5 feet 11, but I weighted
about one hundred and forty pounds and when I got back to the states, I weighted a
hundred and eighteen pounds.

SM: That is thin!

LH: And I eat and I eat those C-rations and eat...but you know...it wasn’t me it
was...just about everybody was the same way and when I...when I met my wife in
Hawaii, I guess there was about ten, eleven of us that...Marines, Army and Navy all
together, pick them up and we landed and everybody got off and my wife said, I could
spot the Marines just like that and I said how? I said oh because of the uniform and she
no, all of you are skinny...I said come on and she said yeah... but we didn’t think we
were. But she said all of you were skinny. It took me a while to get my weight back,
once I got back to the states, but now I weight 160 so...still not bad.

SM: So you were able to meet you wife in Hawaii for your R and R? I bet you
that was nice?

LH: Yes.

SM: Did you correspond a lot with her?

LH: Yeah, we just write...what happened...they had a base here in Big Spring, I
think Webb Air Force Base, somehow they got in contact, well they ask me how
many...one of the captains...ask how many married men we had. But see I was one of
the older ones...I was twenty three, when I went in or twenty four and most of them were
eighteen, nineteen, twenty, most of my guys, so I told them, I am and I was the only one
and I said, why captain and he said, well we just found out we got a program here that if
you go to Hawaii and you are R and R, you can meet your wife. I said how do we do that? So he explained to me, he said well, what I do if you want to, give me the name of your wife and where you live and all the information I gave him and then he...I don’t know if it was teletype or phone or whatever to Big Spring and then from there they got in touch with her, here in Midland and then she said yeah and then they, they set the date and everything and they pay for her way and everything and we just met there. It was something, but it’s a good thing they did, that I’m really proud of.

SM: How about U. S. O. shows did you see any while you there?

LH: No, like I said we were always in the boonies, they never let us, unless you were wounded, you could see the hospital and the hospital was probably about twenty or thirty miles away from where we were.

SM: Well is there anything else that you want talk about with your regard in country in Vietnam?

LH: No! No, that’s about it. There wasn’t that much social life. It was just doing my job, but that’s about it. Got back to the states.

SM: What was the flight like over? When you left, what was it like back to the United States?

LH: Oh man it was…it...I mean...they gave...I don’t know if it was...it wasn’t Champagne...I think it was like Canadian Dry or something like that. Everybody got a bottle of it, when we got in the plane. I guess we tore that plane, I mean not tore it, but just with that water or whatever it was, we just...and when we landed in Okinawa...cause see had to land from Vietnam we land in Okinawa and we had a briefing there, I guess another week and they give you kind of liberty at night, you could go to town. But I never did, I didn’t have any money and I would just...I said I don’t want to get killed up here. I said I already made it this far, I said if I...if I...cause I had heard there were all the Marines fighting the Army and fighting the Air Force and all this stuff so I said no...I’m fine here, I just went to the PX there and then bought me some civilian clothes and cause...it wasn’t that much...only had a couple of dollars...but I would rather spend on that then getting drunk. But no it and after that we landed...we took off from Okinawa and we got into a big ol’ some kind of storm...I don’t know what they call it...typhoons or whatever they call and we had to land at Tokyo...I said shit I don’t think we ever
going to make it…but we finally…we spent a day there in Tokyo, then we got back to
Hawaii and finally in Hawaii we flew to San Francisco and then in San Francisco they
give us our orders and they give us some money and they give us a ticket, they already
had all that…they had left some people there and they just get in line and they say what is
your name and then they had some files and they look it up and here is everything…you
got some spending money, you got your ticket…look and see what time your flight goes
and I think it was about, ten of us that came into Dallas from San Francisco in a Delta.
The whole plane we had it by ourselves and the stewardess was so nice, at that time they
only had women, I think they had about three or four women to the plane. They
said…they came in and brought a big o’ thing of wine and beer and said it’s all yalls, if
you all want just drink it all, it’s free from us. I don’t know if it took us three of four
hours, I don’t remember, how long it took us to get from San Francisco to Dallas, but all
that beer and wine was gone…from ten guys…but I don’t know…to me it look like it
was a lot but I don’t know how much it was. You know I got a buzz, but…when I got to
Dallas I was a little drunk and then from there I had to wait an hour or two and then I
cought a plane to Midland and they gave me two beers on the way from Dallas to
Midland and by the time I got to…my wife and my parents pick me up and they said I
was little drunk.

SM:  They said you were?
LH:  Yeah, they said…I would never admit it but…
SM:  During that trip from San Frans…when you arrived in San Francisco to
Dallas then to Midland, along that route at all, did you encounter any hostility?

LH:  No! No, it was because we were all Marine guys coming and in and there
was two blacks and I was the only Hispanic and the rest of them were white, you know
we were drinking and talking about…cause we were in different parts of Vietnam, we
were all in the different…you know what I’m saying…

SM:  Well especially student protesters, no college students?
LH:  No, cause when we got to San Francisco it was almost getting dark so I
didn’t see any there at the airport. Then when we left, it was still dark, when we got there
to Midland, I mean to Dallas…so I really I didn’t see any. Not at the airport, but they had
told us in Okinawa, that….yall might have some trouble…if you have some civilian
clothes, if you want to wear it after you get your orders…you can do that…but I didn’t understand what they mean by that, so I didn’t change. I left my uniform…I had bought a pair of pants and a shirt in Okinawa but, I didn’t put them on.

SM: Had anything changed in the United States when you got back from before you left?

LH: Yeah!

SM: What were the biggest changes?

LH: The change of time…the…when I worked…I think it was the moon went out in the Spring…back, forward or that…and then…here in Midland, like I said it was small…so I didn’t see…but when I got back to Pendleton, Camp Pendleton, I saw the people look at you when you had your uniform because when I got to the airport, yeah, a lot of people kind of talk at you, I mean not straight at you, they just…you can hear what they were saying…cursing…yeah yall are killing young kids and all that stuff…and if I would have know that, I would have just worn civilian clothes, but we had to wear the uniform to get into the plane, but they had some kind of deal with the airlines…that we didn’t have to pay, I don’t if the government maybe paid them, but we didn’t have to pay…we just show our ID card and we got in, but you know…and…over there in California it was…I saw a lot of that…they didn’t…then later on in LA in the bars or something like that…yeah…cause I had some cousins there in Anaheim and I lived in Orange County and we went in there and they start talking about Mexicans and this and I just…I just told my cousin…I went and fought for these guys and this is what I get…but I was just telling him…I ought to go and tell him…but he said no…they don’t know what they are talking about…said just forget it…it’s just drink our beer and get out. That was the best thing we did, because a lot of people don’t understand. With people like that, the only thing it will end up in a fight and for what and somebody is going to get hurt and it is not worth it.

SM: How much longer did you have in the Marine Corp when you got back?

LH: Three months.

SM: So you spent those three months in Camp Pendleton?

LH: Yes.
SM: When you got out of the Marine Corps, you went back to work for Cities Service Oil?

LH: Right. I got out of the Marine Corps I think on a Wednesday or Thursday and I went back that Monday that following Monday.

SM: For the same oil company?

LH: Yes, at Cities Service?

SM: And you worked for the forty years?

LH: No, I worked for them for almost ten years and I quit them and went to work for Coastal State it’s another oil company for another ten or say eleven, no say about ten and then I went to work for Marathon Oil for twenty years. So I retired from Marathon, but I worked in the oil business for forty years.

SM: What was the most important thing that you took away from your experience in Vietnam as a person?

LH: What do you took away? Did I loose?

SM: Well, no. How did it affect you most? Your time in Vietnam?

LH: I guess it…I think it affect that I lost two years. Because when I got…well really not two years, it was less than two years, but because I didn’t know anything that was going on here. I didn’t know any…what kind of cars…I didn’t know the difference between the cars…I couldn’t…I was pretty good on what kind of Chevrolet and all those cars, but when I got back…they look so new that I couldn’t tell and then the firecrackers were the worst ones. That scared the shit out of me. Because like I said I got here almost during Thanksgiving and Christmas and that time the you could pop them in the city limits and boy my neighbors had three kids and boy I tell you what they pop them and boy I was in…I would just hit the deck and my wife said what is wrong and I said nothing.

SM: Now when you were in Vietnam, did your unit get mortared or rocketed very much?

LH: Well not very much, but we did get mortared quite a bit, but I wouldn’t say, I wouldn’t say every night or like maybe probably maybe once a month or something like that or you go every other month. I would say a total six or seven times.

SM: What did you think when South Vietnam fell to North Vietnam?
LH: Man I said we were there for nothing. I felt like we lost all this young guys for what? Cause really we weren’t even fighting our war, we were there just like police action. We were there just to report; just to represent the United States, cause the United States was there, because we couldn’t do what we wanted to do. We couldn’t call air strikes on what we wanted to call on. There were too many civilian people; I said well shit the civilian people is the ones that are killing us. They couldn’t see that. But, it was always higher up, it’s not the people in country that was doing the fighting that could, that it was their fault, it was the people in Washington that it was their fault. Especially when old Johnson stop the bombing in North Vietnam. As soon as he stops that all the shit start coming in. It was more the patrols were getting hit more and stuff like that.

SM: Were you there during that?
LH: When they stop the war?
SM: When they stop the bombing?
LH: Oh yeah!
SM: And you could tell there was a difference in type of operations?
LH: I could tell the difference, yeah! Because when they were bombing, we would get sniped, not everyday but just here and up. Every time we went out maybe once and after that, we hit them twice and or three times sometimes. But we mortared more, it was just like that. But yeah it was a lot of difference.
SM: How do you feel about your Vietnam service, what do you think about it?
LH: Well, I usually don’t like to talk about it because we were saying a while ago, we…that war just…we got out of there and we didn’t do anything. And we lost a lot of good people, a lot of young people, for what? We don’t show anything…we can’t show anything. It’s just like the Monument in Washington D. C., the wall, I went over there about two years ago and it just…I said this was just for what? Political. It’s not ever worth it. It’s a lot of…I know people here for years and years, like I said I grew up here and know, it’s been about two years ago, they call me or they send me a letter that I could get Purple Heart license plates and so…I feel that I will send it and I had it on my truck and a lot people come and say…were you in the war? What war were you on? And I go I don’t know…but you know some of my cousins or nephews that are small that are just going into high school and they ask…were you in Vietnam? I said yeah! How
could you never talk about it…I said why…I mean…I got to neighbors that were in the
Army, in Nam, they were I think in the 70’s before…one was in seventy one and the
other one in seventy two and we…they…I don’t know they were in the…until one time
we were…I think we were collecting for the March of Dimes me and my wife and we got
there and I saw his pictures in his house…were you in the Army…oh yeah! What year
and so he told us and I said oh you were in Vietnam? He said yeah! I said I was there
too! Then they kind of want to talk more about it…then I say well…I kind of knew so I
said well…I’ll come back later, maybe tomorrow or so and we can talk cause right now
we are just collecting for the March of Dimes…yeah…I can talk to them since then and
they feel the same way. They said…said I like to get all these things out, just
like…because when you talk to somebody else who has never been there, they don’t
understand. You have to talk to people who have been there to understand what…I said
I’m the same way.

SM: Did you when you got back join the VFW or the American Legion?
LH: The American Legion.
SM: When did you do that?
LH: About ten years ago.
SM: So it was quite a while after that?
LH: Yeah! I didn’t join right away; it took me quite a while. It’s like I said I
didn’t anything to do with the service, nothing to do with it!
SM: Well is there anything you would like to talk about today?
LH: No that’s about it. If you have anything that you want to know, just give me
a call.
SM: This will officially end the interview with Mr. Leonard Hernandez. Thank
you very much sir!