Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Brian McKinsey on the fourteenth of April 2002 at approximately 10:45 Lubbock time. We are in the Special Collections Library interview room and this is part of the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Well, thank you very much, sir. Why don’t we begin with a brief introduction, if you would say when and where you were born and where you grew up.

Brian McKinsey: I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, March 23, 1948. Grew up, I guess we spent, I think, roughly five years there. So I was about kindergarten age, my family moved to a small town in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania, sixty miles or so from Pittsburgh. That was what I really call my childhood, where I grew up. I was there from like kindergarten ‘til seventh grade and then back to Maryland for seventh and eighth grade there. Then my high school, ninth through twelfth grades, were in Wilmette, Illinois, north side suburbs of Chicago.

SM: What was it like growing up in Pennsylvania during that time period?

BM: It was great. It was a town of thirteen thousand people, mountains, woods. I had two brothers and later when I was ten, a baby sister, but the three boys, my brothers and I, I was the youngest, a year and a half apart in age, two grades apart in school, but we were the Three Musketeers. Living in an area like that we were into archery. We were into rifle shooting. My dad would take us hunting. We were into spelunking, ice skating, swimming, all the sports, all the hobbies. It was a good place, of course. Then, I guess, there didn’t seem to be much crime or problems anywhere, so. No, I was very lucky. It was like a small town. My brothers and I were always out in the woods and
doing things. We had grass-cutting jobs and earned, earning money when we were
twelve, thirteen years old. It was lucky, good childhood, wonderful place to grow up.

SM: So it sounds like you had a very strong relationship with your brothers.
BM: Oh, yes. Very much.

SM: Did that continue after you grew up?
BM: Yeah, very much so. My middle brother, we still, well, not so much now,
we’ve always knocked heads a little bit, but it’s all still, yes, we’re a very tight family.
We’re Scots, and maybe that says something, I don’t know. They tend to let it all hang
out. So we’ve all had our arguments, yet we’re all very tight and close. My oldest
brother was more mellow, a little more the leader. He was my mentor. I don’t know, we
all had a, at least I had a, I’d say probably a little more mellow relationship with him than
my middle brother.

SM: Now, did your older brother teach you the archery and using the rifles and
things like that, or was that something your dad was also involved in?
BM: Oh, my dad, very much involved, yeah. Mom since Dad worked, my Mom,
both of them were pretty good natural athletes, well, and on sports teams in college in
their day, my dad especially. Mom taught us how to play baseball ‘cause Dad was
working. Mom was a—oh, yeah—throwing the hardball with the mitts and all that stuff.
But yeah, it was more Dad with the archery. We made our own arrows, made our own
bows in the basement. He had some power tools and the necessary implements. So yeah,
we were very much into that kind of stuff, good wholesome—

SM: The archery equipment that you would make for yourselves, was this based
on, I don’t know maybe, Native American type of models, or was it just something you
improvised?
BM: No. I think it was just something we probably copied. We used the reflex
bows, and I think we tried making a few of those, but mainly we bought those, but the
arrows, we got a fletching jig and we’d just buy the shafts. Fletching jig would out the
feathers on and then we made our own little wire, I remember, with my dad’s help, of
course. That was hooked up to a transformer that then we could rotate the shaft with the
three big feathers glued on. That hot wire then would burn the feathers to give them a
nice shape, ‘cause you buy the feather very large, sort of, made to put on a shaft. Then
we’d tip them, and the thing on the other end, you know, that would fit on the string.
Then as it would turn we’d sit and paint our arrows different stripes, “Mine will be this
color.”
SM: Oh, that’s cool.
BM: Made our own slingshots, used to sell them, ‘cause my dad had a jig saw,
we’d buzz them out, varnish them, make them real nice. So my brothers and I were very
creative in building things, building little rockets and sending them up, mixing chemicals
in different things in little jet-x engines they had then. We’d make balsa wood rockets
and put our hamster into them, and launch him, and had a parachute for him. Oh, yeah,
we were—
SM: Would he survive?
BM: No, we lost a few, but we were very ingenious and inventive when we were
young. So we had a lot of fun, a lot of good memories, we still talk about them, laughs.
SM: Yeah. Poor hamsters. (Laughs)
BM: Well, we had a lot of respect for animals, my parents taught us that. We had
befriended squirrels in the backyard that would literally come in our kitchen and take
food out of our hands.
SM: Goodness.
BM: We hunted, too, but I guess I would say it was to me like the Native
American philosophy, what my dad brought us up with. You may have gone out, and
actually I never got into the hunting. I was pretty young and none of my family was big
into it, but it was certainly, you did it and you were going to eat the meat. There was a
little bit of sport, but there was a lot of respect for any living thing. We were brought up
to have that kind of respect.
SM: What would you hunt?
BM: Just small game, rabbit. Then my dad and oldest brother would hunt deer,
but it was great. My dad always felt that it wasn’t even right to go hunting with a rifle.
So they only hunted deer by archery, bow and arrow. My mom and I always liked it
because we knew they’d never get anything, and they never did. So it was probably more
the thing to go out and try.
SM: Would they use the homemade bows for that or did you guys buy compound bows and that kind of stuff?

BM: My dad had compound bows and stuff.

SM: But they never came back with a deer?

BM: No. There wasn’t all that much hunting for those many years, but I don’t think my dad ever did. So half the time they came back and they didn’t even see one. So Mom was always happy about that.

SM: Fishing and stuff too?

BM: Yes, went out to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). My dad was a member and they had a little pond out there. Us three boys were out there all the time on the pier, just reeling in the bluegill and the sunfish. Of course, we’d usually thrown them back in, but yeah, we fished a lot as youngsters.

SM: Now your dad’s membership in the VFW, was that predicated on World War II service?

BM: Yeah. He never went overseas, but he was with that era. They kept him back to train. He was an officer. So he never got orders overseas.

SM: Okay. Did he ever talk much about his military experience with you?

BM: Not a lot, but yeah, I guess over the years. Lots of times it was just sort of, the same stories after awhile, or when my brothers and I would all be home. My father wouldn’t say a whole lot.

SM: What did he do for work?

BM: Job, profession you mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

BM: Pretty much to synopsize, he was in sales and marketing all his life, not in the sexy businesses, but more the tool-and-die maker type stuff, but in the sales and marketing end. So traveling sales when I was younger, but by high school, not that much travel really.

SM: Okay. Now did he have physical experience in that as well, the tool-and-die end of things?
BM: No. He had made it, I think to about third year through Johns Hopkins University. He was very intelligent, but he never did finish. I think he met Mom, all of a sudden they started having my brothers.

SM: Okay.

BM: Well, he was still in the military, actually, when that happened. He went back to night school and I remember him telling us at one time, he worked in the day for a company, went to night school, drove cabs, sold encyclopedias door to door. You know, they did all those things to make ends meet, but he never did finish and get the college degree. That probably held him back, but he was always, I guess what we call now today, white collar and tie. I don’t think he was really ever like blue-collar end of things. He was always sales, sales and marketing.

SM: Okay. Your mom, did she pretty much spend most of her time taking care of you guys, homemaker, or did she work as well?

BM: In the real early years, but by the time I was, oh, we were all in high school, or approaching high school, she worked. I think she even did when we were really young because they had a lady that would come and babysit, sort of like a daycare. But I’d say when we were young, she was a housewife. She went, I think, a year and a half to Mt. St. Agnes junior college. She never finished either, because of meeting my father, the war and then.

SM: Do you remember much of the Korean War? How old were you at that point? You must have been about—?

BM: I would have been six years old I guess, when it ended. It ended in ’54.

SM: Yes, ’53, ’54. Yeah, you would have been really small.

BM: Yeah, right. No, I don’t remember anything. I thought once my mom—well, I don’t know about that. I was thinking maybe, I thought I remembered something that my dad thought he might get recalled up there because he stayed in the Reserves for the rest of his life, even though he was like I think originally a three-year enlistment, OCS (officer candidate school), became an officer, but then after he got out he did stay in the Reserves for about thirty years, retired from the Reserves as a lieutenant colonel in the Army.

SM: Did your older brother go in the military?
BM: Both of them were older, and no, neither of them did. It was that time, Warner was a little older, three and a half years older than me. He was out of college, and I guess he still certainly could have been draftable, but he had physical deferments anyway. He would have never handled it, ‘cause he actually was in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) in college, but he had to drop out. He had always had bad asthma, well, it got bad about that time in his life. So he had the physical deferment. My other brother had to report in, even though he was in college in Chicago at the Art Institute. He had, or maybe he had just finished, and the draft called him. Not long before he was supposed to report for a physical, he was at a party and got in a tussle over his English girlfriend and broke his wrist, hitting the floor instead of the guy’s face that he was mad at. So he broke his wrist and they never called him back, but he went down with a broken wrist. So he was happy. So I was actually the only one that went in.

SM: What did you like about school as you were growing up?

BM: High school or—?

SM: Well, any particular subjects. Yeah, especially high school or activities, sports, things like that.

BM: Yeah. I was more, even though I did all right in school academically, nothing great, I never applied myself. So that wasn’t where I put most of my energy and emphasis. It was more the social life and sports, even grade school I remember and all summer long being on the playgrounds and the sports. In high school I was on the swim team in our high school, actually as a springboard diver. We had—well, Illinois swimming is like Texas football. We had on paper, anyway, the number one team in the nation. We had three, four record holders on our high school team. These are guys that all go on to Yale, Indiana, all the swim schools, California’s and so on. That was a very, very large part of my life in high school; certainly academics were behind my social life and my swimming. Because that’s a sport you do 365 days a year, swimming, diving. You’re always practicing it. Then the season’s quite long. Of course, those were the bulk of my friends. We all had our girlfriends and we all pretty much hung together.

SM: What were the most important military influences in your early life, or were there any?
BM: I don’t know if there were any. You know, my dad was just the stories of training back home, here, some of the funny ones, not that many. Other than that my Uncle Ed from Pittsburgh. We didn’t have a real big extended family, just a couple aunts and uncles, grandma and granddad, but at Christmas we were always together, and Thanksgivings. They would even come to Illinois later when we lived there. He was a navigator, B-25 I believe, and got shot down. I should remember more of that, but I can’t offhand, during World War II, but Uncle Ed would come to our house. We’d always get wound up, talking about some of the war stories. I was never really interested in it. I mean, I wasn’t fascinated by war or military even though a lot of regimentation on a swim team, or any athletic team in high school, I was not really into regimentation. I didn’t deal well with it.

SM: How old were you when you graduated high school?
BM: Eighteen.
SM: What year was that?
SM: What had you heard, or what do remember hearing about Vietnam, before you went into the Marine Corps, anything?
BM: Well, yeah. I’m sure I did and I’m sure I even had some thoughts and opinions because it was already on TV and so on. I just—it’s hard for me to remember any, none stand out. I think, like everybody, I thought it was pretty much a part of our Containment policy, and then afraid of the Domino Theory and the spread of communism. Then that’s why we were there. I can’t say strongly that I remember being for it or against it. I know I wasn’t against it, but I wasn’t real gung ho. I was just somewhere in the middle. Quite honestly, again, at eighteen, at that time, I didn’t think about it.

SM: Were politics and international events and things like that dining room table conversation for your family much? Did your dad and your mom talk about it with you guys?
BM: Not really, no. In high school quite honestly, my brothers and I, whenever we were around it was like, “Hi, Mom and Dad. Okay, great. I’m going to eat. I’ve got stuff to do.” I mean, we weren’t hanging with Mom and Dad then. I wouldn’t say we
were all near that close. It was in and out, in and out, “I’ll be back at ten,” or, “Where are
you going?” “Can I go to the library to meet my girlfriend?” So different when we were
younger, more of the family unit. By the time you get into high school, it’s “I want to be
with my buddies and my girlfriend,” or I had to go to practice. We had pretty grueling
practices and sometimes I wouldn’t get in until late at night from the high school swim
team, the swimming pool. There would be some leftover dinner, I’d eat that.

SM: How about television?

BM: Yeah. We watched our fairly good share. I remember sitting there with
Mom and Dad, watching a show or news together, sports.

SM: Any particular shows that you enjoyed growing up?

BM: Well, in the younger years some of the Disney stuff, of course, and then,
geeze I guess Bonanza, that kind of younger age. Some of the music ones that started
coming about, and things like Hullabaloo, or something. Well, I probably still was in
certainly high school. I was always out running around. I wasn’t sitting in front of a TV.
I always had things to do, partying with my friends, girlfriend, swimming, whatever it
was.

SM: Seems like you guys were awfully busy.

BM: Always, and I’ve still been that way. I don’t sit still much.

SM: What led you to go into the Marine Corps?

BM: Very simply, talked about this lately. Well, I shouldn’t say simply, but I’ll
try to—it was very, very personal, meaning just me, but actually, I’d gone to Oklahoma,
University of Oklahoma. I had a lot of scholarship offers out of New Trier High School.
I picked Oklahoma because they gave me a full ride, full scholarship. I thought
Oklahoma would be fun, some of the swim team guys were going to go there, Big Eight,
some were going to Big Ten. So Minnesota didn’t want to give me as much, or
University of Kansas. So okay, I’ll go to Oklahoma. Realized when I got there, a lot of
us were, in that time, ’66,’67, starting to go, well, maybe we shouldn’t go right through
college, you know, a little anti-establishment, grow your hair, so on. But I was down
there and for a lot of reasons the swim team wasn’t up to my standards compared to what
I had left in high school. Long story short, by mid-second semester I quit and was out of
there. So I was back home with a lot of my other buddies that had already quit college
freshmen year. That was sort of the start of health establishment in education, and the whole love, peace, and the hippie era starting, the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and everything. I was back home, but I was unhappy about that I quit, blew off the scholarship. My dad was upset, but I guess I felt a little bad about it. I was lost, my girlfriend from high school years, that then ended. So I got into, certainly a depressed state, and was just partying with my buddies a lot, working a little, going to night school, but my dad had told me if I’m going to be home living in the house, I’ll be working and going to college. I just don’t hang out there. So he threw me out of the house, and at nineteen years old, then I came back within a matter of weeks, but he made me pay to live there at nineteen. “You’re not going to be a bum.” He was right. So I paid room and board, but I still just kind of going through some just depression, the girlfriend and all that. At any rate, they said, “You need to see a psychiatrist.” They were worried. So they made me go to see one. I went with my parents, didn’t know the guy, of course, didn’t talk much then anyway. I wasn’t going to talk to him. So after a few more times, they saw that it was fruitless. So I told if they were going to keep booking an appointment they were going to waste their money because I’m not going to show up. We went about three times. After that the doctor called my dad, and made my dad mad because he had a lot of pride in me still, ‘cause this doctor said, “Your son’s really goofed up. He needs help. Whatever you do, with the draft, don’t let him go in the military, he’ll never cut it. He’ll go AWOL (absent without leave), or he’ll break down. He won’t be able to handle it.” It kind of pissed my dad off. He told me that. It kind of made me mad, sort of assault that’s swearing in my personality. This guy I felt he didn’t even know me. I saw him three times. He hadn’t made me un-depressed. Don’t question that part of me at any rate. I got thinking about it and I felt that, yeah, I needed a litmus test. I had one all through high school in swimming; try to go again, discipline. It was a big part of my life. So I needed another test. I needed some more discipline I thought. I went down and, well, I thought of what would be the hardest thing I could do in life right now, “What test could I give myself?” Then I thought, geez I’ve always heard the Marine Corps is—it wasn’t like I’m going to go to Vietnam. I remember I wasn’t even thinking that. I thought that could happen, but for all I knew, gosh, by the time I went in Vietnam, it would be over. So it was more just I want to go to the Marine
Corps, because I hear their boot camp, and everything about them is tough. I am going to put myself through this test. So, that’s what I did. I joined the Marine Corps, came home and told my parents. They weren’t exactly happy at that. Of course, my dad could remember what this psychiatrist had said, but I’m one of those, tell me I can’t do it and I will prove you wrong. I get very motivated when people try to say I can’t do something. Most of us do. So that was really the whole reason.

SM: When you went to the recruiter, what did he offer you? What did he tell you could have, or what did you ask for, anything?

BM: Oh, I think I was so naïve and I really don’t remember what he said. I don’t remember asking for anything. I don’t know. It’s those kind of things, I just don’t remember. I don’t know if he painted a rosy picture or anything, I really don’t. Or promised me some schooling. I don’t know. I don’t think they were doing that then.

SM: Then you went in for straight infantry?

BM: Well, no I mean they put me in—

SM: Or did you go in for a specific job?

BM: No, I think I was just, I went in and they always had you take a battery of tests, looked at your schooling and then they placed you. At the time I actually went in on a four-month delay. I was literally just turned twenty years old when I went in to boot camp. So I was an old guy in boot camp, and they called me “teacher” because I had gone, even though I only had not even a year in college, I had educated parents, grew up in that kind of a family. Everybody got degrees, but also New Trier Township High School, that I went to in Winnetka, Illinois, is arguably the best high school, academically, in the nation. At that time, you don’t have dropouts. Nobody dropped out, but 99.9% of them then went onto higher education and something like ninety-four percent of them completed it. That’s a very affluent area where kids grow up whose parents were, grew up with some pretty famous names, kids I grew up with, but their parents were educated, and their parents were educated. So it was that kind of an area. So consequently, with that kind of high schooling, and me being at the University of Oklahoma, I saw how far ahead I was of the Oklahoma freshmen there that came in from Oklahoma high schools for instance. Same thing in boot camp, why they called me “teacher” that I scored so well on all their tests. I mean they put me then, and I was a
field radio operator. They put me in communications, but actually tried to force me to go OCS. They said well, this was third, fourth week in boot camp, “You’re a candidate. You should go OCS.”

SM: Why did you reject that?

BM: Very simply, I asked them what that would entail. It turned out I would enlist for three years and if I went to OCS, my enlistment was going to go to four years. I’d already been in it was just three or four weeks, but I knew enough. I said, “I don’t like this that much,” so it was simply that. I think there was a little bit of, still, rebellion in me, that anti-establishment thing. I think I kind of wanted to, in a little bit of way, I don’t know why I shook, but I wanted to be a peon. I don’t think I really did, but the biggest reason, though, would be the extra year. I was in just three weeks is long enough to say, “I don’t think I’m going to like this,” you know?

SM: Now, when you did tell you parents that you had signed up for the Corps, you said that they didn’t like it. Did they have any specific responses that you remember, especially with regard to Vietnam?

BM: No, actually when I say they didn’t like it, that’s not true. I would say, now, I don’t know specifically, I know my mom was upset only about it for one thing. She knew that that could mean I go to Vietnam, and so she was frightened about that. My dad inside, I think he was kind of proud and happy. It didn’t make any difference that I didn’t go in the Army where he was, but I think probably he would have said, then, “Yeah, I think that would be the best thing for my son.” I don’t think he was worried about me, as the psychiatrist said, but I think he knew too that I needed a little straightening out, getting my act together. So I think he was certainly happy about it, probably most dads, I wouldn’t even think he feared the Vietnam thing. I don’t know. I never asked him, but I think he was probably more like, “That’s all right if my son goes there,” the macho man thing, but you know, but Mom was certainly, that would have been her fear is Vietnam.

SM: Now, during this period when you were thinking about enlisting, which was probably a very short period, did you start paying attention a little bit closer to what was going on over there, and the news and whatnot?

BM: No. As a matter of fact, I enlisted in Illinois there, in, I guess it was probably January of ’68, had the 120-day deferred enlistment deal, four months. So you
actually signed up in January, but I didn’t have to report to wherever in Chicago to go to MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot), boot camp, until April twenty-third, that’s the day I entered boot camp. Well, that four-month period, my buddies and I, we took off in January and I ski-bummed in Aspen that whole winter. Yeah, all my buddies and I. I stayed there until the end of March. I was kind of getting my licks in. Yeah, we went out and lived in Aspen.

SM: How would you ski-bum, in terms of where would you stay? How would you eat?

BM: Oh, it was easy. My three buddies and I, we were all out in Basalt, outside of town in a little cabin. We went out there with a few bucks, but then Mayor Redo was the mayor in Aspen and Aspen Ski Corp ran the whole town. If you got a job about anywhere, you were working for Aspen Ski Corp, be it at the drugstore or whatever. Well, Greg and I got jobs at the Sundeck. I don’t know if you’ve ever skied out there, but atop Ajax Mountain, the main mountain in Aspen is the highest you can go on the mountain, you know, typically have a place to stop in and get your beer and food and whatever, and it was called the Sundeck. So we got a job with them, which the best thing when you work for Aspen Ski Corp, no matter what you did, you got a free skiing pass, laminated card. So we worked from noon ‘til two everyday, at the Sundeck two hours, bussing tables, and skied all morning, and from two ‘til four, and worked two hours a day six days a week. So we worked twelve hours, and about twenty of us hippie-likes all lived in a house, right in town. Like a small caviar, it was pretty neat, people from California. This lady had renovated her house and put in bunk beds so she would get twenty-five of us in.

SM: Pack you in like sardines. Were any of these other guys fixing to go in? Were they on deferment?

BM: No, I can’t remember. I don’t know a lot of us, we were already smoking pot and partying, and a lot of us, about the same age. I don’t remember any of them. I don’t know if they went in. My buddies didn’t. Well, one of them that I was out there with ended up going in the Army to Vietnam, but I think he got drafted later.

SM: Now, of course, end of January ’68, Tet hit, February, the siege of Khe Sahn. These are pretty high-profile, harsh things going on in Vietnam. While you were
doing that, do you remember hearing about it, or were you just too preoccupied with partying?

BM: Probably, too preoccupied. Again, it’s one of those things that if I did, and we even talked about it, while I was living in Aspen, or talked about it with my parents on the phone or anything, I don’t remember. So it couldn’t have had much impact, but it probably didn’t. It doesn’t surprise me. I have trouble watching some of the stuff now, and I’m more like a doer of too many hobbies and things to do to read the newspaper. I’m not a big keep-up-on-the-news-type of a person, even in my life now. So I doubt if I was then or now either, just having fun. We were skiing all day, partying all night, I mean I skied thirty-one days in a row once, my longest.

SM: Wow. Okay. Well, when you reported in April you went to San Diego, is that right?

BM: Yeah.

SM: So, MCRD San Diego.

BM: MCRD.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and explain what that introduction to boot camp was like?

BM: It was frightening. I will admit it, it was just, “Holy shit, what have you done now?” The first thing I remember there was something more than that. I remember in DI (drill instructor) actually, I think meeting us in the airport screaming at us to come this way. It was sort of—it wasn’t too bad. It was fairly mellow, follow him, but once we got on the bus, it started. I’m already thinking “Holy shit, what have I gotten myself into?” Then that first night when we were in a building, on our knees, on hard tile floor, kneeling on our knees for something like two hours. Of course, I was an athlete in excellent shape from all my diving. I’d been skiing. When you’re that age, too, and when you’ve been a jock all your life. I was in great shape, but I mean to kneel on tile, I remember going on for hours, and our knees were just killing us. Guys were, they were screaming at you. There was, it was just like, “God, is this legal? Can they do this to us? What’s going on?” I’d never seen anything like that. My dad was a disciplinarian, but there was no—when we were very young a few times, my dad would fold his belt. There was no abuse ever. My dad was smarter than to ever really hit his kids. We were
grounded. There was the pain. We were wishing he would hit us or something, but what
we always got was “You’re not going to go out for a week after dinner, Brian,” in the
summer in the sixth grade, “and play ball with your buddies.” So my dad was a real
disciplinarian, but it wasn’t anything like, when we were bad, “Brian, you go to your
room.” “Warner you finish eating dinner,” he used to do that a lot, because we’d act up at
the table, my brothers and I goofing around. “Warner, when you’re done eating, you go
up to you room. Tell Brian to come down.” But, yeah, it was downright frightening.
Here I was twenty years old, and I’ve been around and traveled, but it was like, “Holy
shit! These guys are nuts.”

SM: What became the most challenging aspect of boot camp for you?

BM: I think that probably the most challenging for me was the physicals. Oh, it
was hard, and we got worn out. I got extra PT (physical training) at times, usually most
of the time because when everybody screwed up, it was, “Okay, you, you’re not allowed
to say another word,” ’cause everybody knows them by all those nasty words, “You
girls,” and “You, ladies,” and blah, blah, get down and give me a hundred push-ups.
Give me this of whatever it was, squat-thrusts. Then it was usually, “Oh, wait a minute,
no, McKinsey, shit, you’re smarter than that. I forgot. No, you give me a hundred and
fifty. You shouldn’t have screwed up.” So they always gave me extra because I was
supposedly smart. So the physical wasn’t, the mental I mean, learning the things to take
the tests, and taking an M-14 or M-16 apart, whatever it was, all the other things they
drilled in to into, be it map and compass, history of the Marine Corps. Well, that was a
breeze and that’s why on the X-1 and X-2 tests, I think I missed one on one, and two on
the other. They were like a hundred questions. I would have to tutor other ones. DIs
called me teacher. So that was easy. I’d say that not so much the challenge, but the fun
part what the challenge for me was to—and I did kind of to get above them and look at it
and realize what they were going to break us down and re-mold us. So then I kind of
had, I kind of went through with sort of a smirk. My big challenge was to do things
where I could outsmart the DIs, and kind of pull things off and get away with it. I did
that a lot in the Corps. I’ll be honest, I felt at least in boot camp that I was smarter than
all three of the DIs. So that was sort of fun and when I learned to sort of, I guess, laugh
at it, and not freak out over it, some of the guys did with the mental aspect of it, but I kept
remembering who I was, what they were trying to do to us, keep it in that light inside. I don’t remember any real serious challenge except that I didn’t like it.

SM: Did anybody drop out?

BM: Yeah.

SM: From your platoon?

BM: Yeah. If I remember, one or two tried to go AWOL, jumped the fence. I don’t think they ever saw them again. One was kind of a smart aleck and he got drop kicked in the chest, and shoved around. He went to CP platoon. Was it CP? Now I’m blanking it out.

SM: Custodial?

BM: Something like that, where the rough cases go. Then at MCRD we’d see them and they walked around with two pails, in here, they were pails with rocks in them and a twelve-pound sledge in port arms. They went out to the old airstrip and made little rocks out of big rocks, bread and water. They would come back usually in a week with that deer in the headlight look, “Yes sir, no sir.” I mean, I don’t know what they did to them, but they broke them down. They came back very different. Just like we had one guy go to the hog farm, pig farm, because he was overweight. In about a week or two he was back in our platoon. He had lost some serious weight. So it was kind of like, I almost felt like—the stories I had heard of POWs of World War II, or Russia, or—but you had to be able to look at the bright side. You can fall into all that, and it can become a trap in the fear, or you can—I stayed above it. I mean the first few weeks I sort of felt like I figured that part of it out. I just figured that it was in. I’m going to have to endure it. I don’t like it, but I’m not going AWOL. It may not be my cup of tea, but I’m just going to have to play their game, and I’ll do it.

SM: Were your DIs Vietnam veterans? Do you know?

BM: The gunny was, yes, and the one staff sergeant was, and the other staff sergeant, Nelson, wasn’t, whatever, really, probably because he told us, it irritated him too. He had been in ten years or something. He had his fire watch ribbon or whatever, but didn’t have anything else. I mean he was, “I want to get over there and kill some gooks,” and they wouldn’t send him. So it irritated him because I remember him voicing that opinion in some form or another.
SM: Did they talk a lot—in terms of your training, did they use that kind of technology? Did they try to, I guess, prepare you for Vietnam in any specific ways?

BM: I don’t remember that in boot camp, certainly in ITR (infantry training regiment), but mostly in staging. I don’t remember any in boot camp. “You know, you better blah, blah, blah, because when you get to Vietnam,” or you know anything like that. I don’t remember them telling us a lot of stories or anything, or using it for motivation, certainly, again, later on in ITR and in staging.

SM: How about films? Do you remember watching any kind of films in boot camp, especially like, I don’t know, familiarization for the Cold War, that kind of stuff?

BM: Well, I don’t but it’s not to say that we didn’t. I know most of it was lectures. We were in training either inside or out, taking copious notes, studying the Marine Corps, the guide, like the Boy Scout book, but I don’t. I really don’t. I’m thinking, well, I just don’t know. I don’t know if we saw any films. I would guess we probably did, even if it was something like the maintenance of a weapon, but I don’t remember anything political like, or Cold War.

SM: That was eight weeks of training?

BM: Yeah. I’m even foggy there. I should know because of the book, but I guess I didn’t get into that part. It was either eight or ten. I would actually have to go back and look in records. Yeah. It was eight or ten.

SM: Then you went on from there to ITR?

BM: ITR, directly to ITR. I remember that as three weeks in Camp Pendleton.

Then we got our duty assignments and our first leave.

SM: You went on from there to radio, to RTO (radio/telephone operator) school?

BM: Yeah. My duty assignment, we got our thirty-day leave or whatever. I went back to Illinois, but my orders were to then just to return back to San Diego where Voice Radio Operator School was, the ROC (regional operations center) or one, they called it.

So I was right back at MCRD for radio school.

SM: Okay. This will end the interview with Mr. Brain McKinsey on the fourteenth of April.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Brian McKinsey on the twenty-ninth of April 2002 at approximately 11:15 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. McKinsey is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is a continuation of our interview. Sir, why don’t we pick up with a discussion of some of your training as a voice radio operator. If you would, go ahead and describe what that training was like. That was at San Diego, if you will correct me if I’m wrong.

Brian McKinsey: Yeah. No. It was at MCRD, Marine Recruit Depot, Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Again, this is as best as I can remember. I think it was a ten-week school. It could’ve been eight. Then again, it could’ve been twelve. I don’t think it was longer, but I’m not sure. But they called it voice radio operators course. Strangely enough, later I think I don’t know if it’s more of an Army—I don’t remember it being a Marine Corps term, but the RTO, radio telephone operator, would use, seemed like more in the Marine Corps they didn’t use—we never said, “Well, I was an RTO.” “I was the 2531,” which was my MOS radio operator. Actually the MOS I believe listed it as field radio operator. The course, as best as I can remember, it went throughout the day. We had liberty to leave base at night. In the day we had to learn I don’t know why, but part of it was to learn typing even though we didn’t—we used the hunt-and-peck. I don’t think any of us turned out to be great typers. That was part of it. The rest of it I just remember as being a lot of classroom, getting familiar with the “prick twenty-five” the PRC-25 (portable radio communications), which was the radio then. I do recall that and I can go into this later. When I graduated from voice radio operator school, I guess I came out of TFC (training for combat) and pretty high in my class. I really didn’t—well, I may have thought I knew something about radio operating and the radio. Probably more accurately, I knew how to change the batteries and all about it, some of the basics verbiage that you used, but I didn’t really learn how to operate it until I was playing war games.

SM: Okay. Now, was this, any portion of this training, particularly challenging?
BM: No. But then again, I think I mentioned early on, and not to be flippant or conceited or anything, but I was again lucky, it wasn’t that I had a year in college, but I came from an educated family where everybody got degrees. My parents were quite educated. Probably most importantly I went to arguably the best high school in the United States. In my seventh and eighth grade years went through Montgomery County, Maryland, which was one of the best school systems in the country then for my grade school, even high school. So I was never really, I’d say, challenged anywhere from learning sort of tests for aptitude for learning, not really. I mean other people were certainly, but I don’t think though, too, that it was probably the hardest thing to learn. In other words, the 28, I think it was 2831, the radio techs were in school for two years. These were the guys learning about transistors, soldering this and that, you know, the guts of it. I’m sure that would have been a little harder for me, but then again appreciate the Marine Corps probably goes at the pace of the slowest person. So I don’t think any of it would have been too terribly challenging.

SM: Okay. Now what did you do after you finished your voice radio training?

BM: They gave me a leave. I completed school. I’m pretty sure I was made PFC (private first class) then. I came out top of the class or real high up, anyway. So I did well. They gave me leave and then I had orders to go to Camp Lejeune and report to 1st Battalion, 8th Marines. So I imagine it was probably a thirty-day leave. Then I went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and reported in. That would have been roughly February, somewhere in there, of ’69.

SM: Now, actually a couple questions about the voice radio operator course. Did you guys have any training on any kind of code equipment?

BM: I honestly don’t remember. It was midway or somewhere in my tour in Vietnam that we first became acquainted with and ciphered the different radios for that. So I just honestly don’t recall if we were introduced to any in the radio school or not.

SM: Right. Now was it the use of a cipher or was it encrypted or special? Was it any kind of code language?

BM: No. It was—I don’t know what you’d call it, again, because we picked it up over there. So I don’t think they had it before I got there. We were always on PRC-25s and then somewhere in my tour in Vietnam in ’69 or early ’70 we were using PRC-38s
and 77s. I remember they went in combination. They were about the same size, but they actually had a big ol’ like twelve-inch-long by inch thick black sort of handle at one end, but you could open this thing up and align all these pins, certain numbers or positions. You close it back up and then those—when you push down on it like a plunger and had it aligned on, I guess it was the PRC-38, those pins would go in certain depths into the corresponding holes and sort of programmed that radio. What it actually did I have no idea, but we never spoke in any kind of coded language or anything like that. But that was supposed to give us a clear, I guess, an encoded or enciphered type of frequency. Then we changed it every twenty-four hours, every night at midnight.

SM: Did they discuss the techniques of, I don’t know, maybe detecting if you’re being eavesdropped on or something like that?

BM: I don’t recall if they did. Yeah. It would’ve been in a real basic way in school, but I don’t recall that at all.

SM: Okay. When you got your orders for Camp Lejeune, why were you going there?

BM: They just assigned me and I imagine it always was a—some people, I mean, probably got orders directly for Vietnam. You never know the why’s or the wherefore’s. It wasn’t for any school. It was just, “Well, we need X amount of people in the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, X amount of them in 6th Marines,” or whatever. So I happened to get 1/8. At the time, 1st Battalion or, I guess, I should say all of them, I imagine all of 8th Marines was at Camp Lejeune. So that’s where I reported in.

SM: How long were you stationed there?

BM: I was there—well, I’ll tell you what happened. I got there and they said, “Yeah. This will be sort of holding. You’ll probably have your orders for Vietnam in a month.” I kind of figured that. That’s the way it was working. Then all of a sudden they came out that 1/8 was going to go on a BLT which meant battalion landing team. They have one of those like in the Mediterranean at least back then and one in the Caribbean at all times out there with the Navy, with about six ships in a fleet. Kind of a what now they might call our Marine MEUs (Marine Expeditionary Unit) but a combat-ready type thing. You play games, but you’re ready to quell any disturbance, as well. So they said 1/8 will be the battalion that’ll be on the BLT. I thought, “Oh, great.” Then I got word all of us
like in a month while I was there that us new guys that were new in the Marine Corps, hadn’t been to Vietnam, probably wouldn’t go on this BLT. But a lot of guys with 1/8 had already been the Vietnam and back. As the time came down to it, as it turned out they said, “Nope. McKinsey, a lot of you new guys, you’re getting to go on the BLT. You’re not going to Vietnam.” So I was probably—I’m just guessing at Lejeune, like maybe February and March. Then we made this whole battalion-sized troop movement, loaded up everything, went to the coast, got on ships. I guess for four months we were in the Caribbean. I came back probably in June. So well, back that up. Maybe we left in March, roughly, March of ’69 to, I guess, June of ’69, I’d say.

SM: Okay. Where did you go?

BM: We just, reinforced the Caribbean. We played a lot of war games on the now—how do I say it—not notorious, but often spoken about or what’s in the news as the Viegas, the Island of Viegas, I think off of Puerto Rico. We played a lot of war games there, in and out of there. We did a lot of, while we were cruising around we had different—I think I did like what they would call a correspondence by mail, a course protective measures, took that. We had radio watches and different things we had to learn on ship. We pulled into at different times, liberty ports, like San Juan, Puerto Rico, twice, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Curaçao, which was one of the Netherlands Antilles over by Aruba. We were in Colón, Panama, where I went through jungle warfare school, jungle warfare training for like, did it two or three weeks. But other than that it was a lot of—or in between that, I guess I would say, it was a lot of war games. We actually landed on Viegas and had a came there where we operated out of. We played war games with the Brazilian Marines and I don’t remember what other participants that actually helicopter’ed off the ships and got inserted into the mountains on the island and so on.

SM: Okay. Now did you gain any good practical experience from that BLT that you were able to take with you to Vietnam that helped you when you first arrived?

BM: Oh, immensely. As it turned out, there was a buddy of mine from radio school I got to know who ended up with 1/8. He was on the cruise with me, too. Most of the other guys in the com platoon with H&S (Headquarters and Service) Company 1/8 were Vietnam veterans. Some that I befriended and they actually befriended me which was pretty odd that we were still boot. The last people the ‘Nam vets you’d think would
want to hang with them, but these guys were all back from ‘Nam and they had been with
Delta, 1/9, the “Walking Dead.” So they had been through a lot of pretty bad stuff over
there as radio operators. They and then the war games themselves, yes, taught me
immensely. I thought I knew something about the radio, but it was on the BLT that I
learned how to be with an FO (forward observer) and call in the artillery or be on the
other end at fire direction control center where the guns were and give them the necessary
information. Learned all the battalion tactical and radio knowledge that one used and
then I believe even air strikes, medevacs, things like that. So playing their war games,
yeah, I learned a heck of a lot, a lot more than I ever learned in radio school, more of the
practical application when we were out in the bush. So by the time I hit Vietnam, yeah, I
actually kind of knew what I was doing. I still had lots to learn, but I wasn’t—if I’d
gotten to Vietnam and not had that cruise it would have been a different story.

SM: Yeah. Okay. Now what about the senior NCOs in your unit, especially
your squad leader, the platoon sergeant, even your platoon commander, were these guys
Vietnam vets as well?
BM: Yeah. It’s funny I can’t—I can see our gunny sergeant and I know he had
been over there. I can’t remember 1/8’s CO then or anything about him. I can’t
remember our commo lieutenant, as we would have called him for com platoon. I can
really just remember the gunny. I’m sure he had been there at least one tour all ready.
He was a great guy, liked me for some reason. I was always—really, my whole tenure in
the Marine Corps could be summed up as some of my other buddies might talk I was an
excellent radio operator. I was very good at my job. Other than that, I wasn’t a goody-
two-shoes. Kinda get in a lot of trouble, I could say I tested the Marine Corps a lot.
Nothing bad, but like on that cruise the gunny hid me out once ‘cause I was AWOL
couple times with liberty ports, just seeing if I could get away with it. He’s the only one I
really remember besides the guys that I was, I guess, because of my time in grade and
then I passed one of these correspondence courses very easily—they promoted me to—I
think I made lance corporal on that cruise. Well, these guys that had all ready been to
‘Nam were corporals and sergeants. Probably some of them still lance corporals, but I
remember most of them as corporals. Again, there were just a handful of those that I
remember palling around with and learning stuff.
SM: Okay. Now when did you come back from the Caribbean cruise?
BM: I’d say it must have been June.
SM: June of ’69?
BM: Yes.
SM: Hey, did you have a stop in Haiti or the Dominican Republic?
BM: No.
SM: Okay.
BM: Never did. I’m trying to think. I left one of the, probably, the liberty ports out, but I can’t think. I’m not sure if I did. But mainly those ones I mentioned is where we were.
SM: How about Gitmo?
BM: Oh, yeah. Sorry that’s the one, was in Gitmo. We were in Gitmo, that I remember, for actually living there I don’t know a week or two helping to refortify bunkers and holes. Yeah, it was kind of wild to see this big fencing and barbed wire on our side and then the communist side and their guys up in towers with guns and us not very far away. It was all peaceful, but it was all there and real. I just remember a lot of scorpions in all the fighting holes and bunkers that we had to sort of re-dig and refortify. That was our job, I guess, while we were there.
SM: Anybody get stung?
BM: I don’t remember. I’m sure somebody did, but I didn’t anyway.
SM: Any other hazards?
BM: No. Throughout the cruise I know of some people I’m sure got hurt in the war games, broken legs or things. I don’t know if we—we almost crashed some choppers, but I don’t remember any crashing. I almost got office hours, strangely enough, for something I didn’t do intentionally, but snorkeling all day at St. Thomas and got the back side of my legs burnt very badly. I could hardly walk. They almost got me for dereliction of duty or something. I don’t know. It didn’t happen, but—
SM: Damaging government property.
BM: Pardon? Yeah.
SM: Damaging government property.
SM: Oh, goodness. So they really did threaten you?
BM: Yeah. It was so bad. It was like I couldn’t walk or bend my knees. I didn’t want to stretch or wrinkle the skin. I remember the gunny stepping in again—he’d know it was very accidental being in the cool water, a few inches under it paddling around, snorkeling, looking down. You don’t realize you’re getting burnt. That’s what happened to me. I think I hung out in the rear area, like in the tent, or something for a couple days until it mellowed out. I kind of didn’t fall out. But they never did anything to me.

SM: Okay. So what did you do when you got back from the Caribbean BLT?
BM: I got back from the BLT. Since we were out there like four months, I guess a lot of people through liberty call. I did, well, actually I was probably there I’m sure a few weeks. Since that was over, then we expected and were told, “Boy, you really will get orders for ‘Nam this time.” Sure enough, I got mine. As soon as I got my orders I think it was within a week or two I was out of there on liberty. So I went back home to my home in Chicago area and had a thirty-day leave and then reported to Camp Pendleton for staging. That would have probably been sometime in mid-July, I’m guessing.

SM: Okay. Good enough. Mid-July.
BM: Yeah. That’d be pretty darn close.
SM: Pardon?
BM: That’d be pretty darn close, maybe beginning of July.
SM: Uh-huh. What happened next?
BM: Reported into staging and that was just where for about three weeks we kind of went through a lot of PT, physical training, again to get into shape, reacquainted with the weapons, and went through the infamous John Wayne Village or whatever it was, shot at targets and things, learned something about booby traps and went through the jungle, what was like simulated jungle, what we would see in Vietnam. I don’t know if we actually got into any kind of teams and played war games and staging. I think it was just taking us through various courses and again some classroom refreshers on weapons and so on. Staging was usually three or four weeks.

SM: How effective, when you finished that, how effective did you think that was in preparing you to get to Vietnam?
BM: Oh, I thought it was—I’d say somewhat effective. What really stuck out in my head—well, for instance my MOS, which was radio operator, and I assume I probably carried one at times in staging, but it wasn’t like we were playing war games that I remember. So in reality for my MOS the BLT Caribbean cruise I was on playing all those war games prepared me much more for my job in Vietnam, field radio operator, than did staging. Staging was just kind of a quick overview again and a lot of threats with your life span’s going to be twelve seconds over there, which I laughed it off. As a matter of fact, I think in staging I remember dying twice, one by punji stakes and something else. “McKinsey, you’re not going to last long.” Yeah, yeah, yeah right. BS. I knew I was coming home. I knew I was going to survive. I knew that before I left. So I was a little cocky and arrogant. I mean, we had our fun, too. I think part of it wasn’t a big deal. Have fun at night. We went out during staging. I guess there were some that were getting quite scared or nervous. You’re always going to have those. I was just the opposite. The guys I ran with, we were out partying when we could. We went through staging. We tried to take it seriously, but then again it was like, “Hey, we’re going to ‘Nam. Let’s have fun.” So I don’t remember any great fear.

SM: Where was that again?

BM: Camp Pendleton.

SM: Camp Pendleton. Now, did you guys have anybody go AWOL during staging?

BM: I don’t know. I would be surprised if someone or several didn’t—you mean in trying to avoid the going on to Vietnam?

SM: Well, yeah. Like you said, some people dealt with it like you did, that is, you just accepted it, but you felt pretty sure you were coming back so you just went through the training and had a good time while you could, but other people were very stressed out by it. I didn’t know if some of that led to possible AWOLs.

BM: Yeah. I’m sure it did, with true intent. I can’t remember any specifics, but I do remember like vaguely a few times while I was in the Marine Corps and that probably would’ve been one of them where people did go AWOL. I mean with the intention of really going thirty days and then becoming deserters, and being in Canada as opposed to on the Caribbean cruise if anybody was, like myself, on a few occasions that was just UA
(unauthorized absence) because we wanted to stay out all night. Instead of coming back
to ship at one in the morning, it really wasn’t like AWOL or desertion. It was just staying
out the whole night and coming back in the morning and trying to avoid the trouble.

SM: What would happen when you were UA?

BM: Actually, they took my liberty card. I did finally get busted at one port. I
used to run around with a guy who had all ready been to ‘Nam and he was the smooth
operator type. We hit it off. We used to try to do what we could to outsmart the Marine
Corps and get away with things. I got popped on the one occasion, I think in Puerto
Rico. We were, of course, given the orders again when we left the ship that morning,
“Be back at one o’clock in the morning,” and they have the little boats that ferry you out
to the big ship. I was on the USS Guam. LPH, landing platform for helicopters. It’s like
a small aircraft carrier, but when you get into San Juan you keep your uniform on. You
don’t rent cars, blah, blah, blah. Well, Blaze and I got in there—Blasac, we called him
the Blaze. He and I got in there and this was typical. First thing we did was go to a store,
buy civilian clothes, then go to some train station or somewhere and found lockers.
Changed into civilian clothes, put our uniforms in the lockers, went out and rented a car.
So everything we weren’t supposed to do. Then he went back. I dropped him by the
ship, but I stayed out all night. The next day they took my liberty card. So the next time
we were in a liberty port and usually that might be three or four days. So you had a
potential of like three nights of liberty that you could—you know, if all went well you
could be out three nights in a row. So they took my liberty card. I forget which port that
was, but when we got to that liberty port, by the time we got there, I had a new liberty
card and I was walking off ship. I don’t know. I don’t know how I pulled that one off.

SM: How did you arrange that?

BM: I had my ways and my people. I don’t know. I really don’t remember the
specifics. I remember—

SM: So you’re saying maybe it was not an authorized liberty card?

BM: Oh, yeah. It wasn’t authorized at all. It was a fake rendition I probably
with some help or something made one. Kept my head down leaving the planks. Of
course, you know a big ship, thousands of guys on there. So the right person would’ve
had to have been there to recognize me, and they weren’t. So I got away with it.
SM: Okay. Well, when you were at Camp Pendleton going through the staging for Vietnam, your preparation for Vietnam, were they pretty liberal in letting you guys have free time in the evenings?

BM: I remember it being that way, yeah. Yeah. I remember—again, somebody could argue and say, “No. No. You’re wrong.” It’s just my memory fails me. But I don’t—not like when you went through boot camp and ITR and stuff. I think those nights at staging we were—I think we were freed up probably. Oh, they probably had us do some night stuff on a few nights and probably we were around in the week, but I know certainly on the weekends there was like Friday to Sunday night there was liberty. Maybe weekdays there wasn’t. I don’t recall. We probably had free time anyway on the base. Maybe some training. Who knows at night time?

SM: Okay. So in mid-August you must’ve started making your way over to Vietnam. Is that right?

BM: Yes. It would’ve been—yeah, probably. Oh, I’m guessing—yeah probably right around mid-August, August fifteenth maybe. Oh, in my letters, wrote my first letter actually on the plane over there and gave a date. Yeah, I went through staging. It was that last weekend. What’s kind of very memorable I should tell you is that last weekend of liberty. Everybody had to be back Sunday night. Then we’d depart for Okinawa Monday or Tuesday. I remember it was Friday. Staging was done. We had graduated or whatever, completed it. We were all going to ‘Nam in a matter of days. Well, everybody had a wife, friends, somebody, they were all taking off to go see in California or wherever, some flying out of town. I had my few friends out there that I knew going through staging. They were all going somewhere. I had literally nothing to do and nobody to do it with. So I was pretty bummed out. I just remember the Vietnam thing, it didn’t loom that heavy with me. I’d always get lonely easily and it was like, “God, I don’t have anybody to do anything with my last weekend. What am I going to do, sit around the barracks?” So it was like Friday dinnertime-ish or something. I called home and my parents, “Well, what are you doing?” I said, “Well, we finished staging. I’ll be leaving for Vietnam Monday or Tuesday.” My dad of all people says, “Well, what are you doing this weekend?” I said, “Nothing, all my buddies are gone. Blah, blah, blah.” So he said, “Why don’t you come home?” I said, “Well, I just don’t have the money and
it’d be a long trip for just forty-eight hours.” My dad says, “You just get off the base get
to LAX and there’ll be a ticket waiting for you.”

SM: Cool.

BM: That was quite cool. I was so excited. So that’s what I did. I think I finally
got out of there Saturday morning out of LAX, flew to Chicago, spent about thirty-six
hours there. I remember Mom putting me on the plane, I guess, Sunday evening. I was
talking and me being late to the airport. The guy with the airlines saying, “Come on. It’s
final boarding. He’s got to get on the plane.” My mom turned and sort of chewed him
out and said, “Take it easy. My son’s going to Vietnam and [crying sounds].” She was
crying.

SM: Of course.

BM: So it was kind of traumatic, actually, kind of tough. Then I flew back.

California got to Pendleton. Sure enough I think it was like a Monday or Tuesday that
we left, headed to Okinawa.

SM: Okay. Now did you know what unit you were going to be assigned to
before you left or what you would be doing?

BM: Nope. Not at all. I don’t think anybody did. We were, remember, we
were—you know, we didn’t go as units then.

SM: Right. You were going as individual replacements.

BM: We are going as single—

SM: What—I’m sorry go ahead.

BM: No. I was going to say I was on a probably DC-8 stretch or something like
that with I don’t know whatever they held, 250 guys. I remember when I flew over I
don’t even remember—they probably, out of staging there were so many different
groups. I mean, I don’t even remember flying over there with the few guys I knew at
staging. I don’t even remember knowing anybody on the plane. I think that’s when I
wrote my first letter home was actually during that flight, but it was pretty strange since
you were all singletons and it wasn’t like you knew anybody. Yeah, you had no idea who
you were going to be detached to or whatever.

SM: Yeah. Were many of the other guys on that initial flight to Okinawa going
to Vietnam or were some of them staying there in Okinawa or what?
BM: I don’t even think we knew that or anybody knew that, if I remember. Guys certainly probably on that plane did stay in Okinawa because they were small-arms repair or they were whatever. But I don’t know if certainly if the Marine Corps knew that then and who was going to go on and who was going to 1st Marine Division or who was going to stay at Okinawa as an MP (military police) or something. I didn’t or I don’t remember any of us knowing about it as far as everybody was concerned. We were “going south” as they called it. That meant going to Vietnam.

SM: So what was the atmosphere like on the aircraft going over to Okinawa?

BM: I remember it as being pretty darn quiet, very quiet. Again, some people, oh, very worried and actually in my letter I wrote home on that airplane that I was writing home headed to Okinawa I admitted that for the first time ever I was a little, I was getting scared. I told my parents that, but I know I finished it up with, “But I’m just scared. Other than that I’m fully confident and don’t worry. I’m coming home.” I always seemed to know that, that I would go there and stuff would happen, but I’d make it home alive. It was pretty quiet, kind of somber.

SM: When you arrived at Okinawa you switched planes, or did you stay on the same aircraft?

BM: No. Actually what happened when you hit Okinawa is everybody spent at least two or three days there. You had your sea bag and all the gear that Marine Corps had ever given you. I think a lot of it was just a matter of coordinating flights and doing the proper paperwork, staging if you will. So you didn’t, like, just change planes and refuel and take off. Just about everybody spent two to three days at Okinawa. Whether we got more shots I don’t remember. I remember we had three formations a day where we had to, like, fall in. You were supposed to be accounted for. There was no particular time they told us right when we landed that we’d be leaving for Vietnam. They said, “You’ll be here for several days. We don’t know when you’ll be leaving so do not make the three formations a day.” Basically like morning, lunchtime, noon, and say, end of the day. We had liberty ‘cause we’d go out into the villes at night and party. From what I remember, though, mostly it was just hanging out on the base for the day and making those formations. In the mean time we did do the paperwork to get our sea bags stored which presumably we would pick up on our way home from Vietnam. We didn’t get our
weapons or any of that stuff then or jungle utilities, anything like that. It was kind of like just hang and wait ‘til you find out what flight you’re gonna be manifested on.

SM: So, after that period there, a couple days in Okinawa, then you finally got back on an aircraft and flew directly to Vietnam or did you do more stops along the way?

BM: No. Those flights went directly to Vietnam. Then, of course, being in Okinawa it wasn’t—I think a couple-hour flight. The one to Okinawa was probably ten or eleven and we may have stopped in Hawaii. I think we did to do something, but for a few hours and then took off again. When you left Okinawa on that plane that went—at least ours went to Da Nang. I guess because we were probably all Marines, again I don’t know maybe they had separated some of them out that were gonna go to south, or I mean more to III and IV Corps. They probably would have flown into Tan Son Nhut. We flew into Da Nang, I Corps. Yeah, that was the case except for mine again. I pulled one of my little—oh, I don’t know—stunts again. I was always sort of cocky and arrogant trying to have fun, trying to keep smiling. I guess I felt I always had to in the Marine Corps otherwise I would have lost my mind. When we hit Okinawa I had known ahead of time that an old friend from back home was stationed there for about a year. As a matter of fact, he was small-arms repair. He never went to Vietnam. I looked him up and found him on one of the camps there, one of the bases. Sure enough, we linked up.

We went out partying a few nights in a row. He was about to go home to the States. He had spent about thirteen months. We went out one night and partied a little too much and came back at four in the morning. I was staggering around drunk looking for my squad bay, the barracks, and all the guys I had flown there with. You know, I was looking for where that was, the barracks we were all sleeping in. I thought I had the right big number on the outside of the billet. Walked inside, nobody there, finally some sergeant of the guard screamed at me. “Halt! Who goes there?” locks and loads his weapon. I tell him it’s me. I tell him the whole truth. I said, “I’m lost. I think this is my barracks, but there’s nobody in there. There were hundreds of guys in there tonight when I left the base earlier.” He said, “You’re at the right place. They were. They got their call and they were emergency flight to Vietnam.” At about midnight they packed up and left. So I went, “Oh, shit! God! I’m supposed to be on that.” I said, “Those are my guys.” He says, “Well,” and he’s kind of being smart. For some reason he took a liking to me or
whatever, but he said, “Well, you just missed the troop movement. That’s only a court-
martial offense.” Of course, I swallowed and oh, God. He says, “Look, you seem like a
good dude, just square it away.” He said, “Just sleep it off, go down to the flight office
tomorrow. This place is so screwed up, people coming and going, nobody really knows
for sure who’s where or anything. It’s just Army, Navy personnel coming and going,” as
you can imagine, the stop off point before ‘Nam and the stop off point when you leave
‘Nam. So it was a zoo. He says, “Act like you know what you’re doing. Do this. Do
this. Manifest yourself on a flight to get your butt to ‘Nam.” Okay. So I go back and I
sneak into my buddy’s barracks and hide from his gunny and lieutenant, his commander
and stuff. I tell him what happened. I’m sleeping under his bunk on the floor hiding out.
Later that day I’m going, “Yeah. Well, this is what the guy told me to do.” Pat says,
“Okay. Well, you do whatever.” I’m a little worried still that I might get busted. That
day goes on and I keep thinking, “Well, gee, if he makes it sound that easy then I can go
down there and manifest myself on a flight and just do it.” I thought, “Hell, I’m on
Okinawa, why do it today? “

SM: Oh, no.

BM: I might as well take a day or two and then I’ll go for it. I’ll take a little
vacation. So that’s what I decided to do. Then finally it was—every night partying in the
ville with my buddy and his friends. So finally about six days later, I said, “You know, I
really should get to Vietnam.” So I was being all cocky then. I knew I’d got away with
it. At least I thought I had. Nobody was looking for me. So after, yeah, it was six or
seven days I went down and manifested myself on a flight, flew to Vietnam, landed in Da
Nang, finally got out to 1st Marine Division rear. That was the orders I had, to go to 1st
Marine Division rear area and from there I’d get my orders. I got out there and saw some
of those same guys from Okinawa. They’d still been sitting there a week, hadn’t gotten
orders yet to what unit they’d be with. “Where you been McKinsey?” Of course, by then
at least I thought I’d gotten away with it. So I’m sort of strutting around. “I figured, no
big hurry. Gonna spend a year here anyway, might as well take a little vacation first. So
I took a few extra days in Okinawa.” They’re all going, “Jesus, you crazy little blah-
blah-blah.” Well, in retrospect, nobody ever said a word to me about it. There were no
office hours, nothing like that. No officers mentioned it or anything. We all got our
orders in a few days and they sent me to the 11th Motor Battalion or whatever, right there in the Da Nang area and sent me to them for mess duty for thirty days. (Laughs) So in retrospect a lot of my buddies say, “Yeah, you got away with it. Yeah, sure you did.” They knew. They just weren’t gonna fire you up for it and bust you. That’s why you got mess duty, which of course was the most dreaded thing in the Marine Corps. It was terrible.

SM: That’s funny. So that was your introduction to Vietnam.

BM: Yeah. Actually, my real intro was pretty hairy one. That’s what happened. I was on mess duty for like thirty-some days. Then they put me out as an 0300 rifleman for two weeks on platoon security. We were getting a lot of crap thrown at us from the enemy every night, mortars and artillery. Then I’d be out on the line on platoon security. I forgot they made me an 0300 grunt rifleman for like two weeks. That was right after mess duty. My real indoctrination or welcome was that first night in Da Nang, when we landed that day. Like everybody, you’re going, “God, look at”—I mean, the heat, the humidity, it was all very stifling when you got off the plane. It’s all these salty guys in jungle utilities that you didn’t even want to look at them for more than a split second, they might kill you. Then you saw people in black pajamas and you didn’t know if you were in North Vietnam or South Vietnam or where am I? Is somebody going to shoot at me getting off the plane or how secure is it? Of course, you got off the plane. They got me out to 1st Mar Div rear. It was that night I had my first night in ‘Nam, no rifle, no flak jacket, no helmet yet, hadn’t been issued any of that. I was with some old salts that were in from the bush. They befriended me. They’d been in ‘Nam six to eight months. They said, “Come on, we’ll take you over to the enlisted men’s club and have some beers.” Typical screened-in, hard-backed hooch. We’re sitting in there, starting to get a buzz on. It’s probably eleven at night and I’m still like, “Geez this is pretty bizarre. I’m hearing what these guys are saying. You don’t know what to expect.” I mean, it’s quite—you’re sitting there going, “God, what’s gonna happen next?” You have no idea. Well, all of a sudden we hear a lot of small-arms fire and tracers. You can see them outside the hooch flying by. I mean, every table in this club turned over. Guys are diving through the screens. We’re getting hit. Of course, I went right to the floor. All of a sudden, I remember these guys sort of dragged me out of there. We hustled out of the hooch and
they shoved me in a bunker and said, “Get all the way to the end of that bunker. You
don’t even have a helmet or flak jacket yet so you don’t get to fight,” or something like
that. “You just keep your goddamn head down.” That was my first night in ‘Nam. I was
like, “Holy shit!” Then it was like starting to sink in. I guess this is for real.
SM: Were there mortars and rockets and all that?
BM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. In Da Nang the airstrip was getting hit which they would
do apparently frequently. They’d try and lob stuff on the air strip, of course, to interrupt
the air traffic.
SM: Do you remember about what day that was that you arrived in Vietnam?
BM: Yep. I think it was August twenty-seventh.
SM: Okay. Had you been paying attention much to the news during the time—
while you were in the Corps while you were at Lejeune and during staging? Had you
been paying attention at all to the news and stuff?
BM: Not that I recall at all. I know I was never big on watching the news on
television, never a big newspaper reader.
SM: Okay. Good enough.
BM: No. I don’t remember that.
SM: Okay.
BM: I don’t even think I went there with any preconceived real notion. I mean, I
probably had some, things I’d heard, but probably not so much from the local news or
whatever, or national news as much as from guys giving me first-hand accounts, like
some of the guys did on the cruise were with Delta 1/9.
SM: Had you heard that the United States was changing its policy from fighting
most of the war to Vietnamization, to handing more of it over to the Vietnamese?
BM: I don’t even think I had—no, not at that time.
SM: You hadn’t heard about that either?
BM: No.
SM: Okay.
BM: Even if it had started then, it wasn’t—’cause by the time they sent me off to
3/7, then I spent like eleven months with out in the mountains there in I Corps, even then
we started—after I was there a while in Vietnam, started to hear a little bit about it, but
even when I got out to 3/7 it was still just like—I remember thinking, “Hey we were there still to fight the war and we’re going to win.” It wasn’t all that talk about standing down and starting to move Marines out and Vietnamization and all that. We were just out there doing our job.

SM: Okay. This will end the interview with Bryan McKinsey on the twenty-ninth of April.
Interview with Brian McKinsey
Date: May 9, 2002

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Brian McKinsey on the ninth of May 2002, at approximately 2:15 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. McKinsey is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up today’s interview looking at some of the more specific aspects of your first experiences in Vietnam? You mentioned in our last interview that your first month was actually spent, I guess as a form of, I don’t know if it was punishment or what, but you took those days off, I guess, in Okinawa. When you finally caught up with your unit, they threw you into mess duty for a month. I was just wondering if you would just describe that unit, where you were, what kind of interactions you had with other soldiers and Marines, the Vietnamese people, things like that? Just in general, what was that assignment like for that first month?

Brian McKinsey: Well, what I can remember, and yeah, I think as I alluded to, the more I think about it, being a lance corporal and radio operator and all that good stuff, when I was thrown on mess duty that was definitely punishment. I didn’t get away with anything. Mess duty was about the worst thing anyone could ever get. Well, some might think, “Well, you got to stay back in Da Nang rear area.” Well, they were getting rocketed and mortared. You had supposedly thousands of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) on the other side of the hill from us. I forget what hill that was. I believe I was mess duty with 14th Motor Transport Battalion. I’m not sure. But anyway, I caught it, mess duty. It was just the worst duty one could ever, I think, pull in the Marine Corps. I had it once before and it wasn’t then a punishment, but it was stateside. Long days and just sort of be mean to you, and dirty and stinky and everything else, so. But they gave me that for a month. I mentioned a few guys in my letters, yeah, it was hanging around at night in hardbacks, hooches that we slept in, we take incoming and we’d run to the outside and jump in our holes. I don’t remember any of my good, or having any good friends, Marines there. The ones that I got close to that I did write home a lot about the papasans. We had an ex-NVA working with us at the mess hall, just a lot of Vietnamese. I sat in the garbage shack with them, and shooting the bull and learning a little
Vietnamese. Typical mess duty, they were twelve-hour days, seven days a week. It just wasn’t a fun job. So I was itching then really to get out with one of my units or with a unit, do what I was trained to do. But it was kind of like demeaning, the low-life job. But once I finished thirty days, I think it was still the Motor Transport Battalion there, but they made me an 0300, which in the Marine Corps was a rifleman, basic rifleman, grunt, MOS. Then I was that for about two weeks. That was just standing my various watches out on the perimeter of this area in case, if, we got attacked. That I don’t remember much about, but they probably would have given me a four-hour shifts, a couple of them a day, you know, the perimeter is manned, of course, twenty-four hours. I was just out there in a hole with some other Marines, ready to shoot at the enemy. That was that two weeks and then I finally got orders, which I knew would happen. Well, I least I didn’t think I’d be staying in the rear area being a field radio operator, ’til I got my orders for the 7th Marines. By then I had, all that six weeks back in the Da Nang area, you’d see Marines come in from out of the bush, from 7th Marines, where I would be going, coming in on in-country R&R, or whatever else, some excuse, reason. Maybe they got into the Da Nang area to take it easy. Then they would tell us what it was like out in the bush in a firing unit. The 7th was getting into a lot of stuff with the enemy, a lot of confrontation. They were supposedly hard worked, and under-staffed, lost their people. I’d heard a lot of stories about it. It had me a little scared, but also very curious and kind of excited to get out there where I’d be in the bush. I finally got the orders for 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines. It could have been 5th Marines or 1st Marines, and I think also the 1st Marine Division then, maybe the 26th or 27th Marine Regiment was there, I think that’s one of the regiments, but any rate I got the 7th Regiment, 3rd Battalion.

SM: What was your initial impression of the unit?

BM: I think the first impression of the unit was very good. It’s more your impressions are more you’re wondering what’s going to happen, and your impression of the area. I worked at LZ (landing zone) Ross, which was one of 3/7’s, two rear areas, the year I was there. We had LZ Baldy and LZ Ross. LZ Ross was southwest of Baldy, farther from Da Nang, right at the foot of the Que Son Mountains, at the foot of the valley there. It was a pretty grim looking place, of course, there were big tents there, with gigantic mud holes, like a little mound, kind of small, very threatening, very scary. They
used to call it Rocket City Ross because it took so much incoming. So that was very
foreboding when I first saw that. I’m like, wow. Of course, back in Da Nang area,
especially working in the mess hall, but I was used to hot cooked meals, three a day, I
guess, if I wanted. When I hit Ross, we were getting two meals a day, you know,
maybe—they did have a little mess hall there, but lots of times the meal was just out of
cans, C-rations. Then you could be lucky to squander up two meals a day. That part of it
was quite a big change. I was out pretty much in the bush now. So I knew things would
be a lot different, no more leisurely writing of letters home on time off, stuff like that. As
a matter of fact, I started collecting some tapes, music cassettes from home, when I was
in Da Nang. My letters indicated that I had a little cassette deck and a couple little
auxiliary speakers or something to go with it, which wouldn’t have been uncommon if
you were back in the Da Nang area to have that in the hardback hooch. But I indicated in
my letters that I got orders for 7th Marines, “Well, I’m going to the bush. I’m not going
to need this anymore.” So I gave it away. But I wouldn’t have room for that stuff out
where I was going.

SM: When you arrived there, and you met with members of the unit, what kind of
briefings did they give you about unit procedures, unit activities? Did they give you any
kind of training? Did they hook you up with a buddy that would help you with some of
the basics of surviving in Vietnam, that kind of stuff?

BM: Yeah, they did. It was quite good. I was looking back at my letters home.
When I got to Ross, yeah, they had us fam-fire (familiarization fire). My TO (table of
organization) weapon was a .45. I also had a 16 (M-16). I had to turn in the 16 because
the radio operators were only supposed to have a .45, but they sort of—we fam-fired
those again. Then we had, actually at Ross, which again, wasn’t much of a rear area,
pretty shoddy, pretty rough. We had about a four- or five-day orientation and went back
through some of the radio skills. Well, first of all they gave us some background on the
7th Marines, especially history of the 7th in Vietnam, right up to that date, what was
happening with 3/7 and with the battalions, or the companies of the 3/7, what their
mission was, where we operated, showed us on maps, and so on. Kind of gave us an
overlay or overview of what the heck we’re doing, an overview of what we were doing,
what we were supposed to be doing. Then the orientation went as far as they took us
through. Of course, I’d already had various times, lots of map reading, compass work, but we went through that again. At least, I honestly don’t know if there were like 0300 grunts that reported to the 7th or 3/7 about the same day or the same week I did, that went through the same orientation or not. I don’t know. But it could have been. I got more just because I was the radio operator. Certainly I had to be expected to know how to read a map, use a compass and all that. But they went through that as a refresher. I think a little bit of first aid, field first aid as a refresher. I don’t remember everything in the orientation, but I know past, some history, past battles and things like that, the weaponry that was used, again, the radio work and stuff like that. That lasted three or four or five days. Then I was—once that was done I was actually a radio operator, 2531 was our MOS. We were actually attached—we were part of H&S (headquarters and service) Company, communications platoon, from H&S Company. We would get detached out to one of the grunt companies at various times. We could be operating. We actually trained everybody on a battalion operation, we would jump CP to just out with one of our four grunt companies as the company operated, so (unintelligible). After orientation, H&S Company first had me in the rear area on radio watch in the COC (command operations center), you know, operations, and stood radio watch. Then I forget, it was probably about a couple of weeks before I went out on my first patrol there going out with the grunts on an operation.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe the morale of the unit when you first arrived?

BM: Again, coming from my letters when I first joined the unit I know I wrote home and said these are a bunch of sorry looking people. They’re very tired, meaning oh, not just physically tired like lack of sleep, but also in the Marine Corps, we used the expression a lot, tired. In that slang, even an M-16 could be a tired weapon, if it was kind of beat up, old, rode hard and hung up wet, so to speak. We used that terminology and I thought they were tired in both ways, physically, which most of us were over there because we didn’t always get much sleep and we worked hard, be it humping up in the bush. I’d say they looked very tired, worn out, lot of hollow stares, we could tell the ones who’d been in the bush a lot, and seen a lot. But despite that it wasn’t, I wouldn’t say it was no real negative aspect of their morale, though. Well, I never saw anybody in the
Marine Corps or anybody in our unit refuse any kind of order. Did we bitch and moan? Yeah. That was part of everything, “Oh, bullshit. The skipper wants to, you know, hump over to here today, or take that hill again, or whatever.” So you bitched about it, but everybody saddled up and did it. Unlike the Army where there were quite a few reports of actual disobeyance of orders. I never saw it, never happened in the Marine Corps. So we bitched and moaned, but we did our job. Well, I’d say that’s about where the guys were at. We were way understaffed, but I think we got a bunch of Marines about when I got there, well, several hundred from 3rd Marine Division to help bring our 3rd Battalion up to TO force. I think when I got there, there was a total of about eleven hundred with 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines with all the companies and everything, support. I remember the radio operators that had already been there, the one I knew from previous crews and radio school and so on, he’d gotten sent to 3/7. I didn’t know it until I got there and found Tom (unintelligible) was actually with 3/7. Well, that was pretty neat I didn’t think I was going to know somebody. I don’t think I remembered actually knowing anybody else, stateside or anywhere, but I liked the radio operators that were there, got to know them quite quickly.

SM: Okay. Now what about in location, where the major base for the 7th Marines were, where you were stationed, where there a lot of Vietnamese people in that vicinity, especially Vietnamese civilians?

BM: Well, most of those rear areas, we employed some. Usually you had some kind of a Vietnamese village, outside your compound, your gate or whatever it was. Ross, I couldn’t tell you in linear dimensions, feet or something, but then you could probably walk around our perimeter there ten fifteen minutes, like a little mound. It wasn’t real big. It usually—when three of the companies were out in the bush, one of them was back into the area. We had Vietnamese, what were all thought to be civilians, South Vietnamese civilians, which we hoped were on our side. Usually you had them working in any of these rear areas, even Ross as primitive as it was. We had a Vietnamese barber who cut your hair. I think there were a few others, they’d come and try to sell you a cold Pepsi, or develop your film or something like that, sell you knick-knacks or albums with Vietnam on it that you could put your pictures in and so forth. Every rear area liked that, you had usually some Vietnamese people. We actually had
five Vietnamese that were allowed on the base, the base if you will, that rear area. They
worked their job and then usually we had—like we’d call them the “villes,” right outside
that would typically may be very close to the LZ, maybe small hamlets. So when I was at
LZ Baldy, and that was our rear area, I’ll never forget that village outside or hamlet. It
was called Mak Bai. I had built communicators and we were out on a position for the
rear area. We would put on security, like out on the perimeter. We’d even had mail
security, for awhile we had to go back, or we had to go out, sort of, dropped down the dirt
road to Mak Bai. The VC (Viet Cong) would come into that village. So maybe that's a
lot better for the road security patrol, keep our eyes open, see what was happening. I
don’t remember a little ville that close to Ross. I don’t know if there was any that close
to them, right outside the gate. But one interesting thing later on in my tour we had just
left Ross, and we were 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, was like a swing battalion. They’d
called us, they designated us swing battalion, which meant from 1/7 to 2/7, those two
battalions rotated more between Baldy and Ross. Instead of us rotating equally into the
mix, we mostly stayed out in the bush all the time. But later when Ross was overrun,
February of ’70, we’d just left Ross, pulled out, went back to the bush. It was 1/7 that
came in. Of course, that’s when they got hit, pretty badly torn up, sappers through the
wire, and actually made it on to the hill and everything, out of all the Vietnamese, but the
sappers that we found dead the next morning and accounted for. One of them was the
barber that had been cutting everybody’s hair on that hill for a year. He had a whole map
on his person, showing the whole hill, outlining the whole hill, where everything was. So
you know he’d gone through everything. You never knew. He was the guy that cut our
hair all that time, thought he was a good friendly Vietnamese, but he worked for the VC
all the time.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe your first patrol with the 7th Marines,
your first combat experience?

BM: I’ll do my best. I think being a swing battalion, I was out—one of the first
times I went out in the bush was on a battalion operation. So in that depth, instead of just
a few of our companies out in the bush and the battalion in command and control, all
being back in the rear area. We were mostly with the battalion out in the bush. So that
meant battalion-sized operations where our lieutenant colonel, who was the battalion
commanding officer, was actually out in the bush as well. So instead of me being right in
front of our line, our grunt companies India, Kilo, Lima, or Mike, I was actually—
something pops, my first one finished. I was actually with the colonel on a battalion
operation, that situation, it’d be a small battalion CP, medics, lieutenant colonel, our XO,
or S3 I should say, what we called the five. He was out there, the major. I’d be their
personal operator. We’d usually have a grunt company with our battalion command post
group, our CP, maybe two grunt companies, one on either flank. We were out—basically
all of our missions were search and destroy, seek out the enemy, find the enemy, kill the
effect, as well as seek out their supply, munitions, and food caches, their supply caches
as well as underground hospitals and headquarters and things like that. So, yeah, my first
operation, it was I know beginning a—well, it was already in monsoon, that October they
had the most rain in one month that they'd had I think in a hundred years. It was a bad
monsoon. I forget, something like fifty inches in one month. So it was very nasty in the
bush, just soaking wet all the time, cold all the time, shaking at night. It was a lot of
humping, sloshing through mud. I don’t remember any real specifics about that first
operation.

SM: Now in terms of the size of the unit that you were in the field with, you said
this was battalion-sized operation?

BM: Yeah.

SM: Where were you positioned within that, as far as within a company, a
squad?

BM: Usually I’d be, well, if I was like operating through the six and the five, I’d
be with them, the command group, or the CP.

SM: Are you talking about the battalion command group?

BM: Yeah, which would have been like—oh, again, gosh I can’t remember,
maybe the sergeant major, the major, maybe ten of us, a couple radio operators,
corpsman. But then usually that battalion CP with the big guys, big shots. We were, if
there was ten of us actually in that CP, or fifteen or something, we would not be totally
all alone out there in that size of group. We would have one of our four companies, or
two of them right near us, you know, within half a click, or actually right with us maybe.
So we’d all be out there on all within a few clicks of each other working some big
operation together, which a lot of those were stretching out maybe one company,
hammer-and-anvil type stuff, stretching out one company, or two of them, whatever size
it might have been, in one area. Then the rest of us in another area that we knew had the
enemy between us. That’s what we’d try, try to drive them, the enemy, towards the anvil
if we were the hammer. We’d drive them down towards the other companies that were
set in.

SM: Okay. Now in terms of actual combat, in terms of you having to fire on
another enemy unit, as a radio operator, did that happen very frequently, where you
would have to basically kind of drop your radio responsibilities to help in a particular
firefight?

BM: No. Only if we were—it got real hairy and about to be overrun or if I was
out—there were a few times I actually went out on patrol, on manned patrols. There was
one I even walked point on. So there it would have been a different story, my carrying an
M-16. Typically though as a battalion radio operator, then out on a battalion op, I
thought, well, later I was out as my company operator. Even there I drew in my
company’s CP. So you were a little more, yeah, more protected. Unless you were
going overrun or had lost a lot of guys, no, you typically didn’t. More, even if you
wanted to, like I know I did a few times, it was more like a captain or lieutenant
screaming at you to keep your head down. We were looked up to. I mean the grunts had
their own radio operators within their company that were actual grunts. So they couldn’t
say much. They didn’t know a lot about radio procedure. Us guys we were real trained
radio operators from H&S Company detached out. They did their best to protect us.
They were their—excuse me—we were their lifeline. So we all kind of relied on each
other, but they knew that if I was shot, and couldn’t talk on the radio then they may be
hard put, an officer typically could, but if their one wasn’t one around, they could be hard
put to find a grunt who knew how to keep his cool, talk on the radio, look at a map, call
in coordinates, call in Medevacs, airstrikes, close air, whatever, artillery and all that. So
that’s the kind of stuff I did. So lots of times they were just, “Keep your damn head
down. We need you on the radio.” But you were more busy talking. Again a radio
operator only has a .45. I did have a 16, (unintelligible.) Half the time when I was there,
and when I was in the bush, I felt better with it certainly in any kind of war. Let’s say the
.45’s good when you’re being overrun and that’s about it. Don’t have that accuracy or.

But that never happened. I was never within company patrol or commander like these
(inaudible).

SM: As you were serving with the 7th Marines, what kind of information were
you getting about—first of all, when did you arrive with the 7th Marines, what month and
year was that again?

BM: It would have been about September 15, 1969.

SM: September ’69. What kind of information were you receiving as a radio
operator regarding ways to minimize your signature as one of the primary targets of both
VC and NVA snipers and basically anyone? If they’re going to try to take someone out,
it’s going to someone like an RTO, commander, that kind of stuff. Were you given any
kind of special information or special briefings on how to minimize that risk to you as a
radio operator?

BM: I may have been given some in orientation. I don’t recall. I think a lot of it
was sort of common sense and probably learning from other radio operators that had been
there. Nothing that I can really remember. I mean nothing from a high-tech standpoint.
The only thing you could do is sort of camouflage yourself as best you could. We did
that by—the radio had its own little pack board. I carry an army pack because they were
much better than anything the Marine Corps had. The radio sat down inside of it so it
couldn’t be seen. Ten the antenna, the three foot tape antenna, off the prick-25, usually
we’d wrap over our shoulder, stick it down into our front pocket. It would still work all
right, and you’d get reception. Then we had one of those typical green towels that we all
had around our necks over there, humping, because of the sweat. I’d use that sort of to
cover up the antenna, protect the handset so it would be covered up as well. So I could
sort of walk and tilt my head down, and key the handset, communicate, but not be, for the
sniper, somebody with some eyes looking at us wouldn’t have necessarily known that I
was the radio man. But you couldn’t always do that. Sometimes the antenna just had to
be up for reception. You were standing out there, and it was clear that you were the radio
operator. Then we had a—I think it was a fifteen-foot whip antenna, kind of went
together like a fishing rod, in two-foot lengths. It was collapsible. So you could hide
that, but when you needed it for reception that thing stuck up in the air, fifteen feet, well,
there wasn’t too much hiding. But short of this sort of camouflaging yourself, hiding the
radio and the antenna and headset on your person while you were humping, that’s about
all we could do.

SM: Now, did you ever get a feeling while you were on patrol, that an enemy
unit that you were engaging was trying to target you specifically because you were a
radio operator?

BM: No, but it probably would have in reality been hard to know, unless we had
been pinned down and more of the rounds had been coming my way. But I never, I never
sensed that. Most of my time, when firefights came down, it was being—even if you
were with sort of a company CP, battalion CP, whatever, I was that main radio operator
for that company. Well, I wasn’t out like with one of the squads, walk the point. I was
always the Tail End Charlie, usually somewhere in the middle of that company, typically
with a lieutenant or captain. So you might say we would get more protection, more in the
middle of things if you want. Reality of it was, though, if you were operating for the
company commander or battalion commander, it was wherever they went, you went was
the reality, so then it just depended on whether they wanted to run up and down the line,
or how crazy they wanted to be that you had to follow right along. Sometimes, well,
many times they'd take the handset and want to do the talking. They'd be moving while
they were doing it. So of course, there was that three or four feet of cord strapped
between the handset and the radio. So you were kind of being drug along or had to hop
pretty quickly. It was kind of hilarious at times ‘cause they'd grab it, take off and you
better be with them.

SM: Okay. When you would go out on patrol, would you also carry extra
ammunition, or would you just carry a basic load?

BM: I carried, you know, God, so many of us carried extra stuff there. I probably
carried the standard amount though, and like some would carry extra batteries for me. I'd
always try to carry grenades, even though, again I may be the one less likely to use them,
say. Then once we were set into the bush, of course, we ran all the daytime and
nighttime patrol and ambushes. That was a lot what I did on the radios, staying in
communication with those guys several hundred yards from me, or whatever that are out
there to give fire-size, maybe a squad. I probably just stand—I carried the standard
amount either one. One bandolier of sixteen magazines and I think my .45 I only had to
carry, you know, four magazines.

SM: How many extra batteries would you carry for the radio?
BM: You know, that’s a good question. I can’t remember. I think, I would
usually have a new one in the radio and a couple of them, two to three by a couple, but
then other people would carry them as well. Maybe even the commander would carry
one, or whoever, in your CP group. Did it that way. My people helped out because
somebody was loaded down, and there’s still some stuff that had to go. Everybody
usually chipped in, and picked up something that needed to be carried. So I had other
people carrying batteries, as well, not just the radio operator.

SM: When you went out on patrol, especially a small patrol, where would you
typically position yourself within the formation? Like if it was a ten, like a squad-sized
patrol, or even a platoon-sized patrol, where would you try to be positioned in terms of
the physical location within a patrol?
BM: Yeah.

SM: Was there someplace you preferred or did it just depend on where the either
the squad leader, or platoon commander was located?
BM: I’ll just say it really depended on where they'd be. They typically again,
weren’t going to be the first or the last. I’d like to say somewhere probably in the middle
if we were on the hump. Again on those battalion ops it was hard for me to—well, I
knew at the time, but I can’t remember, but on those we could have had a full company
stood out in front of us and some flanking us, but maybe as far as a click or two away.

SM: But on those larger battalion-sized operations you were with the battalion
command group?
BM: Yes.
SM: So, wherever they were, you were.
BM: Yeah. Yep, exactly. At times we had what was called a jump CP. We’d
get in a lot with 3/7, with my skipper, battalion commander and the five as we call them,
the major, S-3 operations, and a few others. “Okay, let’s jump on the chopper. We’re
going to leave Ross. We’ll be out for about a week. We’re gonna go out and stay with
Lima Company, or Mike, or Kilo.” If I wasn’t out already radio operating for them and
was back in the rear—I mean they had to pick radio operators. The one skipper I had
over there for six months pretty much always picked me, thought I was the best. He
always requested me. So I’d go out on those jump CPs, too. Sometimes we’d come back
two days later. Sometimes we’d come back fourteen days later, but that was a small
group of seven, eight of us, ten of us at the most. We’d go out and get a third of them to,
one of the grunt companies. Then we’d hang with that grunt company CP, usually when
they had things to discuss, or the battalion CO wanted to go out and talk strategy, what my
company is going to do, and how they were going to link up with Lima or whatever,
check on the guys firsthand. A lot of that with some units was done with what they call
C&C, like command and control birds, choppers. Those kind of ranked officers would
do that from three thousand feet in the air, four thousand feet, whatever in a chopper, be it
nice and safe. Not our skipper, he was great. He was out in the bush all the time, I was
with him a lot. Then later I was company operator, with Kilo, like a lot of us radio
guys—well, we’d either be company radio operators or out on a battalion op. Then we’d
spend time at the rear, when we were in the rear. Of course, we were the radio operator
in the command and control center, the command operator, the COC bunker. Then we’d
usually man three to four pushes, radio nets at a time, three to four different radios.

SM: You must have used a—I guess it was referred to as an SOI (specific
operating instruction), is that correct?

BM: I’m sorry, referred to as what?

SM: Was it an SOI? What did you refer to the codebook and the frequency book
that you would use for specific days or specific missions, was it just something that was
briefed as part of the op order, you know what frequencies would be used, and what code
words would be used, that kind of stuff? How would that be organized?

BM: Good question, hang on a second. I’ll try to answer it. Hang on let me get
the—sorry.

SM: That’s okay.

BM: Yes, Steve. I don’t know. That escapes me. I’m hoping, well, here in a
few months I’m going to be out visiting my skipper who really saved my life over there
once. All those kinds of things I forget. I remember some of the call signs, when and
who changed them, how we were told. I don’t remember. Some things were sort of
standard, I mean 2-4 was arty, 1-4 was there, 2-8 was tactical, radio, those sorts of things. You referred to a five and a six and four, but once for a while, we were along a point. We were benchmark. The regiment I think was bad actrin(?). I remember some of the call signs, and who assigned them, why they changed them, when. What freqs were picked to go along with it, I don’t know. I really don’t. I imagine there was, I’m guessing this sort of, before each operation, a major one, things were probably changed. It was just part of the briefing. It was probably the best info, one of those deals, “Okay. We’re going to be out with Lima and Mike on this operation. The skipper said, you know, everybody supposedly got the word that we’re going to be bad actor(?). We’re going to be at 35.45 for 2-8 tactical. Everybody get up there.” You found everybody, if everybody was there, then we were all good to go. Then of course there are all these set admin freqs, and different ones for air and art(?).

SM: Do you remember what your backup plans were in the event that you were communicating over a particularly frequency, and there was some kind of odd interference that was disrupting that communication on that particular frequency, was it—?

BM: Yes. Sometimes we’d hear the enemy on there, who we supposed was enemy ‘cause we’d get, “Die Marines,” and all kinds of other crazy stuff. Usually that was as simple as whoever you were on there with, well, which typically was mostly the companies in the rear area. But if it was more localized within the company out in the bush, lots of times we’d just say, drop a nickel, drop a dime. That meant we dropped like .05 on the megahertz. Sometimes we even used our own, just made up ones to go to briefly till we decided what to do. I think we probably did have alternates those as well, if things were real bad. We’d say go to alternate, everybody, you know, roger that. The room would be gone, and then we’d click down to alternate, whatever alternate was, see if everybody’s there. We did do some where we had our own set on. We’d say go Jack Betty, and that meant 39.00. We’d say things we thought the enemy might not know. We’d say go call malt liquor. That was 45.2, (inaudible). But lots of times it was just as simple as drop a quarter, go up a quarter.

SM: You mentioned that at times, it was obvious that there was someone else, probably the enemy, Viet Cong or NVA, listening in on the radio and even throwing in,
interjecting, certain things. Did you ever encounter or ever experience, where you didn’t
necessarily hear someone else on the radio, but because of what was happening perhaps
on a patrol or in a firefight, that perhaps the enemy was listening in and so changed
frequency as a result of that?

BM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I don’t know, maybe sometimes it was
extreme paranoia after a while, but we kind of—we, I don’t know, most of the Marines I
was with there, I think a lot of combat was that way in Vietnam, really believed that their
eyes were on us all the time. They always seemed to know every where we went, where
we were going to be. How did they do that? There must be more than eavesdropping
and watching us. So I felt that a lot of different times there could be—that they were
listening to us. It wasn’t until later that we got that cipher gear, and just don’t remember,
know enough about it, how that probably solved the problem, curtailed a lot of their
listening. When we were on the PRC-25, yeah I’m sure there were many times they
listened to us. Fortunately they probably didn’t always understand, but I’m sure lots of
times they did.

SM: Okay. You mentioned a little bit ago that your skipper at one point saved
your life.

BM: Yeah.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe the action that was involved there,
how he assisted?

BM: Well, it was funny. It wasn’t actually a combat, but it was about to be, I
think. We were—it might have been a battalion op, maybe. It seems to me we were a
jump CP again. We went out to link up with one of our grunt companies. We were out
on operations and all of a sudden, we cut an LZ. They were going to chopper us, I don’t
know after amount of clicks away, to some other area, I don’t remember. It could have
been to go in there because of all the front intel or recon said there's an enemy there. So
we’d pick up, get in the chopper, beat it over to another place hoping to engage the
enemy. I suspect that's probably what it was, but they on 46’s, maybe twenty, twenty
guys, depending on their load, could get on those, closer to twenty probably. It was 46’s
choppering us from one area to another. Of course we could never all go at once. I think
we were again with, I don’t know the company, but one of our companies. So they were
choppering to the next place. We all got to the next place finally. It was towards the end of the day, we had some small little LZ there cut. Everybody felt eyes were upon us. Everybody was starting to dig in and get ready for the evening. All of a sudden we got orders, additional regiment, because I was with our battalion commander. The choppers would be coming back and picking us up, and were going to take us back to LZ Ross. I suspect that was one of those nights when intel reports came in and said LZ Ross was going to get hit by a sapper battalion tonight. So then all of a sudden they wanted us back at Ross. So the chopper started flying everybody back. Finally the last chopper comes back for about twenty of us, twenty-five of us. I think we’re all getting a little nervous, skipper was one of them. I always seemed to have to be the last one on board because radio operators couldn’t hear once you got on the chopper. I mean, they were incredibly loud, and the crew chief, he’s known as the peon, he’s the one that’s in charge on the chopper. He tells people when they can get on, and when they can get off and all that, tells you if its too heavy. You can’t get off the ground, “You, you, and you, you’re the last guys on, get back off.” Well, I usually stayed outside because that was the only way I could get radio reception and hear, so I could get the last communiqué in before I would jump on a bird. Everybody had gotten on, I was the last one and I was probably was saying something on the radio. I could see the skipper and the hatch started going up on the 46. So I ran to it, jumped on, crew chief came over, started screaming. You can’t believe the racket when the rotors are going around, and the whole thing is shaking, and it’s chaotic. People are yelling and screaming, especially if you’re getting shot at it. We weren’t yet, but the crew chief told me to get back off. So I just _______(??) and follow those orders. I got back off like a dummy. I’m standing there all alone and it’s about dusk. I was looking around and I swore I could see the guys out there, but nobody was shooting at the chopper. It was just a scary area. It was dusk and I’m thinking, they’re going to take off. The relay trip’s been taking about twenty minutes in the air. All of us are going, “You’re ______(??),” literally, just going to leave me here, just me a singleton. They’re all going to leave and come back and get me in twenty minutes, no way. I’ll be dead meat by then. All of a sudden the chopper started actually lifting off. That rear gate on the 46 was up, never closed all they way. There was always that twenty-four inch opening. Well, this was after my lieutenant colonel was screaming with
the crew chief, he's a peon. Crew chief's still got control, “You can’t leave my guy, la, la,” all this stuff. All of a sudden it stared taking off the ground. About ten feet off the ground I couldn’t believe it was all happening. I knew I was going to be dead. Then all of a sudden I see this M-16 hanging over the edge of the ramp there, and a long arm. It was my skipper, “Brian, grab a hold.” The chopper’s starting to fly away and I’m dangling. They pull me inside the chopper, (inaudible). But I knew I wouldn’t have lasted five minutes out there.

SM: Do you remember about when that was?

BM: Yeah. It would have been, I think it’s probably November ’69. Could have been that first or second op I was on, probably, somewhere in there.

SM: What were some of the other close calls you had that you remember?

BM: Oh, I’d say really it was just, no visits, no close calls like some of the guys at one-seven had when Ross was overrun. In many ways I look back. It was like I was around when we got fired at, but to me it wasn’t a close call. No. I was never fifteen feet from an enemy. Even though I fired my weapon at times in the direction you were supposed to, who knows if I ever killed a man. The only way I know was if I killed in an air strike. But it was more of when there was incoming, I suppose it could be close, but never so close that I got blown backwards. I didn’t get trapped. I was very, very lucky or stayed pattered(?) as such. It did happen a few times, not only in general locations. I’d go in from Ross, or back out to bush. But as I say it was like some guys—I could be in a fighting hole, some particular place and all of sudden, leave it, for whatever the reason. Then that place or that hole would take the shit, you know what I mean. It was just incredible fate, where once I remember I was at Ross and one of our companies was getting the shit kicked out of them pretty bad. They lost a couple of radio operators. We were—we needed some replacements. Some little mum(?) in the rear area. “Matt, get out there saddle up. It’ll be at the LZ in ten minutes to take you out there. You, do all that, get out there.” I get there, and the shit dies down, just coincidental. Well, it had just prior to my arrival, you know what I mean?

SM: Mm-hmm.

BM: Then the shit would kick up somewhere else. So in a lot of ways, even though we were in the thick of it a lot, three-seven certainly was, and in bad areas, two
things, lucky, in those sorts of ways, which I call just bait, I don’t know why. The other thing, ‘69, ‘70, that I was there, still a lot of casualties. ‘69 was quite bad. ‘70 started tailing off, but both of those times were when even in I Corps the enemy started really hitting and running fast. I mean, the VC were at that point in time disabled still somewhat from Tet in ’68. The NVA major actions, even though there were NVA all around us, they didn’t seem to want to engage us a lot, after that time in the war where there was already the talk of Nixon bringing people home. There was the Vietnamization going on. There was the war of attrition that they already. They knew from the beginning they could win. So they were started to get into it. They were still engaging us, still things were happening, some bad stuff, but not as many firefights. They were relying more on their booby traps, big time, that sort of a thing, just pecking away at us. The tiger and the elephant, take a little bite out here, take a little bite out there, take a little bite here, finally they kill that elephant. So a lot of those major sieges that were NVA confrontations weren’t happening. They were there and we were out looking for them, but they were doing a good job of thinking away and running. So I wasn’t, in any of our situations, not any of those major long, drawn out sieges. The few that three-seven had when I was there, or 7th Marine, like the overrunning of Ross. I was in the bush, probably a couple of clicks away.

SM: Okay. You mentioned that Nixon was, of course, drawing down, starting to withdraw more American forces out of Vietnam. Did you ever hear scuttlebutt or even maybe something official to the effect that commanders were supposed to keep American casualties to a minimum at all costs, especially as your tour progressed, as you got deeper into your tour?

BM: I think we may have heard that was the idea, and that even some Marines would be coming out in late ‘70, which is after I rotated anyway. My tour was done before that. So it didn’t mean much to me, but actually if we heard anything, it didn’t come from our—I never heard anything from our commanders. The fact of it was, we never did anything like that, I mean stand down so to speak in any way. We just kept doing our job, right up till the end. They were even out on ops after I left, the 7th was going to be staging a mount and out in a month or two. So if anybody talked about it, it might have been in different parts of the country, or with different armed forces, but at
least not with the Marines, not what I saw. We were still doing our same sort of job, search and destroy. I mean, it wasn’t like all of a sudden all the battalions pulled into Baldy and Ross. No, no way. As a matter of fact my last week in-country, last two weeks I was told I could come back to the area, which is LZ Ross, again, not any great big treat, but I could spend it there, be a little safer before I go home, and not be had to get so darn nervous. I got sent just five or six days before this, we had a sapper at the time, intelligence recon said just about a click outside of Ross. We didn’t have enough—I don’t know—a company close by to check it out. So they rounded up whoever wanted to volunteer on the hill. I volunteered, wasn’t going to not to. So damn nervous about croaking before I rotated. So even I, I mean personally, but as a unit, yeah operations kept going on the whole time I was there, even though that was when they all set up targets that way.

SM: Now did you ever get the feeling that there was, I don’t know, a desire though, especially when you were out on patrols, to minimize American losses or to make sure that we lost the fewest number possible? Whether it be when the initial unit makes contact pull them back as quickly as possible and get as much air power in there as you can, or was that standard operation procedures anyway? Were there any changes while you were in-country that you can remember?

BM: I can’t remember again, I may have not realized it at the time. It may have been happening, and even though I would have been the radio operator, I wouldn’t have at the time necessarily knew that that's what the skipper, company or battalion, was trying to do. It’s hard for me to remember if I really ever thought about the tactics and tried to put two and two together, like why would we do that. But I think at twenty-one years old, it would be, unless you were an officer and trained to think that way, for me it was more just do the job on the radio and not go, “Wait a minute. I just did those coordinates and we were here. Why do you think we're doing”—Yeah. I remember getting into that. It was more like, just get on the radio and get the job done because sometimes it was pretty furious jumping from net to net and calling in this, calling in that. They may have done that, but I don’t again remember any. Maybe it happened with some of our smaller units, like a platoon, a company being out there and then separating, and going this and that and going out to an area where the guys knew there was bad intel. They didn’t
follow through with what they were supposed to do or something. I heard of that, but I
guess if we ever did that I wouldn’t have known it. Again, I was either with the company
or battalion, not there. (Inaudible) weren’t exactly, pretty much what they were told, you
know on a company or battalion level.

SM: In terms of the reporting that you would receive from the field, like say for
instance, if you were working with the battalion command group. As an operation were
ongoing, and as an operation was winding down, and of course, the ground commanders,
the company commanders, platoon commanders, they’d be sending reports up the chain,
to the battalion about the operation. Was there very much of an emphasis on the body
count?

BM: Oh, yeah. Every report, every one I took we had names for all those reports.
I forget all of them, but no matter what it was, what kind of a situation report, always had
a part of it, friendly KIA (killed in action) and WIA (wounded in action), as well as
enemy, you know, KIA, WIA. Yeah. That still made all the reports. As far as really the
whole idea, I think it was behind the search and destroy. We were—earlier than I was
there, decided to try to win this war of attrition, and leave the war of hearts and minds to
counter-insurgency. So yeah, it was kill as many as you could, kill more of them than us.
Was there inflation of those figures? I was never involved in those ends of it. I think that
stuff does happen(?), after action reports and lots more involved with high ranking
officers who made them. I think, you know, expand those numbers is what we always
heard. I never saw them do that, for the record.

SM: Was there ever any pressure—say for instance a company commander called
up without including a body count, would that raise a red flag and basically someone
would get back on the radio and say, “Hey what about the body count?” Was it that
important, or were there other things coming up that might have been equally important,
like weapons captured and that kind of stuff?

BM: I was going to say exactly, and that was very important, head count on some
ops, some big captured, other times we came up empty. That was quite important.
Maybe it was just one prisoner, taking of one prisoner. It’d be maybe even, being is
much more important, but I again I never heard of like a higher ranking officer telling
one out in the bush, “Well, get me some bodies.” I’m sure that happened, or, “Get me a
count, I got to have some.” I never heard that. I think that what they probably did get
was certainly orders, “Well, stay out there and move this direction, go do this, do that.
We’ve got to try to—the enemy is supposed to be there, we’ve go to engage them.” They
were always trying to, certainly trying to do that. It was just that they were very elusive.
Again, at that part of the war there were a lot of good reasons why some of those units up
there didn’t want to engage them. For the most part, they lost when they did. The second
part, I think they were more in a waiting game at that point. They knew it would just be
matter of time. The U.S. wouldn’t tolerate us over there any more. They just had to hang
out, and think away here and there.

SM: When you did serve at the battalion level, would there be a lot of traffic
from battalion down to the companies during engagements, during firefights? How did
the battalion command group handle one of the subordinate units making contact?

BM: Well, I’d be in contact with the grunt companies say that were out there
with us. It might be that there was one back in the rear area, could even be in contact
with them if they were going to have to saddle up and come out and help. I just
remembered at times, kind of like the whole war sort of laws when you were out in the
bush. It could be quiet and sometimes you could be bored and be itching for stuff, just
like you could be on a radio watch from midnight till six in the morning back at Ross,
and ______ (??) when you weren’t in the bush. Some nights there, you’d be checking in
with little whispers every couple of hours with the guys in the bush. Just everything’s
quiet. Nobody’s talking. Nothing’s really happening. It was either that, or else it
seemed like it was the shit hit the fan. It was like then all of a sudden when something
happens, everything was beginning to happen. Then it would get kind of chaotic. I’d be
talking to—well, again I could jump over to one-four and be talking to a pilot, bringing a
Medevac chopper here, to do this there. I could be over at artillery me inclined, whoever
I’m with that’s above me grabbing the handset from me and saying let me talk to them.
They’re doing it. You’re talking to the actual platoons out there, what’s happening to
them. Yeah, you’re kind of talking. Not everybody’s got a radio. You’re comfortable in
the battalion, and that’s all you do. (Inaudible). I don’t know, it gets hard to talk about at
times.

SM: Yes, sir.
BM: I don’t know.

SM: This will end the interview, CD number one, excuse me, of the interview with Brian McKinsey. This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Brian McKinsey on the ninth of May 2002. This is CD number two of our interview. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and discuss some other aspects of your time in-country there in Vietnam? I was curious about any other specific operations you might remember or any other specific events that come to mind. Is there anything that you can think of?

BM: Yeah. I would say the ones that first come to mind are sort of funny ones, maybe poignant ones, they maybe—I in particular, am one that in life sort of does that anyway. I mean, I think it’s natural for human beings to try to push out the bad and remember the good, at least it is with me. That’s about all I really ever remember. Maybe that was that mechanism where they automatically—where you do shove out some of the bad fear and the bad times, but I remember some of the good times too that I think say so much about our existence over there. I mean, right off the head, it might come to me later, I think about Monahan, one of our radio operators. This was a bad time. We were in the rear area at LZ Baldy, he for some unknown reason, had no business doing it, was at the wire hooch at about 6:30 or 7:00 in the morning where wire platoon was. They were like—they were communications. They were wire. They’d start the wire for the rear areas, and guys could talk on the landline. We didn’t associate with them a whole lot, but he was in from the bush and went in, opened that hooch door. Everybody surmised later that it was bobby trapped, at any rate. He opened it, blew him up. We put him on a chopper, one of his legs hanging on a mere like thread. He died on the Medevac chopper on the way to Da Nang. He was obviously a friendly ball(?). He was quite secure. There were some racial things starting to happen there in the rear area that I remember, but this I don’t know if it would have been racially motivated or what. They said it was probably for the wire platoon sergeant. He was a particular E-5, they’d been in eighteen years, wasn’t well liked. I didn’t run around, us radio operators. We were always considered sort of the smarter ones, but I didn’t run or hang grunt radio operators, anybody. None of my friends or anybody I knew subscribed to doing things like that, never would have done anything like that. I never saw it, but it was happening in the rear when I was out in the bush, but I never saw a lieutenant shot in the back or...
anything like that. We never did find out what happened. That was a sad time. He was obviously a friend of mine. This was somebody, 7th Marines, somebody who was at LZ Baldy, booby trapped the hooch getting ready for that particular sergeant. Lance Corporal Monahan was the one that walked in. He died because of it. Other than that, I’d like to tell you about a few good times, like my skipper, a major who was so good to us out in the bush. When we’re out there in monsoon on one of those first operations, and they set up a hasty little tarp like we had, digging a whole in the ground, trying to dig in with a little tarp with all of us that were soaking wet. Dan Harash and I, the other radio operator, they observed to the major and the lieutenant colonel, “Watch with the radio, we’ll get outside and dig a little shitter if we can, or at least a little garbage pit.” They both said no. “You guys are radio operators,. You stay on the radio. We’ll go out and dig.” I thought that was so cool. That’s what endeared me to my skipper. He was one hell of a guy. He didn’t ask you to do anything he wouldn’t do, that’s from the top. That same night we were all in the little shelter half, like as a poncho is what it was. We always got soaking with, three of us are under, Harash and me and the skipper. Then by the time morning came, we woke up, Harash and I were still under the hooding and the skipper was pushed out into the mud and the water, just so we could get our sleep pods. We turned and kind of get warm, and booted him out, but we all laughed about that the next morning. There were good times. There was a time when I was back at Baldy in the rear. On my own I went out by the trimmer, found a huge rock five feet high, crawled up on top of it, sat there, had a package of cigarettes, probably from home. They’d send us fresh ones, cartons of them, instead of that C-ration stuff, or anything you’d buy over there. So there I was. I had a can of peaches and can of pound cake. Those were a couple of the prize possessions out of sea rations. Everybody knows they were high on the list. So that hour sitting on that rock, I really honestly, with all my heart, I remember this to this day, I was sitting there with a big smile, going Jesus Christ, it doesn’t get any better than this. I mean, I’m sitting here. I’ve got peaches and pound cake. Nobody’s shooting at me. I’m not too hot, and I’ve got a fresh cigarette. The point being that life was so bloody simple, reduced to the square foot of earth you stood on, and everything was on your back. Then I go back to that lounging many times in life. I really was, I don’t mean it was like a joke, and I was being sarcastic, I mean this was really like, I was
in hog heaven that day. It didn’t get any better. That was like a super good day. That
was a day that couldn’t be equaled back here in the world. All it took was peaches,
pound cake, a cigarette and nobody shooting at me. It was amazing. I’ll just never forget
that.

SM: Yes, sir.

BM: There were a lot of funny times. I continued to get in, oh a little bit of
trouble. I did my job great. I was always requested by the top people, and became an E-
5 there. I loved it when I was a corporal. I had an E-5 that kept pushing me and it
bothered me only because I’d been out in the bush a lot already. He hadn’t even been out
in the bush. He had been over there a year, was staying in the rear area. He was a real,
kind of like I would call a puss. I think it was his second tour. I don’t know if he’d ever
been in the bush. I don’t remember what his job was. He wasn’t a radio operator, but he
was in radio. He was riding me a lot. I think it was because I was befriending my good
buddy, a lance corporal, fraternizing with someone a rank lower. But I lost my temper,
pulled out my .45, locked and loaded it, grabbed him by the collar—this was in a hooch
in the rear, one of those ballistic moments—put it up to his head and told him to quit
f’ing with me or I’m going to blow his brains out. Everybody came over and cooled me
down and all this stuff. He walked away. He went and reported me. Next thing I know I
was called in, they didn’t court-martial me, but gave me office hours for threatening the
life of a senior NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer), and disrespect. So I got sixty hours
of extra pending duty when I was in the rear area, and that meant filling sandbags. Well,
I tried to have fun with that. When I’d come in from the bush I’d go back to just filling
sandbags, building bunks. Well, it was about two months later, we lost four sergeants in
one week, one emergency leave, two off Medevacs, I forget what happened to the other
one, but we needed sergeants in comp. So they put me up. Well, Marine Corps states
that if you’ve had office hours within four months you definitely can’t be promoted. Of
course you have to have the right pro and con marks. Mine were always okay like
average. Well, all of a sudden when I heard I was being put up with Harash for sergeant,
I said, “How can they do that? I just had office hours two months ago for threatening the
life of a sergeant.” They had gone in and erased my whole record book clean. There was
nothing on my crimes at the tent. My pros and cons were the highest you could go, 5-0,
5-0, for that period. I just chuckled, again it was one of the times that kind of, the Marine
Corps was over a barrel. They had to do all that just to promote me. So here I was, and
that was quite comical. I actually came down, and I was at Baldy, a little formation.
Dudes were up on rooks because they heard, “McKinsey’s getting sergeant.” So they
were all up there smoking joints, and watching, howling away, thought it was incredibly
funny. I sit out there and I did get promoted to E-5. To make matters worse, it may not
sound like much, but this is quite a large offense as well in the Marine Corps, my .45, I
let my little Vietnamese buddy-slash-enemy—you never really knew who the hell they
were outside Moc Bai—steal it from me. I mean, I didn’t on purpose, but I know they
stole it. I’m at fault here. So I had to have one, because somebody were in Da Nang, had
access, got me a hot one on the Black Market. The day I was getting promoted I had it
there on my shoulder holster, right on my side there, for my chap. I was carrying a hot
.45, wasn’t even mine, numbers didn’t match up. So those sort of ironies, couldn’t wait
to happen.

SM: Now the NCO that you threatened how much longer did he stay in the unit?
BM: You know, I don’t remember, but I got back at him. I was out on a
company operation and our staff sergeant, a com was out there. He knew I was itching to
lead a patrol over to Mike company. I think we were with Lima. Mike company needed
some radio gear, needed an operator to go anyway. I said, “I’ll take a patrol.” He says,
“Pick about eight, nine guys max, and you can head it.” I wanted to, actually, point to
________(??). I don’t know. One of those days, you’re just feeling kind of gunsy and
gung-ho. I never get to do this, so I want to walk point, you know. Well, one of the guys
I picked was this sergeant who happened to be out there. He was whining the whole two
clicks through the elephant grass. He was getting cut up and wanting to rest. Of course,
I’m an E-5 too. He's still got more power than me because he’s got time and grade, but
we’re both wearing sergeant stripes. So I got to say, just shut up and keep marching. So
I got back at him, I had a ball with that one. He was whimpering and whining the whole
way.

SM: You mentioned this sudden shortage of NCOs that your unit suffered, were
there any shortages of any material, not just personnel perhaps, but how about things that
you needed in-country that you couldn’t get your hands on easily?
BM: Oh, shit yeah, about everything in the Marine Corps.
SM: Really?
BM: Yeah. Marine Corps never—I mean I even wrote my letter, when I was moving out to 7th Marines from Da Nang my first month, or whatever, month and a half, jumped off the chopper, I forget what happened or why, but my helmet somehow got knocked off, went rolling somewhere, couldn’t bend down and pick it up for some reason. I forget what the hell happened. I think I left a sling of, I don’t know, seven or eight M-16 mags on the chopper accidentally or something. Well, you’d think no big deal. Now that you’re out with 7th Marines just get that shit air re-supplied and the Marines have the other stuff, no big deal. Nope, couldn’t get a God damn helmet, couldn’t get more magazines. We had to barter for that stuff, black market, steal it. I think I stole a helmet from somebody going into Da Nang or something. It was all by hook or by crook. Utilities was the biggest funny thing. Your boots are rotting off your feet, your jungle boots. Well, certainly when you come into the rear, they’re going to give you some new boots. Shit, no, there aren’t any for you. You might find some used ones, or you steal them, and that was part of our black humor too. We always said, “Hey if you croak today while we’re out on this op can I have your boots?” We’d ask each other for each other's shit. No, you couldn’t get one poncho liner, ask people about poncho liners. Shit, they were prized possessions, but they weren’t readily available, like gold. That’s about what it went with everything. Yeah, very hard to get stuff and you’d come back with you clothes, it wasn’t like, after a forty-four, forty-five day op take to do my laundry. You didn’t come in and get them washed. You just took them off and put them in the burn barrel. I mean they had been pissed in or shit in accidentally, X amount of times, but forty-five days of sweating and everything else, you just burned them. But it wasn’t always easy getting new ones. You got somebody else’s used ones that weren’t as in bad shape. But yeah, it was always hard getting stuff, afterwards.
SM: Were there any exceptions to that, maybe ammunition?
BM: Were there any exceptions?
SM: Yeah, to the difficulty in getting supplies. Was at least ammunition pretty easy to come by, or would you have shortages of that too?
BM: Well, yeah and again in my position, I never remembered any, but a big man, you know an M-60 guy might say something different. I don’t think there typically was—when you were going out, it was just a matter of take as much as you could. Some guys weren’t too smart about that, just like take a lot of water, maybe some didn’t take as much as they should. I think more the problem happened once you got out there, then there were definite problems with being re-supplied, but that was only because of weather and other things. It’s really no one’s fault, it was just—I mean once we went socked in on 8-4-8 in January. That was a battalion op. We were out there with a couple of our grunt companies. They were getting hit on the left side of the hill that day. It was monsoon, and nasty. We went without food and water for four days, no Medevac, no supplies. They kept trying some air drops, but they weren’t getting them close enough, you know visibility. The ceiling was like a couple hundred feet. Visibility was like the same. I guess the enemy would find the air drops before our guys. So you know things like that happened. So we tried to drink the rain water that fell. We chewed on Styrofoam out of the battery, took them apart, the dead ones, short circuited the wires so they’d heat up and burn out. While they were heating up you’d take off your boots and put your feet on them to warm them up. Then you’d sprinkle some salt on the Styrofoam and chew it and pretend you were eating food, just making the best of it.

SM: Did you carry a lot of those purification tablets for water and stuff? Did you use those?

BM: Yeah. I don’t remember a lot of them. I carried some and I think more times I never fished any out of a stream, wouldn’t dare drink it straight. But I was more the one that subscribed to just taking a lot of water and then any chance I could get when it was Monsoon, rain trickling down a tarp or built some little thing where you could get it to drip. If you knew were going to be set in there for a while, stick a canteen under it. I made pretty good use of that. It seemed like there was—rain wasn’t ever far around the corner, even when it wasn’t monsoon we got those torrential downpours. But, yeah we carried the tablets.

SM: But you’d load up before you’d go out?

BM: Oh, definitely. You’d hear some people saying, we put three or four, shit. It was more like eight canteens. Water was very valuable. It was like gold too.
SM: Would you eat much that wasn’t C-rations? That is like, for instance, did you get an opportunity to eat anywhere, Vietnamese food, that kind of stuff versus C-rations or just mess hall food?

BM: No. Once or twice we got some of the Army’s long range patrol rations that like freeze dried stuff.

SM: Yeah. The LRP (long range patrol) rations, yeah.

BM: Yeah. They were great. We only got those on one op, one night because we snuck down. We were out there, Army was near us. We stole them from them. Our officers helped you know deter, detour, the Army guys that were chasing us. Other than that it was everything out of a can. Never remembered eating any—oh rice a few times, mama-san and papa-san in the vill, but other than that care package stuff. We all got care packages. So every tight group, like I had really five tight buddies over there. Whenever any of us got care packages we all shared. We all got it. Between my mom and grandmother, a few friends, I certainly got my share of them. That kept of us in some good edibles. Other than that, in the rear area, we got some hot meals there, not always out of Ross, but Baldy had a mess hall you could go to.

SM: You mentioned during this brief discussion about your promotion, the guys smoking pot. Was that very common?

BM: Yes, it was. We actually, my group of good buddies and I too, when we had vill security, when we’d be back in the rear out of the bush, or one of us, or two of us, whatever, there’d be a Com platoon dump in Moc Bai, billets or hamlets. Well, in that kind of position we made friends with the villagers. For a while my buddies and I were really controlling most of the pot for all of three-seven. So we all, radio operators, a lot of different people, were getting high, but again it was something that just happened in the rear area. There were some pretty funny instances with all that. Where I was, Ross, I think a few times we had a couple of warm beers. Baldy, I think had some kind of little E club, where you could probably get a couple of beers there, but not always cold. It wasn’t the drug of choice I guess. I think at the time we associated it with the officers, the quote “lifers.” Radio operators knew how stupid people got when they got drunk. Where you got stoned, that wasn’t always the case. You woke up without a hangover.
So that was our drug of choice, but when I was there with the Marines we only partook back in the rear area, Ross or Baldy. We never messed around with it in the bush.

SM: Were there any attempts to curb that activity, by the commanders and officers of the unit, and the senior NCOs?

BM: Yeah, but I don’t remember anything real, real serious. I remember once we all joked, we were back at Ross. I was probably in the COC (command operations center) on radio ops. Donny came and got me, and said, “Hey, Staff Sergeant so and so has found one of our caches, burning a bunch of pot,” ran up near the com hooch. The lieutenant’s out there. He’s got a bunch of pot mounded up and he’s burning it all. Of course everyone stood around and breathed deeply, laughed about it. He kind of rrr, you know. I don’t—there weren’t like inspections in the rear that I remember. There was a sergeant major though, who after leave he didn’t like I and my friends. He knew we smoked pot. He was kind of after me for a while that we were there together. He was going to put me in the red line brig in Da Nang, and I was never going home. Well, thing was we never harmed anybody. We did our jobs. We did them well, everybody I know. We never fooled with it in the bush. It wasn’t much different than some of them, this particular E-5 can wire, who used to get drunk every night. So that was much more of a threat to be released if we got hit, not the case when we were smoking. Yeah, I don’t remember any. I’d say there was a lot of sort of looking the other way, but it was because I think two things, you hear and it was probably true, reports of heroin and lots of other things going on with units where it wasn’t that way, but the Marine Corps always seemed to—I don’t know—at least the people I was with, few troublemakers, few racial problems, but everybody did their God damn job and followed orders. So they didn’t harass us. It was just our way of winding down when we got back to the rear, as opposed to having some drinks. But we always, and the other thing, I remember pot and then Obesatol, from the French word obesity, with the French’s presence there that’s something that had remained like many other things. It was like a weight loss drink, like they drink Slim whatever it is now. It was a liquid. I don’t know what it was. We called it liquid speed. We’d drink that, not so much to get any rush from speeding because we were hoping we’d have enough adrenaline rush with the shipment hit the sand. It was more to stay awake on hull watch out in the perimeter, radio watch at three in the
morning. But it was no heroin. People talked about all this heroin. I never saw any. There was none in our area. I think all that was with the Army later on down south. Rubber was down south, that’s the Army, but there wasn’t any of that in I Corps when we were there.

SM: Do you know what the active ingredients of that drink were?
BM: Obesatol?
SM: Yeah.
BM: No, I don’t. I can’t even remember the bottle or anything, but we used to mix it with water and put it in our canteens when we had a lot of late night hull watch.
SM: It would keep you awake all night?
BM: Yeah. You can actually get speeding on it.
SM: You could get what?
BM: You could get speeding pretty good, and you were wound up.
SM: So you could get amphetamines if you wanted them, in addition to the drink?
BM: I don’t know if I ever saw any pills, but this would be like some liquid amphetamines. I have no idea what was in it.
SM: Were you ever issued anything to help keep you awake over a long period of time?
BM: No. No.
SM: By a medic or anybody?
BM: No. No. That’s why, like I say, we used to resort to that. Most people were hip to that, that’d keep your, the old motor running so to speak.
SM: Well, what would you estimate was the largest enemy unit you guys came into contact with while you were there, you know, a guesstimate?
BM: Well, I know, actually engaged, or within a click or two and trying to find and then outrunning us and stuff like that?
SM: A combination, whatever.
BM: Yeah. Well, definitely battalions, NVA or sapper, but I’m not sure who we would have ever been engaged, like a regiment size or not. I’m trying to think, once we were looking for one, and their underground hospital on 951, we got there and they had
already headed out. So they were doing a lot of escape and evade from us. I would say battalion.

SM: What were the heaviest losses your unit suffered while you were there?

BM: Like on one?

SM: Yeah, one operation perhaps.

BM: Well, I remember when Otto was out—oh, shit, let’s see Lima. I think they lost thirteen that day. I would say it was known that those kind of numbers or less. Some may be big, well normal, over the years, not with some that happened like Ia Drang, and Hue and so on, Dong Xoai or whatever. Still there were some good ones where they lost a lot, Army, Marines, whatever. When we were there, I wouldn’t say—there were no big major ones, at least that I was involved in. Well, I just missed Oklahoma, Tony was there for that, I think it was Oklahoma Hill(?) operation. They could have lost more there. I’m thinking even when Ross got overrun by one-seven and we were two clicks away in the bush, I think they had thirteen Marines killed that night, thirty wounded maybe, but a lot more sappers killed. But I’d say its those kind of numbers, but the norm probably, firefights, skirmish happens, then it’d be over. A couple guys wounded, a couple guys dead, three, four, five, maybe one dead, ten wounded, bobby traps especially. Those kind of things might injure, five or ten. That’s what happened to Donny, about seven of them were blown up. I don’t know how many of them survived.

SM: How about enemy snipers? Were they very prevalent?

BM: No. I just don’t remember us losing Marines to a bullet in the head. Everybody said that they were certainly out there, but I don’t remember a prevalence there, not to a degree that you heard of them. Well, it definitely happened, and I know and I remember writing about times when somebody would plink away at us every once in a while. So there was one person, yeah. In essence that was a sniper, just like we joked about handling Charlie. He used to come down every couple of months from Hanoi, that was our story, with a 122 millimeter rocket on his back. He’d get a couple clicks outside of Ross, then he’d move in closer and he’d fire that sucker at them. It was a standing joke that every two months, this guy, U.S. Vietnamese guy, Viet Cong would hunk down and fire this thing. He’d usually miss. He’d go back to Hanoi and get
another one. It was like a standing joke, but they were out there, these singleton guys, hang out and try to harass us.

SM: I’m sorry. I meant to ask one last question about the drug issue. Did you guys ever get subject to urinalysis?

BM: No.

SM: Oh, okay. How about when you left country?

BM: Not that I remember. Some guys I’m talking to say they did. I don’t—

SM: You don’t remember that then?

BM: I don’t even know if they had tests then. The only thing I remember is they had an amnesty box. You could throw in any contraband that you had, and that could be pot, enemy weapon or something that you weren’t supposed to have, whatever was on their list. That was like no questions asked, last chance, drop it in this box. Well, none of us—there was no point, but it was obviously pretty stupid to try to leave there—well, we would have loved to have left with some of that pot from over there, a lot of that Thai weed we got. It was so cheap and so good, but nobody I knew thought twice about trying to sneak any out. I did send some home a few times, kind of hidden in a cassette tape box, off to my favorites(?), but that was just a few joints.

SM: Okay. Good enough. This will end the interview with Brian McKinsey on the ninth of May.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Brian McKinsey on the thirteenth of May 2002 at approximately 11:10 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. McKinsey is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up this morning’s interview by finishing a discussion about your Vietnam experience? If you would describe those last couple of weeks for you in-country. What was the operational tempo like? What did you do? How did it feel as you got closer and closer to your departure date?

BM: The last couple of weeks, if I remember I was out in the bush on operations. About two weeks before I was to rotate, it could have been as much as three weeks, but I was sent to my rear area, which was LZ Ross, or they said, you can go in now. You want it because you’re two or three weeks away from rotating. It was always assumed that it would be a little safer in the rear area. So, I went back to rear area, didn’t mean you laid around. There were always new people to train, and get other people squared away that had been there, but would be staying there. Of course I still stood radio watch at the COC. I do remember though, I finally started my short-timer calendar. I wasn’t one of those guys that had one the whole time in Vietnam, even though I did keep track of it when I wrote home on my letters. I always had X amount of days left, or roughly how many months at least. So I sort of kept it in my head, but I actually made one in that last few weeks, and X’d off each day as it passed. Each day I remember I got more and more nervous about being killed or wounded, whatever, in my last few weeks. There was a lot of, well, it was common with a lot of us to look up and say Lord or whoever’s up there, if anybody is in control, don’t have me die now. Don’t have me get injured now after I spent a whole full year here. If you’re going to do that, I’m going to be real upset with you because you’re going to have me killed. You could have had it done in the first couple of weeks I got to Vietnam so I wouldn’t have to go through all that crap. Then we’d laugh, but that was sort of standard. But deep inside you got very nervous for that, for not only that reason, but I really started feeling a lot of guilt. I felt fear about going home, how would I act, what would it be like, how would I react to people, to the world,
all the—it’s just a whole different culture when I went home. Here I did a year in
Vietnam, and ____ (?) in a lot of ways, sort of like an animal living in a combat zone.
It was pretty frightening, the thought about going home. It was excitement on the other
hand, couldn’t wait to get home to my parents and friends. There was a lot of feeling of
okay, I’ll get through this. It’s been hell here for a year. When I get home I’m going to
kind of live like a king. I deserve it. I’m going to get my own apartment again, and date
women and party, visions of year old car, and so on and so forth. Maybe going back to
college and how great life is really going to be. Then again with that, you bounce back
and forth. I had a lot of strong feelings about a couple of my very good friends, a few of
them had already rotated, but a few of my other good buddies, well one was going the
same day as me, and actually left the day before me as it turns out. But one of my best
buddies was still going to have a few months to go. I was particularly worried about him.
You just felt a lot of guilt about leaving guys behind, and like you didn’t finish the job.
By the end we knew, even though we were still running our operations, we weren’t
laying low, biding time, even though 7th Marines were supposed to get pulled out a few
months later, and as a unit, go back to America. Nonetheless, the 7th Marines was out
there, running patrols as normal, as usual. We all felt then that we knew it was going to
wind down. America would eventually pull the plug. So we thought that we didn’t finish
the job and afraid about leaving them caught in a (inaudible). When I got down to
Iceland, I got to look back at my letters. It was within ten, fourteen days left. I got so
nervous about all these thoughts bothering me, being in the rear and thinking about them,
that I volunteered. In ____ (?) we had a battalion sized, a battalion of NVA outside,
within a click, click and a half, of LZ Ross compound. I don’t know where our grunt
company was. They obviously were out in the bush. We’re going to get up a little
interdiction towards here, go out, see if they’re really there, see if we can find them,
initiate contact, and we’ll call in the help. But at any rate, I don’t remember how many
they put together, but they asked for volunteers. I in no way had to go cause I was so
short, but I volunteered to go out on this patrol. I imagine it was a couple of platoons. Of
course I was radio operating, but that’s just how nervous I was that I wanted to get out
and be doing something. So I volunteered. The other thing I remember is of course we
had howitzer battery at Ross to give supporting fire. It was a fire support base. We had
not only one pods, one seven pods, but we had eight inchers there. When they would
leave, get sent out to Mr. Charles, that whole world still abroad, just shook the whole
ground, everything. It was an incredible sound when those eight inchers went out, but
even though we knew they were outbound, in the middle of the night, when they had the
fire a mission, they'd start pumping those out. I mean I would just fly a foot off the
ground. So it was just a lot of varying emotions, excitement on one hand, a lot of fear
and apprehension on the other about going home, a lot of guilt, leaving good friends.
That's pretty much my last few weeks. As it turned out, you could chopper to Da Nang,
or pick up a convoy. I had done enough mine sweeps as a radio operator with the
engineers, and so on, on that road from Ross to Baldy, and then Baldy into Da Nang, that
I didn't want to be in a convoy. The roads were all booby-trapped. A lot of them
command detonated. I saw myself getting sniped at, and ambushed on the convoy. I
said, “Boy, I’ll take my chances in the chopper.” A lot of guys were different. I knew
some people that had gone down in two or three choppers and survived it and they were
obviously just the opposite. They would do everything they could to stay out of a
chopper. They didn’t want to press their luck. I’ve been in a lot of overheads that
dropped down in one. So I said I’ll fly in. I flew to Da Nang—I said good-bye to those
who were around on Ross, if I remember Donny was out in the bush, my best buddy was
on an op. I didn’t even get to give him like a personal good-bye—went to Da Nang, and
I would have been gone in twenty-four hours to Okinawa, but Okinawa was having a
typhoon. I had to say in Da Nang like an extra twenty-four hours, a couple of nights
there. I just didn’t know anybody, don’t remember much, except my wallet got stolen.
Other than that, I finally got on a plane and headed for Okinawa.

SM: Did you feel you had adequate time to train your replacement?

BM: Yeah. I’ll tell you it wasn’t so much, there was an actual replacement for
me per se, one guy. It was more helping newer guys who had just been there. I think
most of them were pretty squared away with the radio operators that were out in the bush
and had been there a while. They were doing a good job. I’m sure I probably had to
square away some records, but I think our staff sergeant Legg, of communications, he
was like what you call a two-eight, he was still in-country when I left. So there were still
a lot of people there who were at my level and knew everything about radio and com and things.


BM: Right. August 17th, I think it was, 1970.

SM: When you finally did get on an aircraft, from Okinawa to the U.S., what was that like, knowing you were on your way back to the United States?

BM: Well, first of all, from Vietnam to Okinawa, it was a short ride. That again, I remember a plane full of guys, at least a couple hundred, all mint Army greens(?), whatever. I wasn’t rotating. I mean I didn’t know—I wasn’t with anybody I knew from my unit. Even though we all talked about getting on our freedom bird, going back to the world, a lot of these people sighed, I think were feeling the same emotions as I described. But you’d think it would have relaxed and once we got on that plane there would have been loud cheers and jeers and screaming and laughing, we made it, we’re going home, et cetera. All I remember on the flight to Okinawa and then again on the flight a couple of days later from Okinawa to El Toro Air Station in California was 250 guys for the most part sitting alone with their thoughts. I don’t remember hardly any noise. There were people talking, but it was all very low key. I think it was just—it was so traumatic. Again, the other wards, they went home with their units and the guys they knew. Yeah. I can guarantee it would have been different if I had been going home with all my radio operator buddies, and other people, but there we all were singletons, on a plane. A lot of people didn’t know each other, I’m sure some did, a few, but for the most part you didn’t know anybody. So you internalized it all. I mean, that’s really when the internalization process began for me. I think a lot of people, because I remember sitting on that plane, gosh you all must have been drinking, hoopin and hollerin’, cavorting with the stewardesses, but I don’t remember any of that, it was like being in sort of shock.

SM: What was it like when you did arrive to the U.S.? Where did you come into country, and what was the reception like there?

BM: Well, I left Okinawa. What I can remember is we landed at El Toro Air Station, all of us. Well, it was supposed to have, when we went to Vietnam and stopped in Okinawa, we stored our sea bag, which had a lot of that original issue winter, summer uniforms, long overcoat, gas mask, things like that. But you walked around in your dress
shoes, et cetera, dress hats and everything. Everybody was supposed to pick that up again, and that would be or we could bring home. Somehow I got out of Vietnam with a poncho liner and my jungle boots, which we weren’t even supposed to do that then I guess. Well, I guess we were wearing our jungle boots, we had to. But I had this brainy idea, I knew I’d get back, get out soon, I was done with it all. I was tired of humping that sea bag around to every duty station before I went to Vietnam. So I had this bright idea that I’d just wouldn’t get my stuff in Okinawa and I’d go home with my little itty bag, not hump that big old heavy bag full of Marine Corps gear. So I thought I’ll just leave it, I won’t even pick it up, but I’ll find a way to get around it when I get to the States, but I’ll basically blame the military for losing my gear. So I just left it all. When I arrived at El Toro, I had just my little bitty bag, clothes on my back. I remember, I guess since I was an E-5—well we were all just in a line. I don’t remember seeing civilians or anything. We were on a base, but we were all just in this typical kind of line, waiting. They would process our paperwork. They told us within a matter of hours, we would be free to leave El Toro and take a cab to LAX airport and fly on to wherever we were going. For most of us it was home. I think they did process us in two to three hours. I was going to say because I was an E-5, I guess, I got forty-five-day leave. I think most got thirty. I’m not sure why or what, but that seems to be the reason. I got forty-five day leave. So within about three hours I was processed and leaving El Toro to go to LAX airport.

SM: Were you in uniform when you went to LAX?

BM: Yes.

SM: What was it like there, at the—?

BM: I don’t remember anything. I don’t remember any—nobody would have known form the few pictures there were of when I landed in Chicago, I guess I was wearing my summer tans, just a shirt, had sergeant stripes. I probably took them out of the sea bag and left everything else. So I guess I did have may—had to have my tan pants, my shirt, dress shoes, and probably a little pea-colored hat. I believe I already had sergeant stripes sewn on the shirt. Of course we hadn’t been awarded our medals or ribbons I don’t think yet. I don’t remember anything at LAX. I just went there. Back then it was of course, military standby. I was going back home to Chicago. So that's a route that there’s still lots of flights, between the airlines there’s probably one every hour.
So all I remember is getting booked on a flight pretty quickly and flying home. One memorable thing I remember was the cab from El Toro Air Station to LAX. I got in with a few other guys, split the ride. One of the gentlemen was an officer in the Marine Corps, I think he was a lieutenant colonel, colonel. Here it was, I remember it was early morning, well mid-morning, but he pulled out a little flask and a little pint bottle of whiskey. By then you’re starting to get excited and happier. We were talking and I just remember he was a pretty good dude. He was passing the little bottle around, the flask to all of us. We were just chatting. I don’t even remember where he was going, but we were all flying home. That’s about all I remember.

SM: Okay. How much longer did you have in the Marine Corps?

BM: Let’s see. That was August. I had till, I didn’t get an early out, they were cutting certain MOS’s, and there was still a lot of rumors going around as to which ones they were cutting. So I didn’t get immediately discharged at El Toro. I got orders to report to LeJeune. I figured at that latest it would have been April twenty-second. That would have been my three year enlistment.

SM: Did you stay in until April?

BM: No, actually. I was of course dying to get out. I got to Lejeune and they had nothing for me to do, like a lot of us sergeant that had been to ‘Nam, and a lot of us didn’t want to play war games any more. We’d done it for real. We worked—I guess if they had had us in meaningful positions, training people et cetera, but with the Marines pulling out of ‘Nam, it was like you guys got to stay in. I don’t remember. There was no jobs for us, nothing important to do. We walked around base all day, and fooled around, made formations. I remember some schools I think I went to, but actually didn’t do a lot. So I was anxious to get out and I finally did. I applied for an early out to go back to college. Those were ninety day maximums, which backed me up to the beginning of February. That’s when the second semester was just beginning at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. So I did get out. I think I was discharged February second.

SM: Now, during your time on leave, when you first arrived in Chicago, about how much time had transpired from the time you left Vietnam until the time you arrived at home? How many days?
BM: From the time I left Vietnam to the time I got home would have been about three to four days. It would have been about five or six days, seven days, that I actually left Ross in the bush.

SM: What was it like arriving home so quickly?

BM: Well, again all those feelings that I mentioned earlier right, the last few weeks before leaving Vietnam, those of course are kind of reaching a crescendo. You have thoughts about the Vietnamese people, which I still cared a lot about. You could tell by my last letter home. I didn’t want to leave them. I felt for them, help for my buddies, yet I was super excited to get home. I came home. My parents picked me up at the airport. I guess I had a big smile. We got back to the house in the suburbs. Both my brothers were there, their wives and actually a few girls that I had dated in the past, like a couple sort of ex old girlfriends. My parents had a big banner across the front of the house.

SM: Do you want to take a minute?

BM: Please.

BM: I guess I went through the motions. We partied that night. We weren’t at my parent’s house, but off a few hours where my brother lived with his buddies which I knew, over in the old hidden counts we called it. So we, it’s been real mom and dad, but we’re going to go party now. So we went to my brother’s, a lot of people over there, a lot of drinking, smoking dope. I did stay at my parent’s house that forty-five day leave. I was probably out a few nights at my brothers, sleeping with a date somewhere, but for the most part I stayed with them. The amazing thing about that leave was, I remember very vividly, was for the whole forty-five days, nobody asked me about Vietnam. Mom and Dad were told not to, and didn’t want to bring things up. Let’s just celebrate he made it home alive. My buddies hardly missed me. It was like, “Oh, you were in Vietnam. Okay, fine. Well, hey, there’s a party tonight.” It seemed like nobody cared. I would get up every morning at eight o’clock, so I could be dressed. I didn’t own a car. My mom had one. She worked. My dad worked. I would get up every morning to drive my mom to work over at Marshall Field’s Company at the mall, drop her off, like nine in the morning so I could have her car all day. Then I’d be back to pick her up at like, five, five-thirty. Most of my buddies who went off in college then, it was towards the end of
summer so some were in town. A lot of them were working, busy in the day. So I didn't see any of them in the day, I was pretty much to myself. I would drive my mom’s car all around the north shore area there, down to the lake, listening to music and crying. I did that for forty-five days. Every day I’d go around and cry. I’m not sure why. I didn’t even think about it. I guess I knew why, it was just pain and emotion, this trauma that was incredible again. Again all those things I mentioned from one end to the other. I’d get my mom, and my buddies would start calling. Every night there was a party somewhere. So I would get drunk and it was just like Mac had never left. None of my buddies had gone over. So they didn’t know anything about it, couldn’t talk to them about it. They never asked, didn’t seem to care. So I just went along and partied with them every night and got drunk and stoned. That was really my forty-five-day leave before I went back to Camp Lejeune.

SM: Did you have much contact as far as letters or anything like that from other guys from your unit back in Vietnam?

BM: No. I don’t remember any. That’s just one of the strange things years later. I’ve even felt guilt about that because I was so close to some of them. Harash came home when I did. So he was up in Wisconsin. Donny, my best buddy, was still over there. It would only be four weeks later that he’d get badly blown up and I’d find out about it, but there weren’t those letters yet. I felt so much guilt when I had to leave them I was so close to them. I think after I got home though, it was like, well this is your world now. If you keep in touch with your buddies, by writing them or whatever, it’s just going to increase the pain. I guess I kept saying that you’ve got to rehabilitate. You’ve got to get back into this world now, this society. You’ve got to put it behind you, nobody cares anyway. Strange enough, if that’s what happened, but I know if I would have gotten letters, I would have returned them. I don’t think I got any, and I don’t think I wrote any, even though that sounds very odd and very strange. Don’t second guess what it was, it was all part of the way to try to forget it all. Over the years that’s why I kept it all in the box for thirty years and never even hung around with any veterans, or had anything to do with it. I was in complete denial. It was because that was the only way I could try to get over my past. I didn’t want to be around some of the veterans and talk to
them or have anything to do with the war because it would just bring it all up. It really, it all started then.

SM: What were your plans when you got out of the Marine Corps?
BM: None. I just go back to school and try to live it up, make up for lost time, long hair, love and peace thing, still going in ’71. So I just wanted to go back to school and grow my hair long, for the fact that I could. I almost bought a wig. I really did. There were so many people hoping to call you, you know a pig or something, when they knew you were in and had the short hair. Fortunately when I got to UNM (University of New Mexico), I had buddies from back home that hadn’t been in, but buddies from the Chicago area that I was close with. They were all going to school here. So, I kind of fell in with this group. It didn’t take many months for my hair to grow, just making this big transformation. It was like losing your identity or getting rid of your old identity and putting on this new one, sort of bizarre and something that doesn’t make sense to me now.

SM: Where did you go to school?
BM: University of New Mexico.

SM: What was the atmosphere like there as the war was winding down?
BM: A lot of student protests. I was—I still feel that’s why certain people join and fight wars indirectly, I mean the big picture of it. We love the freedoms we get here. We’re protecting that, allowing those people, whoever they may be to protest in the streets. None of that bothered me, just fall in though with a few Vietnam veterans on-campus was in my classes that I kind of liked. I didn’t know them over there. We did join Vietnam veterans against the war. Actually I say I joined. I sort of hung with them, I don’t think I ever officially paid any money or filled out a form, but I ran with them for a little while, a few months that spring semester and was with them when we tired to shut down Sandia Army base.

SM: When you tried to shut down what?
BM: Sandia Army base in Albuquerque. Well, we didn’t try to shut it down. We just were protesting against the war. A lot of us lying in the streets in front of the gates. They gave us space. I never really felt that was me. I guess at that point I was sort of latching on, striking out, grasping anything I could. Life gave me a purpose to live, but I
was more of probably just a follower and not the—I was keeping pretty low key really about being a Marine, and being in Vietnam. I’d meet girls. That would never come up. That would be the last thing. If anything I’d deny it. I had this other side of me that hung with the new guys, the vets against the war stuff, but then I remember they getting a little radical. One of them was talking about breaking into an armory and getting some weapons and blowing up stuff. I basically said I’m out of here. I don’t want to be a part, that wasn’t on my mind. So, that’s pretty much the way the spring semester went, got okay grades, partied a lot, just tried to get back into the—get going life and forget my past.

SM: Did you graduate?

BM: No. I only—I went off to Europe that summer for a month and a half, came back, started the second semester in the fall in ’71. I think I lasted a couple of months, decided I’d move up to Breckinridge, be a ski bum. I had friends up there. So yeah, I went up there. Then for ten years, I was in and out of colleges. I didn’t finally get my degree until 1978.

SM: What was that in?

BM: Actually, I got it from Brooks Institute of Photographic Arts and Sciences. It was a Bachelor of Arts, motion picture productions, still photography.

SM: As you were going through these college experiences and I guess—well, until 19—say 1975, April of ‘75, did you keep up with what was happening in Vietnam, up until the fall in April of ’75?

BM: No, not like maybe what I’d catch on TV or something, but I didn’t make any concerted effort. At least I don’t remember any feelings one way or another when troops came home. I guess at the time I didn’t feel that badly about leaving, us pulling the plug, not like I have more recently here. So I was thinking more of our people over there. So I was like let’s get the home. It’s the same one way or another and move on.

SM: What about when Saigon fell in April of ’75? Do you remember hearing about that and having any particular thoughts?

BM: Yeah. Obviously I knew about it. I knew some of my thoughts then were, well, feeling for the Vietnamese people, they knowing and we knowing that the Communist would roll over them, a lot of them would be killed, murdered. Knowing
that, well I just felt they always got the short end of the stick. We went in there for ten years, and helped them in some ways, caused a lot of them to die, in other ways. Then we just said adios and left. I still felt some anger about that. I felt bad that they'd made it look like we were getting out of there with the clothes on our back. It was sort of embarrassing or something. I didn’t see the pride there, yet I did want stuff to get our people home. The hardest time I had was, as far as the war ending and so on, was right after I got back from Vietnam and found out that my buddy got hurt. That was the most impact on me. After that I think up until the fall of Saigon, I just kept an eye on it.

SM: What did you think about the memorial when it was first built in the early 1980s?

BM: I’ve never felt anything but good about public art and memorials, at least when we’re not fighting over the correctness of them, with regard to ethnicity, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera and politics. Some lady designed it. I thought it was great. I saw pride and with pride it was done. Public art, like that and memorials are making a statement. I felt like it was thanking us. A lot of it still hadn’t been thanked by anybody yet. I thought that was a little bit of validation, a little bit of recognition for what all of us who served had done, and some honor of course paid particularly to the fifty-eight thousand and some whose names are on the wall. So, I thought it was great. At time I thought it should’ve—why’d it take so long, but I thought it was a great thing.

SM: Now did your attitude about your service in Vietnam change over time, especially say from when you first got back to maybe when the wall was put up to, more recently, perhaps with veterans’ reunions and things like that you’ve attended? Have you found that your attitude and your feelings about your service have changed at all?

BM: Yeah, definitely. They’ve done nothing less than a 180 degree turn, but it took thirty some years to do that, even though I had those feelings as I said about the wall when that happened. I followed other things and I remember feeling very patriotic on the Gulf War, early 90’s. That was on TV, and was one of those sort of like, “Yeah, come on guys. Get in there. Be careful and kick some butt.” That was all—but still during that time and up until a year and a half ago, I was still really—those were I don’t know all those feelings personal. I don’t like sharing them with my wife or talking really to anybody about it because I was still in denial that I was ever in the Marine Corps in
Vietnam. I didn’t really feel the need to pry again for it at all, war for the country(?).
That really didn’t start till about (inaudible).

SM: Okay. In what ways do you think the war has affected you most on a personal level, and your experiences in Vietnam?
BM: On a personal level?
SM: Mm-hmm.
BM: That’s not something I can think of. I can say that, how specific I can get, but as I look back now, I may have not been able to do this ten years ago or realized it.
But as I look back now I see the shaping force that it had on my whole life. It gets a lot of people, wouldn’t be surprised by that, you’re in the Marine Corps almost three years, in Vietnam a year of it. It made a strong impact and helped shape the kind of person I am. Some of the ways I am go back to before that. That certainly was instilled in me by my parents and my upbringing, but there was still some molding and shaping to be done when I was only twenty years old. I came from being in the military—personally, I get these great highs and great lows now. There’s guilt and feelings which I still battle with every day, not having any real means or purpose in life. Every thing has been downhill since I was twenty-one. I’ve had what people would say are some good jobs again. I’ve set goals. I’ve achieved them. I’ve done some things that some people say are pretty incredible and admirable yet to me they’re just jobs. Maybe they look good because of the title, the money I made for it, whatever. To me now they were all very hollow accomplishments. As I say I had the most important job I guess as it turns out that I would ever have in life. Well, my life’s not over so I may have some more when I deem very important means. So far, the most back then when I was a radio operator in Vietnam, keeping people alive, keeping myself alive. I guess if I’d been better than that have maybe, I’d grown up and gone to school and become a doctor I wouldn’t feel this way. Probably being a doctor one feels pretty good if you’re saving lives and helping people. Soon you’re just doing jobs, working the in the film industry, and advertising and marketing, creating things that will help sell products, shove it down people’s throat. There’s just not much humanitarian involvement there I guess. I miss that. I mean I see a pattern, feeling like there’s some important purpose in my life. (Inaudible) They had a lot of problems with the PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). I’d guess you’d say that
probably I fit eighty percent of the symptoms. I’ve had them like a lot of others. I would address certain ones of those, but you’re just trying to get an overview of the first one, you know the good side go(?). The personal side as I realized I saw people at their best. I saw people at their worst. I have so much respect and pride and not so much for loving to the country and certainly not for our government at all, had a lot of disdain for them, but the people I was with at the end. I have a lot of respect for them and pride again not for the war, but for the people I was with. I’d go anywhere with them.

SM: What fueled your disdain for government, for the American government?

BM: The lies that led to this, the war being lengthened, the way the war was fought from Washington. The military had to fight it with the hand tied behind their back, can’t bomb here, can’t bomb there, can’t go into Laos. A lot of I guess political decisions that seemed to come out of Washington I didn’t agree with. There were just lots of lies. Towards the end, of course, the (inaudible), Mr. Kissinger, Schlesinger, McNamara’s pulling the plug, leaving the Laotians, the Hmong, leaving the Vietnamese people, the Cambodian people. It’s terrible. It’s embarrassing that our country didn’t—so, I have a lot of anger and hostility towards this.

SM: Based on those comments is that what you would see as some of the major lessons we should learn from the war?

BM: Good question. The only lesson I can see from war is to quit fighting them, but I don’t think that’s ever going to happen. But I have always felt that I really, real not getting in to deep was apparent lesson I see from that war, we’d be a little more honorable of a country. If we were going to help some people, keep communism from entering their country, even helping little countries from stopping the Iraqis coming in and taking over, whoever it is, whatever it is. If you’re going to help them, stick to your promises and then you go in all out. Most of us felt probably, it was a very piecemeal war in Vietnam, give a little here. Well, let’s commit a few more troops. Let’s commit a few more. Let’s do this, let’s do that. If we engage in these conflicts I think it should be all out, more like what a lot of us saw in the Persian Gulf War, went in there, military pretty much ran it, says we’re going to be a big (inaudible), and did it.

SM: Okay. Well, is there anything else you’d like to talk about today?
BM: No. I can’t really—well, I think (inaudible). If you have any more questions I’m glad to talk or I can—I don’t know what all the, is there more of interest, relevant to the war in the way I feel? Yeah, but we could go on forever, but no, unless you have any questions.

SM: No. I had exhausted pretty much most of my questions. I wanted to let you have any last, if you had any other comments or anything.

BM: I suppose, I’d maybe just say that now that I’ve done this a hundred eighty degrees, I would want people to know, be it age, wisdom, who knows, that why at fifty-four years of my life do I now have Marine Corps stickers on my vehicle, why does all my clothing have Vietnam and Marine Corps, and why am I engulfed in projects from the war and reading. For all those years I felt like I’d turned my back on the veterans. ‘Cause I wasn’t admitting I was one of them. Two years ago when I opened up a box my mom sent me, read all thirty-seven letters I had written home. It just—something happened and the big process started purging, just (??) he’d ever sent, and the best thing to come of it is knowledge. I’m learning about myself. I’m learning a lot of reasons why, and I’m also, the other great thing is, I’m feeling a lot of pride again for the people that saw (inaudible). Deep inside I may still not like politicians, but I have a lot of the same goals—I’ve always had pride for our country. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I know our country is just a lot of good people. I have a lot of pride, especially those in the Marine Corps and those of us that were in Vietnam. Now, strangely enough, I don’t go out and tell everybody, “Hey, guess what? I was in Vietnam thirty-two years ago.” No I don’t but if anybody asks, anybody wants to know, you bet I tell them. I won’t lie about it any more. I’m real proud to be a Vietnam veteran.

SM: Yes, sir. All right. Well, that's probably a good note to end the interview on. Let me put an official ending on to this real quick, and then I’ll talk to you after I finish. Thank you, Mr. McKinsey this will end the interview on the thirteenth of May.