Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Alan VanDan. Mr. VanDan is located—you are in Indiana sir, is that correct?

Alan VanDan: Yes.

RV: Okay. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the interview room in the Special Collections Library at Texas Tech University. Sir if you would, give us a little bit of biographical information on yourself. Where were you born and when were you born?

AV: I was born in Valparaiso, Indiana, and July 8, 1947.

RV: Did you grow up there in Valparaiso?

AV: Yeah, just south.

RV: How would you describe your childhood? Would you say you had an ordinary childhood?

AV: Yeah.

RV: Did you attend high school?

AV: Yes. I graduated too.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school? What did you enjoy studying or did you enjoy studying?

AV: I don’t know. I enjoyed math more.

RV: Oh, really? Okay. Did you participate in sports in high school?

AV: No. I’m going to say no.

RV: What years were this when you were in high school? This would be when?

AV: I didn’t graduate until 1967.

RV: 1967. I’m sorry?
AV: No, I was talking to my wife.

RV: This is 1967. So the United States at this point is fully involved in the Vietnam War. What did you know about the war at this point in your life?

AV: Oh, when I graduated?

RV: Yes, sir.

AV: I didn’t know too much.

RV: Or through high school? Did you guys keep up with what was happening overseas?

AV: Somewhat, but I never thought it was like it was.

RV: What did you think it was at that point?

AV: Just mostly a guard thing you know.

RV: Guarding South Vietnam?

AV: Right.

RV: Against what?

AV: Against communism coming in.

RV: When you graduated high school in 1967, did you enlist or did you volunteer?

AV: I volunteered for draft.

RV: You volunteered for draft. Why did you volunteer to be drafted?

AV: I was working midnights and there wasn’t much going on and I wanted to buy a car. I said, “Well, I’ll buy a car and I’ll get drafted.” So, I might as well just volunteer.

RV: So you expected to be drafted?

AV: Right, most definitely.

RV: How did you know that? The word was going around?

AV: Just because everybody was going.

RV: So some of your classmates were also going to be drafted?

AV: No, working friends.

RV: Where did you work when you graduated?

AV: It was called McGills Bearing Department.

RV: What kind of work was that?
AV: Just like car bearings, and bearing for molders and all that kind of stuff.

RV: This is still 1967. When did you volunteer to be drafted? Was this right after high school?

AV: In November.

RV: So you graduated in say May, April, May or June?

AV: In June.

RV: You decided to go in to the Army or did you have a choice?

AV: I went to sign up for four years in the Army, but the office was closed. Then somebody in town said, “Well, the draft place is open.” So I went right there.

RV: Were you able to choose the branch of service?

AV: No.

RV: So you wound up in the Army?

AV: Right.

RV: Would you have preferred to be in another branch?

AV: Yes, Air Force.

RV: Air Force okay. Why the Air Force over the other ones?

AV: More like a helicopter mechanic.

RV: So you had hoped to do maintenance type work on the aircraft.

AV: Right.

RV: So when you were in the Army how did you feel when you realized you were going into the Army?

AV: It didn’t bother me. I thought it was more like security than battle up front.

RV: So you thought you would be in the rear areas?

AV: Right.

RV: Working on the equipment. Where did you go for your training, your initial basic training?

AV: Fort Leonard Wood.

RV: Can you describe that for us? What was that like?

AV: It wasn’t too bad. Lots of people complained a lot, but it didn’t bother me at all. Everything about basic was pretty good. The training could have been more if I was—well, I guess at that point the training was good.
RV: What do you think were the training strengths?
AV: Getting people to realize how the government works.
RV: What do you mean by that?
AV: Routine, knowing who to talk to. To obey orders.
RV: Was the physical part of the training difficult for you?
AV: No, real good.
RV: How about the instructors that you had? How would you describe them?
AV: They were excellent.
RV: How were they so good?
AV: Well, anytime I smiled at them they made me do about fifty push-ups. But that’s part of the training though. The more physical you are, the better you was. So really it boiled down to being how physical you was, not how mentally you was.
RV: So basically they were training you physically to do the job you would do in-country?
AV: Right.
RV: Did you know you were going to go to Vietnam at this point during basic?
AV: No.
RV: Did any of your training, your instructors have any training or any experience in Vietnam?
AV: I believe one.
RV: Really? Did he talk about it?
AV: Yeah. He said, “You don’t want to go there.”
RV: Why did he say that? What was he saying?
AV: He said, “It’s not what you expect, it’s bad. It’s more dangerous than what you think.”
RV: So he probably had seen combat?
AV: Yes. I think so. I’m not positive on that though.
RV: Do you feel like your training there at Fort Leonard Wood helped you for when you got in-country?
AV: In Vietnam?
RV: Yes, sir.
AV: No. If I was going to Vietnam I’d want more—if you’re going to combat
I’d want more to combat. Whatever you were doing in country. That I say no. It was
average I’d say.

RV: So you had average training for what you were going to encounter?
AV: Right.

RV: Would you have changed anything about your training? Did you feel like
you were basically with your equipment with how you were told to survive in combat,
things like that?
AV: The only other thing I can say is like the rifles we had in basic should have
been more like the ones we were going to go really fight with in Vietnam. That’s all I
can say about that right there.

RV: What was your weapon that you trained on in basic?
AV: M-14.

RV: That’s not what you used in Vietnam?
AV: No, M-16.

RV: What other weapon training did you have in basic training?
AV: Bazooka, pistol and I think that’s it.

RV: Do you remember any specific incidents or does anything stand out for you
about your basic training?
AV: It was cold, but that’s because of the year I was in.

RV: Right. You were there in the fall I guess.
AV: Right, in November and then December got real cold.

RV: How long did it last, twelve weeks?
AV: I think six weeks.

RV: Six weeks, okay.
AV: I’m not positive. It wasn’t very long. It could have been twelve weeks.

You were right.

RV: So you finish your basic there and did you feel like you were prepared at
that point to go into a war zone?
AV: No, absolutely not.

RV: Did you have advanced training at all?
AV: Yes, AIT (advanced infantry training).

RV: Where did you have your advanced training?

AV: Fort Polk, Louisiana.

RV: At Fort Polk, so this was your infantry training?

AV: Right.

RV: You originally said you wanted to work basically with equipment that’s where your experience had been.

AV: Right.

RV: Now you’re in the infantry. How did you get into the infantry?

AV: I have no idea.

RV: They just chose you?

AV: Yeah.

RV: Were you particularly good with the weapons?

AV: No, I was just a marksman that’s all. I didn’t get real good until I was in the Army, I mean in Vietnam.

RV: Tell me about your advanced training, what did you cover mainly?

AV: Hand to hand combat, claymores, grenades, M-79, I think that’s about it.

RV: So you had a lot more specific weapons training?

AV: Right.

RV: Did you feel comfortable with all those weapons?

AV: Yeah, not too bad. I’m pretty good.

RV: How would you describe your instructors and the training that they gave you?

AV: When I was there I thought it was great, but when I got in Vietnam, I don’t know, it just didn’t seem like it was up to par.

RV: In what ways do you think?

AV: Hand to hand combat could have been somehow improved. I don’t know I just couldn’t get the right picture I’m trying to say. That when I left there I didn’t realize how bad it was going to be.

RV: You felt prepared based on what training you received, but when you got there—
AV: Right.
RV: How different was it?
AV: A big difference.
RV: Does anything stand out in your mind about your advanced infantry training?
AV: Lots of running.
RV: A lot more physical exercise then?
AV: Yeah. Maybe five miles in the morning, five miles after breakfast. It was lots of physical.
RV: Wow. Were you able to handle that okay?
AV: Oh yeah, excellent.
RV: You must have been in pretty good shape?
AV: I was.
RV: What was the most difficult thing about your advanced training?
AV: Low crawling, but that was the only thing I didn’t do real fast. But other than that it was pretty good.
RV: Did anybody in your platoon or in your company get wounded or any kinds of accidents during your advanced training?
AV: One guy caught his finger in the tailgate of the truck and that was about it.
RV: How familiar did they make you with vehicles there?
AV: Ask that question again now.
RV: Were you exposed to the jeeps, the tanks, the things like that?
AV: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. We did ride in the tank and that that was in there at Fort Polk.
RV: Were you given any kind of training?
AV: No. We just rode in them. They gave like a summarized how the tank works and how fast they could go, what to expect if you was in a tank.
RV: What kind of combat tactics did they teach you there at advanced training?
AV: There was more hand to hand combat. I don’t know. I think there should be a way to improve on that. It needed to be longer, because for Vietnam. I’ll tell you about that later.
RV: At this point, did you know you were going to Vietnam?
AV: No, I had an idea though.
RV: I bet all of you did.
AV: Yeah. We’re all going.
RV: Your instructors there at advanced were they Vietnam veterans? Had they been in-country?
AV: Yeah. I’d say at least half of them I know was.
RV: What did they tell you about their experiences?
AV: They were saying about staying away from mama sans and all that kind of stuff and about the villages and all that and about the water.
RV: What were they saying about the water?
AV: Watch where you drink and all that kind of stuff.
RV: What were they saying about the mama sans?
AV: Sometimes if you make love to them they’ve got razor blades in their puckies.
RV: Oh my gosh. Okay.
AV: He really got into it, which made sense. What it really was to scare people away.
RV: Right, to protect you somehow.
AV: Right.
RV: What about the villages? What did he tell you about the villages?
AV: You could never trust them. To be on guard at all times.
RV: Did all that stuff prove to be true?
AV: Oh, yeah.
RV: We can talk more about that later. How did your family feel that you’re in the Army went through basic, went through advanced, how did they feel about this?
AV: My dad was against me going into the Army totally anyway. I don’t know why though.
RV: How about your mom?
AV: She didn’t say nothing. I don’t think it bothered her.
RV: Did you have any military experience in your family, your brother or your father or grandfather?

AV: No, none.

RV: None at all, so you were the first?

AV: Right.

RV: How many brothers and sisters—?

AV: Well, I take that back. I take that back. My dad’s brother was in like did take care of the wounded just as a grunt. That’s about it.

RV: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

AV: There was four of us total. One brother, two sisters.

RV: Were they supportive of your decision to go into the military?

AV: Yeah. I mean, they wasn’t against it. My sister, one sister was real supportive.

RV: Were you able to keep in contact with her during your training?

AV: Yes.

RV: Did you finally get to train on the M-16 while in advanced infantry training?

AV: I can’t remember. I think we did.

RV: So at the end of your infantry training or your advanced training, how did you find out you were going to Vietnam?

AV: Well, I was the only one in—I thought you was asking me how I got in the 1st Cav.

RV: Well, that’s going to be my next question actually. Did they place you in 1st Cav while you were there in AIT?

AV: No, no. I was the only one in my whole company in my barracks that was in 1st Cav.

RV: So that was I guess an honor that you were assigned it?

AV: Yeah. One of the guys said, “Man, how did you get in 1st Cav?”

RV: What did you tell him?

AV: I said, “I don’t know.”

RV: So you’re placed in 1st Cav before you found out you were going to Vietnam or after?
AV: No, before.

RV: When you were placed in the 1st Cav Airmobile Division, did you separate from the other guys or was this right at the end of training?

AV: Yes. Each time I moved even from basic I was all by myself. Then when I went by and got out of AIT I was by myself again. When I went to the field in Vietnam there was one other guy that came, but I didn’t know him.

RV: So back to your AIT, I guess they told you at the end of this training that you were going to Vietnam?

AV: Yes, the very end.

RV: How did you react to that?

AV: I didn’t know what to think. I was really stunned.

RV: Did they give you some time off before your ship out?

AV: Yes, two weeks I think.

RV: What did you do during those two weeks?

AV: Just went home and relaxed and visited my friends. That was about it.

RV: How did your family feel when they learned that you were going to Vietnam?

AV: My mom was worried about me, but my father never said nothing.

RV: How did you feel?

AV: Scared, that was about it. I didn’t know what to expect.

RV: So you left, went back to Indiana and then you went—where did you ship out from, from the west coast?

AV: Let’s see. I went to Washington State and we went out of there. I think we went to Okinawa and then to Vietnam. I don’t know why.

RV: I guess maybe to refuel?

AV: Yeah.

RV: How did you feel on that flight?

AV: Scared.

RV: What was the mood of everyone else on the flight?

AV: Real quiet.

RV: I assume this was an all military flight.
AV: The mood was real quiet.

RV: Was this an all-military flight?

AV: Yes.

RV: Were you guys in uniform?

AV: Yes.

RV: So everybody was pretty quiet?

AV: Yeah. There wasn’t much talking going on.

RV: So when you landed in Okinawa were you able to get off the plane?

AV: Yeah. Most of them got off and the ones that smoke got cigarettes, walked around a little bit and that was about it.

RV: So you had basically a couple hours?

AV: Yeah, maybe an hour and a half.

RV: From there you went to Vietnam. Where did you land? Did you go to Saigon?

AV: No, Cam Ranh Bay.

RV: Cam Ranh Bay. Okay. Did you arrive at night or during the day?

AV: During the day.

RV: What was your impression when you stepped off the plane?

AV: Hot! Unbelievable hot. I mean, I’m in Arizona and places like that now, no comparison. Oh my gosh, I don’t know if it’s the blacktop. Well, really we had like all the metal or the blacktop or what, it was hot! I couldn’t believe anyplace could be hot. It did have a bad odor. I don’t know.

RV: How long were you in Cam Ranh?

AV: Maybe three days.

RV: What did you do while you were there for those three days? You got off the plane?

AV: I just waited for my next move, that’s all. We played cards and that.

RV: You were housed in the barracks there?

AV: Right.

RV: You were with your company?

AV: No. I was by myself.
RV: You’re by yourself. Okay.

AV: I mean, there were other people there, but I was by myself.

RV: So no one else from 1st Cav was around? There was no one else from 1st Cav around?

AV: Let’s see.

RV: Or from the 1st of the 12th?

AV: No. We didn’t know if I was in the 1st of the 12th until after I got in the field.

RV: What kind of equipment did you have with you were there when you first arrived?

AV: I think I just had my uniform really and my clothes. That was it.

RV: So you were not issued weapons?

AV: No. Well, let’s see. I might have been issued a weapon there. I can’t remember that.

RV: Were you able to talk to anybody that had been in the field when you were at Cam Ranh Bay?

AV: No, I didn’t.

RV: Were all you new guys, were you isolated from—?

AV: Yes, I believe so. Because I didn’t see anybody that was in. I did see people getting on the plane when I got in, but they were further away than what we was.

RV: So they were I guess on the Freedom Bird home?

AV: Right.

RV: So how were you put into the field? You’re there for three days, how did your orders come through?

AV: I really don’t know.

RV: Did someone just come up and tell you?

AV: Yes. Well, everyday when you were there they’d call out and then a bunch of people would go. Then it depends what you were really trained in I think. I don’t know. Some was trained in artillery or something like that. Then they’d go. It was different groups. But I was—they go by like if you’re 11B.
RV: So you left on the third day. At that point did you know you were assigned to the 1st of the 12th?

AV: Yes, I’m pretty sure I did.

RV: Were you aware of any of the history of the 1st Cavalry Division?

AV: No, none at all.

RV: So what happened? You were put on a helicopter and taken directly to headquarters of the 1st Cav?

AV: Let’s see. It was probably headquarters of 1st Cav.

RV: Where was that?

AV: An Khe.

RV: An Khe. What did you do when you arrived in An Khe?

AV: It was another waiting period again.

RV: For how long?

AV: I’ll say this time it was a week.

RV: What were you waiting on?

AV: I was waiting for them to get out, I mean Khe Sanh.

RV: This is 1969?

AV: Yeah, April.

RV: April of ’69 is when you arrived in-country?

AV: Let me see what day. Probably it was the last week of April and it was in Khe Sahn.

RV: Now what had you heard by this time about U.S. policy in Vietnam? Were you still under the same impression that you were in high school or did you think something different was going on?

AV: I knew there was something different going on, but I didn’t know. Then when I was sitting there them three days they said that they didn’t want me going out to the field just yet because I would just get killed.

RV: That’s what they told you?

AV: Right, which would have been true.

RV: Can you explain that? What did they mean by that?

AV: Well, I’m going to tell you my first week then you’ll understand.
RV: Okay, all right. So you’re back at An Khe. You’re waiting for that week to go by. What did you do during that week?

AV: A little KP (kitchen police), just help with the kitchen a little bit. Basically just wait.

RV: At this point did you know exactly where you would be assigned and with whom you’d be serving?

AV: I knew I was going to be in Charlie Company 1st of the 12th, but I didn’t know where I was going to go. Because they never did tell you ever, even in the field where you were going.

RV: Why did they do that do you think?

AV: Because if you got captured then the enemy would know. Only the RTOs (radio telephone operator) and the captain and the squad leaders would know.

RV: So describe to me what happened when that week was up and you were taken into the field.

AV: Okay. I was taken in the field. Then we’d guard a bunker that week because they was relaxing, which I didn’t know really. We pulled guard base around an LZ (landing zone).

RV: Now was this in 1968 or ’69?

AV: ’68.

RV: ’68. Okay. So you arrived in April ’68. This is right after the Tet Offensive.

AV: Right.

RV: So you were taken out. Do you know where you were taken to?

AV: No. Wait a minute my wife might know. Do you know where I was taken to right off the bat? Because she talked to my sergeant yet. I don’t know. Con Thien?.

RV: Con Thien, is this in Quang Tri Province?

AV: Yes. Boy you’re good.

RV: Describe to me your first day out in the field. What transpired?

AV: You’re going to really laugh. I ain’t cussing now here.

RV: Go right ahead sir.

AV: I’m pulling guard duty at night.
RV: Is this your first night?
AV: Yeah, about two o’clock in the morning and then I hear, “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.” I go God darn what the hell is this. So I woke up the whole company—I mean not my company, but my squad and I say, “Somebody’s coming. Somebody’s out there”. They heard what it was and they go that’s a darn lizard. That’s what it was.

RV: It was a lizard?
AV: Yeah. We killed it the next day.
RV: What kind of lizard was it?
AV: I don’t know.
RV: It was a really big one?
AV: Yes, three feet or four feet long.
RV: That’s a pretty big lizard.
AV: It was the biggest I’d even seen in my life.
RV: Yeah, I would imagine.
AV: It was the biggest one I’d ever seen.
RV: Coming from Indiana.
AV: Yeah. I could never believe one got that big.
RV: So the next morning, what happened? Did you get out on patrol?
AV: Yeah. Then we went on patrol.
RV: Now you were with your squad or you were patrolling with your company?
AV: Company then.
RV: About how many men did you have with you?
AV: I’d say 110.
RV: How did you go out? Describe how you’d go out with 110 men.
AV: What we do is we usually—well, we probably moved again. We’d go out walking and then we’d walk and walk and walk.
RV: What were you looking for? Did they tell you?
AV: The enemy.
RV: You were going to make contact with the enemy?
AV: Yeah.
RV: You weren’t choppered in, you went out on foot?

AV: A lot of times we’d chopper. Let’s see. That was in the rear. We did get choppered out to the field. I was wrong about what I told you there.

RV: Had you done any kind of helicopter training before?

AV: Just in advanced training. Jumping out of dummies. I don’t think I did, but there was nothing to it.

RV: You felt comfortable doing that?

AV: Yeah.

RV: So you guys are choppered out, you were dropped off, was it a forest area, a jungle area, a clearing?

AV: It was a little bit jungle and then lots of sandy beach.

RV: All right because you were near the coast there, yeah.

AV: Right remember where that place is by the ocean.

RV: So what happened on your first patrol?

AV: That was at Gia Dang. Then we went walking and I think we ran across somebody that first day, an enemy. Somebody got shot and then they got choppered out. Then we walked the next day. Since I was the new guy—oh, then we launched. The chopper brought our water because you can’t drink ocean water. So it was my first week really basically I feel. I got a new strap on my rifle and nobody else got a strap.

RV: Why did you get the strap?

AV: No, I had a strap, but they didn’t have one. You’re issued with a strap and then they take them off because you’re not being alert then.

RV: Right if you have it strapped—

AV: To the shoulder you’re going to get binged off. But I still had one, so they made me carry two five-gallon water cans, which I agreed. Remember we met somebody that day before so then we were going to sweep the area.

RV: So you had contact with the enemy on that first day?

AV: Right.

RV: Did you sleep out in the field that night?

AV: Oh, yeah

RV: What was that like for you?
AV: Just like camping kind of, but we couldn’t have no campfire though.
RV: Right. Right. I can imagine. So the next day you went, you swept for the enemy?
AV: Yeah, then we swept for the enemy. Then we really ran into it. Everybody on both sides of me got killed.
RV: How so? Were they shot?
AV: Well, Camio, the black guy from Virginia, got shot in the head. Then my friend from Indiana got shot by the groin. I thought he was going to live. So then there was a little mound there, you had to run down, backtrack just a little bit and run alongside because that whole company was down because we were getting fired on. First I yelled, “Medic.” Then I ran and told the captain that Stevens was shot. His name was Tom Stevens.
RV: Tom Stevens, okay.
AV: He said, “Get back and guard your place otherwise we’re going to get overrun.” My friend Gary Richards shot the person that shot these guys. I think five of them got killed.
RV: Of the enemy?
AV: No us.
RV: Oh, okay.
AV: I know that somebody else was pulling guard then when I went back to see how Tom was doing. When I went back to see how Tom was doing I found out he died. I was real mad, real mad. Then Gary says to me, he says, “I had to kill the person that killed Tom and he was going to kill you next.” He was eight years old.
RV: The people who had shot Tom?
AV: Shot Tom, Samuel and a bunch of others.
RV: You were able to find these people?
AV: Oh yeah. The mom went out there and was screaming.
RV: Did you surround them and get them? How did you—?
AV: I’m trying to think. I guess we did recover them, but then when we pulled them in they told us there was a whole pile of people there, like 350 people, enemy.
RV: Was this the Viet Cong or the NVA (North Vietnamese Army)?
AV: It was both.

RV: So you said the VC (Viet Cong) or the person who had shot your friends was an eight-year-old boy?

AV: Yes, eight-year-old boy.

RV: You guys captured him?

AV: No, he was dead. Gary Richards had to kill him, shoot him because he was shooting all of us. I think what he did, I believe if I understand it right is that the kid wanted to show off that he was going to be a hero too. Then he started spraying bullets and a bunch of us got shot.

RV: Was this near a village?

AV: Yes.

RV: You said the kid’s mother came out?

AV: Yes.

RV: What did she do?

AV: She was screaming and yelling.

RV: At you guys or at—?

AV: No, at her boy because he was dead.

RV: Did he have any siblings around him?

AV: No. It was just them two.

RV: So you didn’t see any of the other enemies, you just saw these two people?

AV: No. So then we found out there were lots of people there. Then that night we had flares going up all night long. I just kept on firing out of my hole anyway now and then because we were allowed to fire. The other part of it—so they knew there was so many people in there they called Alpha and Bravo out there also out of 1st Cav. We knew there was a lot. Even there might have been more yet because we surrounded them all the way around. Then that night we got overrun. I know I kept firing all the time now and then.

RV: Could you see what you were firing at?

AV: No, I just fired.

RV: Was everybody else doing the same thing?
AV: Yeah, but then we started to get overrun. Then the guy next to me had an M-79 and he blew the whole stomach out of a guy and he still kept running. He still kept running. He fell in the hole, dead.

RV: He fell in your foxhole?

AV: No the foxhole next to me. Then later down the other, more toward Gio Son they were getting overrun. They were running like mad.

RV: The Americans were getting overrun?

AV: Yes. Then a bunch of them went out to the ocean. I think they swam around us, but they didn’t attack. They were just running, but they was on dope.

RV: Why do you say that?

AV: Because when anybody gets no stomach in them and you can see all the way through their body and they still keep running we found out later that they was all doped up. That’s what my captain said. So then the next day I had to pull guard because the captain said—I was crying a lot because I didn’t know what the heck was going on.

RV: What do you mean you were crying a lot? You were literally crying?

AV: Yeah. He said, “This is your first week out there. Why don’t you just pull guard?”

RV: Is this during the day or night?

AV: During the day. I think we were in battle for three days. Then the next day we brought still more enforcement. We even brought tanks in because of the conditions. Then they all advanced. I had to guard the perimeter where we was. Anybody come out and he said I had to kill them. I said, “Okay, I’ll do that.”

RV: Were you near the beach or the jungle line?

AV: I could see the ocean, but I would say it was quite a jog, probably a quarter mile.

RV: Between you and whoever would be coming out?

AV: If they were coming out towards me maybe three thousand feet in. So I didn’t see them. So the company went in and then they said they piled them all up in a pile. Nobody did come out by me. Then the company came out by me. The next day we just did patrol again.

RV: You’re doing this on a company size or was it your squad doing patrol?
AV: No, it was the whole company again. Then we went on patrol again and then I captured a gook, I did.

RV: You did by yourself?

AV: Yeah.

RV: How did you do that?

AV: I grabbed him with my hands. He was hiding in the bushes. He didn’t have no weapon. Then he started screaming bloody murder because he had Napalm, he was all burnt. When I took my hands off of him, the skin stayed on my hands. I couldn’t get rid of that smell for a week. I kept washing my hands and you don’t have much water out there anyway. Then I went to the ocean I guess and tried to get clean.

RV: So what happened to this—this is a Viet Cong?

AV: Yeah.

RV: What did you do with him?

AV: He went to headquarters and they got more information out of him.

RV: How would you describe the enemy, the Viet Cong or the NVA?

AV: They had to do what they had to do, you know? I felt. I mean, war is war.

RV: What would you say the enemy strengths were?

AV: Not too good. I say that because they didn’t have tanks. They didn’t have helicopters. They didn’t have airplanes. It was kind of sad in a way for their part.

RV: What were his weaknesses?

AV: Let’s see. Because they didn’t have all that stuff really. For fighting part I will say they were good.

RV: What made them good fighters?

AV: They didn’t have no choice. I mean when the 1st Cav came in, that’s like attacking a mountain lion. I mean, man. They—

RV: Go ahead. I’m sorry.

AV: They would do probably more than I would ever do.

RV: Why do you think so?

AV: Well, fighting a big, big company like that, there’s no end to it.

RV: So after that first week you had a lot of contact there.

AV: Yes.
RV: What happened after that? Did you stay in the same area?
AV: Yeah, kind of. We flew out again and we went on patrol again. That was about the third day then. We was in where there was elephant grass, wherever that would be. Then we had a ceremony for the people that died. The chaplain came out.
RV: How much availability did you have with the chaplains while you were in country?
AV: Not too many times. But I’m glad he did come out that time because I was sick.
RV: How were you sick?
AV: I was sick because after you’re in a battle like that you’re kind of winding down and I wasn’t myself. I didn’t feel good. I was just really sick.
RV: This was from your combat experience?
AV: Yes. It wasn’t from being sick because I was sick. I was sick because my adrenaline was going down. Kind of like relaxing I guess, I don’t know. Then one of my friends said that would happen to me because I was in so much hand-to-hand combat.
RV: Right. How long did it take you to cool down and to get back to normal?
AV: A week believe it or not.
RV: Really?
AV: Yeah. I was still able to work, I mean, visualize what I was going through. Then I wrote home to my sister and told her I’d never make it out of here alive.
RV: Because of what you had seen?
AV: Yes and what I was going to go through.
RV: Were you able to communicate with your family as much as you wanted?
AV: Not too bad. Usually if you’re in a real secure area and they came out about everyday with the mail. Then there were other days where it would probably be a week.
RV: Did you write home often?
AV: Yes, very often and then my sister wrote me everyday.
RV: Wow. Who did you write when you wrote home?
AV: I wrote to my mother and then my sister and that was all.
RV: How much did the mail help you guys in the field?
AV: A great deal. Even thought you couldn’t be home that’s probably the best thing there could be. You kept on putting things in and even though—I told my sister, even if it’d be garbage, just write to me.

RV: Right. She did.

AV: Yes. Some days I’d have a dozen letters and then I’d have to wait until the mail came out again. Because if it was in real thick forest, you didn’t chopper in and tell the enemy where you was.

RV: So after the first couple weeks, you kind of regained a sense of self I guess.

AV: The lieutenant said, “I’m going to teach you right. I’m going to teach you how to walk point and know what’s coming on.”

RV: What did he train you in? What did he tell you?

AV: Basically watch him and watch what he did. Usually a lieutenant don’t do that, but this one was real good. Then we got choppered out again. We had an Indian that walked point. I was in 1st squad, but I was probably the last guy in 1st squad. I take it back. I think 2nd squad or 3rd squad was in front of me because most of my squad was killed. So then we just walked and made a couple contacts with the enemy.

RV: Now were you on point or not?

AV: I was probably fifteen or twenty guys back.

RV: Had you walked point at this time yet?

AV: No. I’m going to say no. Then we choppered in and out. Let’s see. I know the Indian—where we stop and rest, I’d always go up there and ask him questions.

RV: Like what?

AV: How do you know where the enemy is and all this stuff? He had like a machete and he put a mark in the tree and showed me.

RV: What did that do, what do you mean by putting the machete in a tree? He would mark the trees as you walked past?

AV: No. He would mark that one tree just showing me what the enemy does.

RV: So he was kind of drawing it for you?

AV: Right. Well, he’d make a notch and he’d say one notch means there’s one bunker ahead, two notches there’s probably two bunkers ahead. Just a scratch in the tree would be some explosive in the path.
RV: Did you come across a lot of booby traps?

AV: Yes.

RV: Can you describe those for me?

AV: There's a basic bunch of kinds. There's the kind with the bamboo where they put a little over and then all it would do is injure somebody's foot and then you'd be out of commission. That person would have to go to the rear and that's basically what they were trying to do was get everybody injured all the time and that.

RV: Were these punji stakes?

AV: Yeah, punji stakes. Then there was like claymores I don't know what you call them. They were like from Russia. Those things you step on and they blow your leg off. They did teach us out in AIT showing us what they look like. So that was one helpful thing.

RV: So you knew what to look for.

AV: Right.

RV: Did you ever see anybody step on a mine?

AV: Oh yes, I've got more detail on that.

RV: Why don't you talk about that? This is on your basic patrols?

AV: Yeah, everyday was patrol and everyday two or three guys would get killed, every day almost.

RV: What was that from mainly?

AV: Sniper or a booby trap or something like that. The first month, I just observed what everybody does. Then the second month I carried an M-79.

RV: How'd you like that weapon?

AV: I loved it.

RV: Why did you like it so much?

AV: In AIT I was really an expert on that. Wherever I hit it was like a bouncing Betty. It would bounce back up and it would staple the person all together. Or if you wanted to blow—it's kind of like if you wanted to blow something up pretty far away it would do it. I was relaxed with that, even though I had only one shell. I mean I had more in my bag, but you could only fire one shell at a time.

RV: So the second month you're carrying the M-79?
AV: Right. Then the next month I carried the radio for a week for somebody because I can’t talk real good. You can hear that now.

RV: Right.

AV: The next month I started walking point, one day out of ten.

RV: You walked point?

AV: Right.

RV: Were you chosen to walk point or did you volunteer to do it?

AV: No. I think I was chose that time.

RV: Can you describe the first time you were out there on point?

AV: Very scary. I didn’t know what to look for—well I did know more of what to look for because the Indian teaching me stuff. I was kind of relaxed. I was nervous, but I kind of had confidence in myself. Then the other squad would take turns walking point. Out of my squad as time went on I started walking point almost every day. That’s because they weren’t doing their job right. What I mean by not doing their job right they started looking in the trees for gooks, they weren’t looking on the ground. You had to look for notches. You had to look up in the trees. You had to look on the ground. So your eyes were always moving. I watched their eyes and then I seen they weren’t doing all that and then people would get hurt.

RV: So you just felt more in control at point?

AV: Yes. I knew that if I did it, I knew that I would be okay. Then the only bad part is I was always off the trail.

RV: What do you mean?

AV: Well, I’d see a couple of notches and then I’d go throw a couple frags in bunkers.

RV: You could see the bunkers?

AV: Oh yes. No, I couldn’t see them from the trail, but I saw the notch on the trail. I said there’s a bunker up ahead on the right.

RV: Hold on. The notches were from—?

AV: The gooks.

RV: They would notch the trees.

AV: Yes. They would notch the trees and tell them where they was.
RV: So that’s to protect them if they’re walking around.
AV: Right because then they would be, themselves if they were coming through they would know.
RV: Right. Right. Okay, I understand now.
AV: Lots of people walking squad would never pay no attention, walking point I mean. I mean not squad, walking point.
RV: You would be off the trail you said?
AV: Yes. I’d go off the trail and I’d always take the hard way. I wouldn’t try to stay on the path anyway. Because if you stay on that path that they walked on, because you can tell where they walked on. It’s like a bunch of elephants going through and there’d be a path. You don’t ever want to stay on that anyway because if you’re on that you don’t know what you can run into. So I would go off for a few minutes and then I’d come back around. Then sometimes people would get injured because they’d step on a land mine.
RV: You were leading basically the whole squad off the path?
AV: The whole company.
RV: The whole company. Okay. They would all follow you. Did you feel like you were a pretty good point man?
AV: Yes, real good.
RV: How long did you do that while you were there?
AV: Until December probably the fifteenth. I can’t remember the day exactly anywhere from the tenth to the fifteenth I was.
RV: So you basically did that the last?
AV: Very lot.
RV: Three or four months you were there before December.
AV: Right.
RV: Anything else you want to say about any contact you had there during that time?
AV: Well, like the day I left the field they needed some people in the rear and I was lucky. I drew the winning card and I don’t even know how to play cards. I drewed the high card so I got to go. Then I kept on asking the captain, “When am I going
out? When am I going out?” He said, “Whenever that next chopper come in, don’t even ask me just get on it.” So a chopper just for some reason came in, I jumped on it. It took two rounds, but we made it in. Then the next day that guy that flew the chopper and I we both looked at the chopper with the round in it, one went up through his leg and missed his head, went out the roof. I go, “Oh my gosh.” So I hugged him. I said “Well, you brought me to the home”—I mean, “to the rear at least.”

RV: What were your duties there? Why were you brought to the rear or why was somebody asked to go to the rear?

AV: Because they didn’t have enough guys in the rear.

RV: What were your duties?

AV: The first I had to pull guard on the perimeter. Then I really volunteered for anything I can get my hands on, even though it would be bad.

RV: Why did you do that?

AV: Because I don’t like just laying around. Somebody said they need somebody in repair and utility. I said, “Yeah, I’ll do that”. So they tried me out for a day or two, they liked me, then before you knew it I was in charge of it. Then I was building little buildings.

RV: I’m sorry, you would build buildings?

AV: Yes, then I was building buildings. They said, “Well, we don’t have the right kind of lumber.” The lumber was like all three inches thick by ten inches, something like that. Then I’d ask the captain, which is Captain J. I really know his real name if you want it.

RV: Sure.

AV: Jaradski, Joe Jaradski.

RV: He was your captain back in the rear?

AV: Yes.

RV: Where was this located do you know?

AV: HHC (headquarters and headquarters company).

RV: I’m sorry?

AV: HHC.

RV: Okay, HHC.
AV: C.
RV: Was this still in Quang Tri Province or were you—?
AV: Headquarters and headquarters company. Yeah, but where? Oh it was at Tay Ninh.
RV: At Tay Ninh. Okay.
AV: I couldn’t remember.
RV: So that’s a little further south then.
AV: Right. That’s when our company moved in between that time too.
RV: Where did they move to?
AV: Tay Ninh.
RV: Okay. So the whole company went south?
AV: The whole company.
RV: Did you find the environment different down there?
AV: Yes.
RV: How so?
AV: I thought we were just getting out of monsoon season at that one place. When you fly over to another place there’s no monsoon. I thought that was the reason, but it wasn’t. It was because there was more enemy down there spotted they said. So then I was only on that field for like a week or so. Then we were running that day all day long from a fire.
RV: Where? At your location?
AV: That was in the rear. Not in the rear, but I mean in the field.
RV: In the field there was a fire?
AV: Yeah. I ran all day from that fire.
RV: Can you describe that?
AV: That was by Song Bay. It was bad, we was gagging. We were really just running for our lives really to be honest with you.
RV: So you had moved from the rear area back out to the field?
AV: No, no. I mean that was when I was out in the field. That’s when I got on the chopper. Then I flew to the rear, but I didn’t tell you about that and I wanted to tell you.
RV: So there was a fire out there and you guys were escaping.

AV: Right.

RV: How did it start? Did the VC start it?

AV: Yes, that’s what I found out later.

RV: What did they say about that? How did you find out that the VC started it?

AV: I found out when I got back in the States really in a book.

RV: Which book were you reading?

AV: What book was that? It was in the 1st Cavalry History Book.

RV: What would you say was the bravest thing that you saw over there while you were in Vietnam?

AV: I think the bravest thing I ever seen was someone threw something in like a grenade and a guy put his helmet on it and then jumped on it and died. I don’t know who it was.

RV: Was he in your squad?

AV: No, not in my squad so I wouldn’t know. He was in the company but—

RV: He saved—

AV: Some lives.

RV: Did he save your life?

AV: No.

RV: Did you feel like the American GIs were fighting bravely, your comrades there in arms?

AV: They didn’t have no choice. If you didn’t pull your duty, somebody would shoot you when you got in the battle.

RV: Meaning one of the Americans would?

AV: Yeah. So you didn’t have no choice. I’m going to give you another example. Out in the field I was walking point, the E-7 sergeant just came to the rear, I mean from the rear out to the field said I wasn’t walking fast enough. This other kid, he’s kind of like a little troublemaker and we called him Dinglefuck. He said, “Why don’t you walk point then?” So they kicked me all the way to the back of the company to the last. Then I found out there was a guy in the back that always carried the shotgun. I
didn’t know that before then. Then they went about two hundred feet and then both of
his legs blew off.

RV: The new guy leading, walking point?

AV: Yeah, hit a land mine. Then he had me come all the way back to the front
again after he was—well, before I did that we was in woods. I had to take C-4 dynamite,
put it around trees and blow it up, get a chopper in. Everybody was cussing me then
because I got dirt over everybody. They didn’t know I had that many sticks of C-4 ever
on anybody. I had like twenty-one sticks.

RV: So you used them all?

AV: Yeah.

RV: So you’re blowing a new LZ.

AV: Yeah, I did. I had dirt over everybody. Then the chopper came in and took
them away, but then later I think just this year I found out that he did die.

RV: Dinglefuck did?

AV: No, Dinglefuck stayed alive because he was with me. It was that E-7
sergeant that died.

RV: Oh, he’s the one who took over point.

AV: Right.

RV: Okay, I’ve got you. All right. That’s interesting. So you were the
designated person in the company to handle the explosives?

AV: No, anybody really could.

RV: How did you get along with your immediate superiors in the field?

AV: Real good because I’m going to give you an example. I was in the rear, I
mean I was in the field. We went to the rear. This is my first month or so. Then I came
back to the field, he said, “Well, did you have a good time in the rear?” I said, “Hell no, I
didn’t.” He goes, “What do you mean you didn’t have a good time?” I said, “They made
me burn shit all the time I was in there, people shit.” I say, “Forget that. Let’s just stay
out in the field if I’ve got to do that.” So then he did.

RV: He put you back out?
AV: No. Everybody stayed back out in the field almost, unless we were going to a special spot like Wonder Beach. If the company was going to Wonder Beach we’d all go.

RV: Wonder Beach?

AV: Yeah.

RV: What was that, Wonder Beach?

AV: That was just a resort for the Army in Vietnam somewhere. I’d have to look that up.

RV: Was that kind of R&R (rest and recuperation) for the company?

AV: Yeah, it was R&R. Otherwise we played football in the field for two or three days, but still pulled guard in front of an LZ. We still was useful, but then we pulled guard. Then we played football all day until dark for two or three days. Then he brought pop and beer in. Not too many people, they’d drink beer, but they wouldn’t get too carried away.

RV: I wanted to ask you about that. Did you see a lot of alcohol use?

AV: They did drink a bunch of alcohol, but they never really got drunk.

RV: This was mainly in the rear areas?

AV: No, this was in the field.

RV: In the field, okay.

AV: In the rear, no they got drunk and plastered.

RV: How about drug use? Did you see a lot of that?

AV: Marijuana in the field.

RV: In the field? Did that affect your company effectiveness?

AV: No. They kept it to a limit. They was the same as the alcohol. They didn’t do it too much. I don’t smoke or drink. It didn’t interfere with me because I would have made sure I was on the last. Like from two o’clock in the morning or whatever I would make sure I pulled guard then, make sure.

RV: Why did you want to do it then?

AV: Because that’s when the enemy would probably attack you the most. Most people are sleeping harder at that time. I wanted to make sure I was awake.

RV: Did you get attacked a lot at that time of night?
AV: Now and then we did yes.

RV: How would the enemy attack you like that?

AV: They just come up into the camp. Basically they just sprayed bullets all over in hope they get a couple guys and then they take off.

RV: So kind of hit and run tactics.

AV: It was hit and run.

RV: Did you guys ever set ambushes and do hit and run stuff?

AV: Yeah. We did that. We’d go on patrol and then one squad of the company would go in front of the company and then we always had to tell them where we were at. Then one time I accidentally shot a couple of our guys because I didn’t know they was only like two hundred feet in front of me or three hundred feet. That’s too close. They were supposed to go out further. Then when you hear noise, you think it’s the enemy and it’s them. But luckily they called back in and said, “Quit firing.” They all fell down. Anytime you heard anything out there you was allowed to fire. It would wake everybody up, but you’d be better off being alive than dead.

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

AV: No, not at all. Maybe in the rear maybe more, but in the field, no. Not at all. They just telled you what they wanted to tell you.

RV: You were there when Lyndon Johnson announced, or basically this was his last term as president.

AV: Everybody hated him.

RV: Really?

AV: Everybody hated him.

RV: Why was that?

AV: Because it was a political war. We should never have been in it to begin with. People was making money off of it and people was dying.

RV: What do you mean people were making money off of it?

AV: He had investments, they always said in the field in the rubber stuff. That would go towards boots, making boots and that kind of stuff. He had shares in the stock
market where he knew it would grow. I don’t know if that’s true or not. But we didn’t
have no business being there.

RV: What did you—?

AV: Then—

RV: I’m sorry go ahead.

AV: What?

RV: I was going to ask you, did you have a different feeling when Richard Nixon
took office in January 1969?

AV: I came home in June of ’69.

RV: Right. You had gone to the—

AV: We heard word that he might get us out. So everybody was kind of positive.

RV: Did you feel like your company, if they thought that they were getting out
did you continue with the same kind of tactics?

AV: Oh yeah, everybody did. When they was in the rear they had to do the same
tactics. In fact they probably had it worse because the enemy thought they had a strong
hold.

RV: Right.

AV: I don’t know how they knew that, but I believe that.

RV: Did you ever hear any talk of fragging while you were there?

AV: Yeah.

RV: What did you hear? Can you describe any incidents?

AV: I really can’t say too much about that. I just heard.

RV: You just heard things.

AV: Right.

RV: Was this kind of related to what you were saying about if some of your
fellow soldiers did not fight, didn’t do what they were supposed to do they would get hit
sometimes?

AV: Yeah. Lots of people would get wounded, but it wasn’t because they wasn’t
doing their duty out in the field.

RV: Right. You said earlier that some of them—
AV: Yeah. Like in the bunkers I’d say, “Chieu Hoi, give up.” Then I’d throw a
frag in. Then I’d wait a few minutes and then go in. Sometimes if I really thought there
was somebody in there, I’d throw like a phosphorous peter in there. That would just
make smoke and then somebody would come out. They would just be burnt a little bit,
but they’d be all right.

RV: Did you ever hear of anybody shooting any enlisted men, shooting officers?
AV: We had a bounty on our captain, one captain we had out there.
RV: You had a bounty on him?
AV: Yeah.
RV: For how much?
AV: I don’t know a couple thousand.
RV: Really? For anybody who would shoot him?
AV: Kill him.
RV: Why did you want to kill him?
AV: He wasn’t doing his job. It was about my third month maybe, in June it
was. We was sleeping and we got attacked. We’re 1st Squad you know. He told us to
advance, but there were so many bullets coming over my head. Then I turn around and I
see him running backwards, running away from the enemy. Then he’s telling us to
advance. This Dinglefuck said, “Wait a here minute and see what’s going on.” He said,
“Send up the machine gun.” Sent up the machine gun and about five guys got killed that
day. Then I think we fired on our own troops on the other side.

RV: Really?
AV: Right, because we asked for the plane, the boats to put in artillery.
RV: You asked the boats to—?
AV: That company called our company and said there was another company
there. Then he did get taken out of the field a week later.

RV: That captain did?
AV: Yes.
RV: So during that—
AV: Then he got busted down to E-7 later I found out. I mean this is way later.

Somebody else informer told me this. I know it’s true.
RV: But you guys would have killed this guy if you had the chance?
AV: Oh yeah. We wouldn’t hesitate.
RV: But you never had the chance to do it?
AV: No. I wouldn’t do it personally, but they would definitely.
RV: So was that common in the field?
AV: If you didn’t do your duty right you would get shot. So that’s the only thing that kept the black people in line. I hate to say that.
RV: Well, I wanted to ask you about racial issues.
AV: The blacks usually did their jobs, but I’m going to be honest with you, when they’re by themselves they’re cowards. When they’re with a group they’re brave as all get out. They think they are. I’m not trying to act prejudiced. It’s just how it is.
RV: So your impression was that they did not—
AV: No. There was lots of them that did do their job, but then there’s lots of them that was terrible. Might as well call them slackers because they didn’t do their job right. Then they would always be in the rear almost of a company. Not too many would be in the 1st Squad or the 2nd or the 3rd even though the captain would be in the 3rd. There wouldn’t be too many like that.
RV: Did you ever have any friends that were black over there?
AV: Yes. His name was Davidson.
RV: Davidson.
AV: Yeah. I don’t know, never met him or seen him ever again, but he was good.
RV: He was good?
AV: He was good. He’d walk point, everything. He was real good.
RV: Did he make it out?
AV: I don’t know. I’d have to have my wife look that up.
RV: Were you able to get close to anybody else while you were over there?
AV: Yeah, my squad I was kind of close to a couple guys.
RV: Did they make it out?
AV: Larry got shot in the head. I just made contact with him two weeks ago.
RV: Really?
AV: Because that’s what my duty is now. I’m trying to find my whole—they
came in later like in August, but they still was with me until December. I’m trying to
find out all the guys that I was with in my squad and 1st Cav too.

RV: Have you been able to make some contacts?

AV: Yeah. Fifty-three of us are going to Washington D.C.

RV: Are you going to the Wall?

AV: Yes, fifty-three of us.

RV: Have you ever been there before?

AV: No, but my sergeant friend yes, he’s been there.

RV: How many R&Rs did you have while you were in country?

AV: One.

RV: Was that to Wonder Beach?

AV: No, no that’s not R&R. That’s just relaxation.

RV: Okay, but you actually took an R&R?

AV: To Japan. But I was there you’ve got to remember more than a year.

RV: Yes, sir. You went in, in April, April ’68 and you left in June of ’69.

AV: Right, but I still only had one.

RV: Where did you go in Japan?

AV: Tokyo.

RV: How was that?

AV: If I had to go there I wouldn’t go, but the people there was nice. But other
than that I didn’t like the fish smell. I really couldn’t understand their English. So I had
to write everything down. Like I wanted a Dairy Queen thing and I had to write it down.

Then I went to the bowling alley and I give them the paper and then they give me my
food. I had a good time though. I was really kind of by myself. I didn’t go with no
friend there though. I wanted to go on with a friend, but probably worked out better.

RV: Were you able to call home when you were there?

AV: In Vietnam I called home once.

RV: Oh, you did?

AV: Yes. When I was in that Rear Company they would provide flying circuits.

One of them guys said, “Have you ever called home?” I go, “No.” He said, “Would you
like to?” I go, “Yes, I would.” He said, “Well, come back at six o’clock,” or something like that. I went over there and I called home.

RV: Who’d you call?

AV: My mom.

RV: Was she surprised?

AV: Yeah. Then she wrote me back and said the bill was hardly anything, should have done it earlier. It was real good. Whoever was in the flying circuits thing I’ve go to give them credit. Because I was just walking by and he asked me if I ever did. I think that’s one thing they could have improved on. Well, now a days you’ve got computer laptops and all that. That’s one thing that could really have been improved on over there. But then sometimes if you know what’s going on at home and you’re in the field, it’s not good.

RV: Why is that?

AV: Because then your minds on at home and then you’re not doing your duty right because you’ve go to be so alert, real alert.

RV: Now did you stay in the rear area from December all the way until June when you left?

AV: Yes. I had a maid. Because when I got to the rear and then I went to that repair stuff. Then the Captain J moved me with the E-7s even though I was an E-4. Then he told me, “Don’t wear no raincoat, make sure,” because he said, “You’re telling everybody else what to do and you’re only an E-4.” He was real nice to me. Then I had a real nice sergeant in the rear. I told him, “If you ever wake me up just wiggle my toe, but never touch anywhere else on my body.”

RV: Why was that?

AV: Because he’d be dead. That’s even yet today.

RV: That’s the same today?

AV: Yes. I sleep in a separate room. I don’t sleep with my wife. Then when I did come home and I met her, she touched me on the back and I had her on the ground.

RV: I’m sorry?
AV: I’m still jumpy.
RV: Are you? Okay. Were you ever wounded in the field?
AV: No. I did get a couple of little scratches later I found out that had a little
scrap metal in them, but no I never claimed nothing. I was happy to be home.
RV: What did you think of ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam)?
AV: They didn’t do their job right.
RV: How so?
AV: Well, I’ll give you an example. The ARVN that was with us interpreting
was fine. But then the ARVNs that had their own platoons and squads and all that they’d
only go a hundred feet outside the LZ and that’s it.
RV: Even if they were ordered to do otherwise?
AV: Yes. Then they were wanting to know why they were getting attacked and
killed and all this. They were scared. They were super scared.
RV: Why were they so scared do you think?
AV: I don’t know. I think they’d have more advantage. I think instead of being
an ARVN that they would have had somebody out there just walking around in civilian
clothes I think it would have been better and more informers in civilian clothes. Then the
enemy wouldn’t know that you were on an ARVN. If you was an ARVN, you’re dead,
no if, and or buts. So they were scared, oh my gosh.
RV: Was that the feeling of the rest of your company?
AV: The whole company said they were cowards. That’s why they said, “We
shouldn’t even be over there fighting. Them guys can’t even go out there.” Because we
know where they’d go, by observing because we had all these guys out there, out in the
jungle, because of LRPs (long range patrol) and all that stuff. So no they didn’t do their
job at all. I’m disappointed in them.
RV: Well, that brings up a point. This is part of the American strategy actually
right after you left was this policy of Vietnamization, turning the Vietnam War over to
the Vietnamese to ARVN to the South Vietnamese to fight.
AV: That—
RV: Did you feel like—I’m sorry. Go ahead.
AV: That was a bunch of bologna. There’s no way. Even when I was there they couldn’t even hold anybody down. That was propaganda.

RV: You didn’t have any confidence that they could hold their country?

AV: No, not at all. If I go from one to ten I’d give them a one. They was that bad.

RV: How do you feel about the overall American leadership, military leadership as far as the Vietnam War?

AV: No, they didn’t do their job. Anybody knows when there’s no—well, I don’t know if we didn’t want to get involved over there or what, but then when there’s nobody guarding the northern border, nobody guarding any borders at all. So it was like a bunch of Indians running out there. They could run anywhere they wanted around us. Okay, I’m going to tell you what. If the 1st Cav would secure an area, then send in some grunts then, an Army group a secured area, they let the 1st Cav go in there and destroy a bunch more people. If they’re enemy get them. If they’re civilians I believe the civilians had been in a camp. That’s what’s wrong with most wars, they don’t know who the enemy is and who isn’t.

RV: So you would advocate kind of getting the civilians to one side or get them in one area.

AV: Right, one area all down south in southern Vietnam or some darn thing or something.

RV: Then—

AV: You really don’t even need that really basically. If you have a secure line, we didn’t have nothing. This was like running out in the woods. I mean if you’ve got woods and you’ve got about a thousand guys running through it, you might see—and they’re sneaking around you might only see about four or five. The rest of them go through. That’s what it was, identical to that. It was terrible. I couldn’t believe the government was running something like that. Any dumb nut knew better than that.

RV: Your strategy would have been to—?

AV: I would have secured an area, secure it. We would have had that country down pat, just like that. That country wasn’t that darn big. I mean, that was ridiculous. We’d go—I’m going to give you an example, we’d go fight. Then we’d secure that area,
and then we’d take off with a chopper. One week later we’d come back, the enemy’s there again.

RV: Same place.
AV: Same place. Nobody kept them from coming in and out. They just walked across like a bunch of cattle grazing. That’s what it was all the time we was there.

RV: Did that affect the morale of your unit?
AV: Yeah, but it was just common sense. They was coming behind us to pick up all our garbage and that, canned goods because GIs are terrible. They’re bad, GIs are because they throw lots of food around. They don’t like the peaches and then they’d throw half a can, but then they’d eat the half a can, the enemy would because that was treats to them.

RV: Did you ever go into Laos or Cambodia?
AV: Oh, yes. I was there all the time.

RV: Really?
AV: Oh, yes, two or three miles in.

RV: You guys knew you were in?
AV: Yes.

RV: Was it Laos or Cambodia? Which one?
AV: I was in both.

RV: In both. You guys knew you were in there?
AV: Oh, yes, because once you go—we’d go back there after that tent thing at the beginning in April, we’d go back and then we’d go beyond. Every tree was dead, every bird was dead, any animal was dead. That was because of Agent Orange sprayed.

RV: Did you ever have any contact with Agent Orange?
AV: Very much.

RV: Has that affected you since?
AV: I’m getting tested for it now. Hopefully not. By me being point man, there was powder on the ground and my feet would pick it up and all them people would have gas masks on.

RV: But you would not?
AV: I didn’t because my feet was picking up the powder. I’d go, “What the heck are they banging about?” Turning around and they were banging.

RV: What do you mean banging?

AV: When you’re banging you’ve got to put your gas mask on, you can’t talk.

RV: Did you ever put yours on?

AV: Yes, now and then. In fact sometimes if you had to go in a circle or something or the wind would pick up. But the problem was we were drinking in that water and everything like that because we didn’t go to the rear. That’s the only drawback I’ve seen.

RV: What do you remember most about combat today when you think back of your time there?

AV: I just think it was a wasteful war over there. I think they should have let the place go communism. I don’t know. You know they said they wanted not to be communism, but I think they did.

RV: You wrote in your questionnaire about Tom Stevens’ death. You said he was your captain?

AV: No, he was my squad leader.

RV: Squad leader. How did he die? Was that in that first week?

AV: Yes. He was an Eagle Scout and he was real intelligent. He was good. It’s just sad, you know.

RV: So how did you find out you were leaving Vietnam? You stayed over a year, your tour was up at twelve months. Why did you stay longer than twelve months?

AV: I had it made in the rear. I had a foam rubber bed, had a TV and a radio. Slept with E-7 sergeants. Even though there was incoming now and I was comfortable to that.

RV: So you volunteered to stay another tour?

AV: Right because why have somebody else come over there that didn’t know what they was doing?

RV: You only stayed two months later?

AV: Probably two and a half, three.
RV: Was that a complete tour for you, just another few months or were you signed up for another twelve months?

AV: No, that was it. Really I got an early out to go to heavy equipment school.

RV: So you were done?

AV: Yeah.

RV: What do you think about—if you could comment on how the government conducted the war? You were the common soldier on the ground? Do you think that the U.S. government had regard or correctly utilized your skills as a soldier or not?

AV: I think they should screen people better and find out where people are more suitable. I believe that the people that are drafted should be in the rear and the people that are lifers and want to be the riflemen and all that stuff they should be out front.

RV: Did you ever see any or experience problems between lifers and the enlisted?

AV: No, not too much.

RV: What were your impressions about Vietnam as a country in general? You’ve commented on how hot it was, you commented on the smell.

AV: The country is beautiful. The people, if we were out of war or something I think the people would have been pleasant. The only reason why they wasn’t was because we was over there.

RV: How did the civilians treat you while you were there?

AV: Not too bad. I think fair. You really couldn’t trust them, but I say it was good.

RV: So you found out you were leaving after your second short tour was up. How did you feel when you knew you were getting out of there?

AV: I was glad. I couldn’t believe it.

RV: Where did you leave from?

AV: Wait a minute. Bien Hoa, I couldn’t remember that.

RV: Bien Hoa, okay. When you went to the airstrip to get on the plane did you see any new people arriving?

AV: Yes.

RV: What did you think about the new guys coming in?
AV: I just nodded my head and got on that plane. I go, “Man, what a bunch of suckers these bad boys will be.”

RV: So when you guys took off, how did you feel?

AV: We didn’t feel relaxed until we hit the ground in California.

RV: Really?

AV: Or Hawaii. I think we dropped off at Hawaii and then we went to California. But no we didn’t feel comfortable until we go to American soil. We were more worried about the plane getting shot down even though it was high. Even taking off on the plane we was worried.

RV: What was the mood of everybody there?

AV: They was all tickled to death happy. There was only male stewards that was on the plane.

RV: Were you disappointed?

AV: No, but they all wanted to grab somebody’s butt and they couldn’t.

RV: I want to ask you one other thing about being in-country, did you get to go to any USO (United Services Organization) Shows?

AV: Yes, Bob Hope.

RV: You saw Bob Hope?

AV: Mm-hmm.

RV: How was he?

AV: Well, I’d seen a couple of them. I don’t know. I guess it was all right, but the crowds were so big and then Bob Hope had a thing where they put all the movie cameras and like a tarp and then you really couldn’t see Bob Hope. Then everybody started throwing beer cans.

RV: Really?

AV: Right. So we was disappointed. I think if it had been smaller groups and then no photographers in front and forget about the movie stuff it would have been all right. When you get TV involved it’s no good.

RV: When you arrived back in the States you landed in California?

AV: Yeah. We all kissed the ground.

RV: What was your reception at the airport like?
AV: It was at midnight and it wasn’t too good.

RV: What do you mean?

AV: Just depressing really.

RV: How so?

AV: Nobody there to say, “Guys welcome home.” The Army said they had people there, even civilians saying welcome home and all that. Nobody even welcoming us home at all.

RV: Did you all get on separate flights to go to your various homes?

AV: Yes. We didn’t have first class passes, but then I was smart enough to up mine to first class, pay the difference. Most of them had to stay because there were so many guys there and I flew out right away.

RV: You went back to Indiana?

AV: I dropped off in Chicago. Then I didn’t have no ride home, my sister came and got me. Then she took me back home to Indiana. She lived in Illinois.

RV: How did it feel to see her?

AV: I guess my mom hugged me and my dad said hi. That was it.

RV: Were they happy to have you home?

AV: I don’t know. My mom was happy I was home. It was kind of sad.

RV: In what way?

AV: I don’t know. If my boy went to war right now I’d meet him in California. There wouldn’t be no hesitation. I mean, give me a break.

RV: So it was kind of anti-climactic?

AV: Right and then everybody at the airport didn’t treat us good neither at Chicago.

RV: What did they do in Chicago?

AV: You know baby killer, all this kind of stuff.

RV: Really? They were there when you disembarked from the plane?

AV: Right. I had my uniform on. I would have been better off not to have one on.

RV: What did you do? Did you just ignore it?

AV: I just ignored them. They didn’t know what I went through.
RV: How did you feel about that?
AV: Depressed, disgusted with America, kind of low.
RV: How was your transition back to civilian life? You were in-country and then?
AV: Well, really not too good if you’d look at it from your viewpoint, but my viewpoint is it was good. At your point I became a workaholic and that’s because I didn’t want to think about the war or anything.
RV: You became a workaholic?
AV: Yes. I am one.
RV: What job—did you immediately start working?
AV: I’d take jobs that I had to work long hours on. I put an ad in the paper when I got home and I got in construction. I’ve been there ever since. I’m still in a foxhole.
RV: I’m sorry?
AV: I’m still in the foxhole.
RV: What do you mean by that?
AV: I dig footings, put footings in on big commercials jobs. Say a university needs a building up, then we put walls up. I’m in dirt all the time.
RV: So, you’re still in that foxhole.
AV: Yep.
RV: That’s a good way to put it. When you came home, you’re back in ’69. The war went on for another three years or three and a half years for the United States.
AV: I didn’t listen to the TV at all.
RV: You did not?
AV: No. I didn’t want nothing to do with it.
RV: So you really did not follow the war at all?
AV: No.
RV: What did you think when—?
RV: Not too much. Now and then my parents would have it on, but I’d go outside because it would make me—I wasn’t a relaxed person. I’m still not. I can’t watch really no Vietnam combat stuff hardly at all. I went to see We Were Soldiers and that’s why I’m talking to you today otherwise I would never be talking to you.
RV: What was it about that movie that made you want to talk to us?
AV: It was too much. I remembered more stuff about all of my friends. My wife said that I better just start contacting them all and that. I think it’s probably the best, because now I’ve got the best friends in the world.

RV: Your buddies who were there with you?
AV: Yeah, my sergeant and all them and my colonel. He became a colonel and he writes to me. He might meet me in Washington D.C.

RV: That’s great. That’s great. I wanted to ask you, how did you feel in 1975 when Saigon fell, when the country—?
AV: I was disappointed and I was very mad. I was mad at America. If we’re letting something stupid—I mean, if we’re going to fight, we’re going to fight to win. This was a bunch of bologna. I’m probably more mad at Lyndon Johnson because for some reason we all blamed him. I don’t know why even though Kennedy got us into it.

RV: One other question about when you were in-country, did you see any unusual wildlife?
AV: What do you mean, animals or people?
RV: (Laughs) Well, I guess both. I was thinking about animals.
AV: My friend—well, another company they shot a tiger. It was a tiger.
RV: They shot a tiger?
AV: Yeah. They’ve got pictures of it and they were showing me the other day. Then there were lots of squirrels, lots of chickens, lots of lizards, lots of snakes, water buffaloes and calves.

RV: Did anybody ever get bitten by snakes?
AV: Not too much, no.
RV: So you didn’t when you were out there walking point?
AV: We caught some big snakes too. Oh my God, the biggest snakes I’ve ever seen in my life.

RV: Pythons?
AV: No, I don’t know what it was. I’m not a snake person. There were water moccasins, something like water moccasins or pythons or whatever you call them out there. You could see them. But see we wasn’t on them kind of—we did go through lots
but once they see a bunch of group coming and they’re making so much noise then they would scatter.

RV: Today when you hear a particular song does that remind you of your time in Vietnam?

AV: Yeah. Yes.

RV: Which one or which ones?

AV: We might ask my wife because (inaudible). It’s the one my daughter hates.

Scarborough Fair.

RV: By Simon and Garfunkel.

AV: Yeah, right.

RV: So that takes you back there?

AV: Oh, yeah.

RV: Any other ones?

AV: Let’s see. That song about a woman Harper Valley PTA.

RV: Harper Valley PTA.

AV: I wasn’t into music very much.

RV: You said you had not seen or wanted to see some of these Vietnam movies that have been coming out over the years. Have you seen any of them?

AV: No.

RV: Really? So you never saw Apocalypse Now or Platoon?

AV: No. Hamburger Hill, no. If I start watching them I’ve got nightmares. So before I go to bed I always watch something like Cheers or something like that. Then I sleep real good. It depends what happens during the day though. I mean by that, like I contacted some of the parents of people that died by me. Then I’d dream about them that night. Other than that no I’d be okay then.

RV: Do you feel like you suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder?

AV: Oh, I do. No if, and or but. I really don’t have no help for it, but what I’m doing contacting everybody I think is the best.

RV: You did this after you saw We Were Soldiers?

AV: Yes.
RV: You're contacting you said the parents of some of these guys that were killed with you?

AV: Yes.

RV: How are they reacting to you contacting them?

AV: Well, that one sergeant contacted them or somebody did and they didn’t believe him. So when I told them what happened to him ‘cause they thought their boy didn’t get good care or someone didn’t care and just left him lay and die. I told them no. We tried to do our best and we really did try to save him. But half the family, took me in hugged me big time, just like if I was their son. Then the other half, I can’t really judge them. They just looked at me like I’m intruding on their lives maybe or something.

RV: Are you going to still continue to do this?

AV: I’m still going down to the gravesite every year from now on and put flowers on it since I know where it is now.

RV: Have you ever seen the traveling wall?

AV: Yes. I’ve just seen that in Merrillville and it tore me up because a girl from—where does she live in Illinois—Centralia, Illinois. What’s she doing? Sons and Daughters in Touch. She was on the internet to put something and she asked me if I knew her dad and I said no. But then she told me when her dad died and her dad was the one that came to save my butt on that first week.

RV: He was there then?

AV: He died there.

RV: He died there during your first week on patrol?

AV: Right. Right. We’d been lying in foxholes in lines and the Alpha Company was walking by and yelled out to me, “We come to save your butt,” ‘cause I guess they knew the way I was crying that they did come to save my butt, which they really did. Then she found that out. She came all the way—that’s pretty far from my house. She came all the way up to the traveling wall to take me.

RV: Wow. That’s very nice of her.

AV: Yeah. I took pictures of it and they’re beautiful and we both cried a lot. We’re in contact and she’s coming with me to Washington D.C.

RV: That’s great. That’s great.
AV: So she’s a daughter now because her dad died when she was three months old. Her family and her kids are the best two kids I ever seen in my life. I said, “Well, her parents, his side didn’t want nothing to do with her and she’s such a positive person I ever met and I’m a positive person.” I said, “You’re my daughter now.” So now we email all the time.

RV: That’s wonderful.

AV: I’m meeting her at the Wall. Then I’m going to introduce her to my company, 1st of the 12th Charlie Company.

RV: That’s great. Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

AV: I probably will go with her. She wants to put a well in where Tom died and all them guys died. Sam Hill and all them and she wants to put a well in. Remember now what was I doing? I was carrying water.

RV: That’s right. You sure were.

AV: What does she want me to do? Put a well in for water. I haven’t told her yet, but I’m pretty sure I might go because my dad he used to put all his own wells in. So I think I could do it. I might get a grant for it or I’ll just go do it myself.

RV: I wish you luck with that.

AV: I found some people that do that kind of thing. There is people out there that does.

RV: I’m sure there are.

AV: No, I already know.

RV: Okay. Good. What do you think you learned while serving in Vietnam, that you took with you?

AV: Pardon me?

RV: What did you learn in Vietnam if anything?

AV: I tell you what, I can’t hardly read or write so my wife does most of it for me. I thought I was dumb and I found out I’m not dumb at all. In fact I found out I’m real smart. It gives me really more confidence. I know I can do it. That’s just like my first big job I got I couldn’t hardly read or write and they was all laughing at me. Then I told the boss well, give me all the numbers. This is a 24-unit apartment. So the next day
I came in and I gave them all the numbers off my head. He said, “You got the saw man, cut.” Then before you knew it I was foreman.

RV: Really?

AV: So one of the plumbers was working there I worked with two or three years before then said, “If you knew where this guy came from you guys need to shake this guy’s hand.” Because the plumber was asking me where to put the plumbing in and I’m telling him where to put the plumbing in at on the whole unit apartment. They was just carpenter peons and all that.

RV: So you came away with a lot of confidence in yourself?

AV: Oh, most definitely.

RV: Was that from walking point and just learning the country and knowing how?

AV: Yes, it’s from walking point. That’s one thing that did come out positive.

RV: If you had your Vietnam experience to do over again, what if anything would you change about it?

AV: Remember I put on that paper we wasn’t supplied with night scopes.

Everybody should have a compass. More first aid, we didn’t have enough first aid training. In fact we didn’t hardly have any. I definitely would improve on that. They’ve got new weapons out now the Army does that’s probably better. Then I see now they’ve got intercom in between each buddy, which we had chaos over there all the time when we got in a battle. So I can see where that could be real positive. But still even in Afghanistan if they don’t know, if they let them people come back through without their weapons that was a mistake.

RV: Why?

AV: If they’re enemy get them out of that country. Deport them or whatever you’ve got to do or kill them. Because once you let that enemy come back in, it’s just like these Afghanistans and whatever coming in America, if they don’t have the same round base as we do they shouldn’t be in America. I believe that anybody that comes in America should donate two years of their life to America before they can become American.

RV: Meaning like volunteer work or civic work?
AV: Right. Right. Doing bookwork whatever for the government, whatever needs to be done. If they’re not capable of doing that, they don’t belong in America. I hate to say that, but that’s how I feel. Because there’s so many people coming in our country and we’ve got no control over it. Half of them, because I work with lots of foreign people at work, they don’t care nothing about. I said, “If they come get in war, you guys can go.” “Oh, no we’re not going to go fight.” That’s where the problem is. I don’t mind fighting for our country if everybody’s going to do it. I believe that no matter if you’ve got a master’s degree or whatever you’re going to fight too. No college exempts them.

RV: Right. Did that anger you guys when you were over there?
AV: Yeah. When we got over there and we found out what the war was about, yeah. But not before then, no.

RV: How do you feel about your Vietnam service today?
AV: It was just a waste of time.

RV: Why do you say that?
AV: We didn’t really accomplish anything out of it.

RV: How about for you personally?
AV: I did personally because of my attitude. What I’m saying is I’m a positive person, that’s why I’m saying that. But lots of my friends, half the Vietnam people that came out of it, not Vietnam people, but half the Americans came out, they’re trying to drown their memories all the time. I can understand why they do. There’s not a doubt in my mind because if you’re in combat like that, that’s their relief and my relief was doing like the KP duty, whatever I had to do. So I probably became a workaholic over there.

RV: Sir, is there anything else you’d like to add to this oral history interview? Anything else you want to say?
AV: No, I guess not. The only thing I’d say is if we’re going to fight a war, fight to win. Know who the enemy is. I don’t know. It’s just like Afghanistan I don’t know if that’s positive or not. It seemed like we are positive there, but then I don’t know to be honest with you. I don’t know enough about it.

RV: Do you think the government has learned lessons from Vietnam?
AV: Yes, I do think that. I think the lesson they learned is not to get involved in a war unless they’re willing to win. I hope so. Then like if we go into Iraq, I believe what President Bush is doing is right because if we just wait till they make the first move, we’re done. We’re already dead. It depends on what they really know. If they don’t know that much then stay out of it, but if they do know, then get involved. I think he knows more than what he’s telling people. That’s how I feel.

RV: Anything else you’d like to add?

AV: No. My wife might write a book about me and my friends though.

RV: Okay. Well, make sure when she does she can donate it to the archive, part of it we can keep it here for posterities sake.

AV: Okay, then.

RV: Hold on just a second sir, let me sign off. This will end our oral history interview with Mr. Alan VanDan. Thank you very much sir for your time.

AV: Thank you.

RV: We appreciate it very much.