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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Larry Burke
Conducted by Steve Maxner
April 21, 2001
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

NOTE: Text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Dr. Larry
2 Burke on the 21st of April, 2001 at approximately 10:30 Lubbock time. We are in the
3 International Cultural Center in Lubbock, Texas during the Vietnam Center Conference
4 and Counterparts Reunion. Sir, why don't you begin by just giving a brief introduction
5 when and where you were born and where you grew up?

6 Larry Burke: Let me start off by saying that if you want to refer to me as a Dr.
7 Burke, you're in error. I do not have a Ph.D. I am professor of history at Dodge City
8 Community College. I have a Bachelor's and Master's Degree of course in history and
9 many hours beyond that. I don't like for people to think that I am something that I am
10 not.

11 SM: Yes, sir. I apologize sir.

12 LB: I was born in Newton, Kansas in 1939. My parents moved us to Dodge City,
13 Kansas in 1940. Essentially, that has been my home except for my college and my Army
14 experience ever since. I grew up there, went to grade school and all the way through
15 school. I had one brother who was also an Army Veteran and served in Vietnam who is
16 four years younger than I. My sister is 12 years younger. I was always interested in
17 military history and so forth. I was drawn to the military service because of that. My
18 father was a retail merchant. We grew up in a comfortable situation. I participated in
19 athletics. I wasn't a particularly good athlete. I guess for high school I was pretty good.

1 I played football and basketball and ran track. I went to the University of Kansas. I
2 majored in history. I joined the Air Force ROTC program there, but ultimately my
3 eyesight hasn't been as good as I would liked for it to have been. I couldn't pass the
4 eyesight requirements of the Air Force physical. I transferred to Army ROTC and liked it
5 very much and I'm glad I did. I started wearing contact lenses and my vision improved
6 those types of things. So, in Army ROTC I was a distinguished military graduate from
7 there at KU. I graduated in January of 1962. I was awarded a regular Army commission
8 through that DMG program. By that time, I had met the woman that I married, Sonja
9 Hampton. She was from a little town of Oskaloosa, North of Lawrence. Received my
10 first orders to go. I requested armor as my branch. I went to Ft. Knox, Kentucky to the
11 armor basic course. From there we were assigned to the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii.
12 That was my choice in 1962. We went there a couple of young kids from Kansas, and
13 had the experience of traveling there on commercial steamship. The Matsonia was a
14 luxury liner. It was an incredible business. When I got to the 25th division I was
15 assigned to the 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry of the 25th. There I was a reconnaissance
16 platoon leader. I became the support platoon leader, a job I hated with an absolute
17 passion. From there I got good efficiency reports as a recon platoon leader. My support
18 platoon leader efficiency reports weren't as great as I liked them to be because I hated the
19 job. We got a new squadron commander and I was made the aero rifle platoon leader in
20 the new air cav troop of the squadron. A job that I loved about as well as any job I ever
21 had. From there I became the XO of troop B. I left the 25th division in July of 1965. By
22 that time I had transferred to infantry. My experience with the aero rifle team convinced
23 me that I was tired of pulling maintenance on those tanks in a motor pool. That time I
24 had to make a decision. My obligation, my three-year obligation was complete. Am I
25 going to stay in or not? They sent me to the infantry officer's basic course. Not basic
26 course, excuse me, what they called a career course -I think maybe they called it the
27 advanced course now- at Ft. Benning and I decided to stay in. The Vietnam War was of
28 course hovering at that time and heating up. Somehow I just was so confident. My dad
29 asked me [at the time] what about this war thing? I said "ah, I'll be down there [Ft.
30 Benning] for a year. That thing will be over with by the time I get out of there cause we

1 were committing troops there”. Well, silly me. Am I giving you basically what you
2 want?

3 SM: Yes, sir. Absolutely. This might be a good place to pause and let me ask
4 some clarifying questions. As you were growing up of course 1940s and ‘50s height of
5 the Cold War, did you have many relatives that had served in the Second World War that
6 you had contact with and talked to you about that experience?

7 LB: Well, first of all my father was in the Army Air Corps during World War II.
8 He was a radio operator in a B-29 bomber. We lived on a couple of posts with him. We
9 were stationed Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I went to kindergarten at Sioux Falls, South
10 Dakota. We lived in a trailer house. Then he was transferred to Alamogordo, New
11 Mexico to Holloman Air Base down in White Sands. We went down there and of course
12 he was enlisted and the pay wasn’t much. We didn’t have a whole lot of money. We
13 lived in a trailer house in a trailer park at the edge of the desert there. It was a formative
14 experience for me. There’s something about that desert setting that just kind of grows on
15 you after a while. Being close to those air bases and so on I can remember just as a little
16 kid, five, six years old, I can remember the intense patriotism in the country at that
17 particular time. Total determination to win that war. Everybody was united by it. Even
18 as a child you could just sense that it was just a kind of glorious, maybe not glorious.
19 Maybe glorious is not the right word, but a satisfying feeling of everybody just with the
20 same determination going in the same direction. As a child, even as a child, I could sense
21 that and feel it. It’s something that has stuck with me. I don’t want war to unite us like
22 that again obviously, but it was great for the country to be that unified. My dad used to
23 have those little baked plastic models of various aircraft that they would hang in orderly
24 rooms and so forth. And the crew usually would be able to identify the silhouette of
25 airplanes because of the gun or the bomber [they had to recognize friendly aircraft from
26 enemy]. You had to be able to instantly pick them out. Dad used to bring some of those
27 home. I guess that [being there on those bases] developed an intense interest in me for all
28 aircraft and military kinds of things being on the base. So, he [my dad] had orders to go
29 to the Pacific, but he didn’t ever have to go into combat because just prior to his
30 departure they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war was over. I
31 had another uncle married to my mom’s older sister who as a farm boy grew up on a farm

1 south of Pratt, Kansas. He went into the Army. He was an infantryman. He landed at
2 Normandy, not on D-day, but as a replacement a week or so later. He was involved in
3 the Battle of the Hedgerows. He was severely wounded. A mortar shell landed right next
4 to his foxhole. He doesn't know whether it was German or friendly fire. They were
5 pinned down by German machine guns. He was so severely wounded in the arm that the
6 medic couldn't get to him and he took his belt out and made a tourniquet to cut off
7 because he was going to bleed to death. Knew he'd probably lose the arm. Before he
8 lost consciousness he had what I guess you call the consciousness or good thinking to
9 take off his wedding ring and his watch off his left arm because he knew was going to
10 lose it. He lost consciousness. The medics weren't able to get there for a long time. The
11 tourniquet saved his life, but it cost him his arm. His arm was amputated, I think more
12 than once. They tried to save a stub and couldn't so they amputated right at the shoulder.
13 He never had even a stub. He was an extraordinary guy. He'd been a hell of a baseball
14 player before his Army service. He used to come up [to my grandmother's place]. We
15 had family reunions in the late '40s and 50s after the war. He came and played catch
16 with us one handed. Catch the ball with the mitt on the right hand. Threw the ball up,
17 pull the mitt off, catch the ball and then throw it back. Then reach down and put it [the
18 glove] on. He was a great hunter. He won trap shoots. They called him the one-armed
19 bandit because he could hold that [shot gun with] one-arm and shoot the shotgun and
20 shoot 95 out of 100 clay pigeons, stuff like that. That example I guess was there for me.
21 Of course, as I said my brother followed me into the Army. Those are the close relatives
22 that I had in the military service. That's kind of my association with the military and I
23 guess you might say some role model or examples or something. When I was at KU in
24 my ROTC department I remember I had two officers that were there. Major Gilmore and
25 Captain Pilkington or Pinkerton, can't remember what it is now. They were both
26 Airborne. They were Rangers. They were just the kind of guys I admired. They were
27 just outstanding people. I don't know that I consciously said this, but subconsciously I
28 knew when I walked into a class that either of those men was teaching, I know that in my
29 mind, my mind was telling me I want to be just like those guys. Role models are really
30 important in life. I know that I thought to myself I want to be just like those guys. So,
31 those are some I guess influences.

1 SM: Now your father and your uncle did they talk very much about their specific
2 experiences with you?

3 LB: My uncle, the one who lost the arm, it doesn't seem like he was necessarily
4 reluctant to talk about it. I think that a lot of other people in the family and so forth
5 maybe felt like that would be too painful for him, so I don't remember that people
6 brought it up to him and talked to him. There were times when, particularly after I got in
7 the Army where he and I kind of had that in common. Every once in a while he would
8 mention some things about his experiences. Then I did talk to him about it. It didn't
9 seem to be terribly painful for him to talk about. I'm sure it was up to a point, but we did
10 talk about it. As far as my father was concerned, my father's experiences in the military
11 were typical for many. He joined the Army rather than be drafted, but he knew probably
12 he was going to be drafted. That [military service] interrupted his business. He
13 grumbled about it and yet I don't believe I ever heard my dad talk [negatively] about
14 military service after he was out. This was true of most people. The warmth, the
15 comradeship, positive feelings didn't come out. His bomber crew, they were very close.
16 He looked them up after the war. He was one of the few guys down in Alamogordo who
17 had a car so they'd all come over and we'd go up to Ruidoso or places like that. Could
18 jam everyone in that thing and have picnics and things like that. So, you see my
19 memories of that period of time actually they're very positive memories because I was
20 being unaware of the danger that he might have to go in to. It was just kind of a big
21 adventure. I think it was a very positive influence for me.

22 SM: Were there other influences in your life? Not necessarily role models but
23 perhaps popular culture? Reading material, novels or magazines? Movies? Things like
24 that?

25 LB: I've always been an avid reader. And for some reason and I suppose it's
26 probably because of that early experience on the military posts and growing up during
27 World War II. I've always been an avid student I guess we might say of military history.
28 So, when I was growing up I read all kinds of novels and so forth. But I think the ones I
29 probably focused on more than others were war novels. I remember reading Leon Uriss',
30 Battle Cry. Is that right? I think that's right. Ernest Hemmingway's For Whom the Bell
31 Tolls. I thought that was an outstanding book. Military histories I remember reading

1 Panzer Battles by General Von Millenthin, a German officer. I got one of those books in
2 high school and I just poured through that thing. I thought it was fascinating, absolutely a
3 fascinating book. Primarily about armored warfare. That's one reason why I went into
4 tanks when I joined the Army. There are airplane books about it in World War II aerial
5 warfare and that kind of stuff has always been kind of a thing of interest to me [I had a
6 number of books]. You know if I guess, I had a little more time to think about what my
7 favorite books are. I'm an avid reader. My favorite novels are not necessarily war
8 novels, but they [war novels] are among the top 15 or 20. The Killer Angels by Michael
9 Shaara is an absolutely incredible story and captures the emotions and stuff of Battle of
10 Gettysburg and Civil War real well. I've got a library full of books and a lot of them are
11 military history. I used to focus a lot on the Civil War, but all aspects of conflict and so
12 forth interest me. I've done some papers in my professional life on military subjects. I'm
13 tinkering right now, I took a sabbatical and did some writing and thought I'd write
14 something based on my own experiences. Then I got a little discouraged because I didn't
15 like talking about myself on paper like that. And after all who am I? Who's going to be
16 interested in what I have to say? So I turned it into a novel. I haven't finished it yet.
17 Now, I'm actually finishing up a short story and I'm just going to persist until I can get it
18 published. I think it's a pretty good.

19 SM: Was there anything that you remember reading as a young man before
20 entering the military that was particularly influential on your life and some of your
21 decisions to go in the Army? You mentioned the one book on armor. I don't know if
22 Rommel Attacks had been out yet?

23 LB: No. I have the Rommel Papers. I read that as a high school student. I know
24 I'm missing some stuff out there in the way of novels and histories that deal with war that
25 were very influential. One of the reasons why I have a hard time just pulling one out of
26 the air except the ones that I've mentioned. VonManstein's Lost Victories. There are a
27 number of things that I don't know why I just sort of was very interested in that thing. I
28 think a lot of it had traced back to growing up on those Army posts when I was a kid in
29 World War II. Right now I'm trying to think of the other books that I read. I know
30 there's a whole string of them for some reason they're not popping into my mind right

1 now. [One book which was very influential was John Mastes's book, Bugles and a Tiger.
2 That is a wonderful book about a young officer in the pre-WWII British Indian Army].

3 SM: It's a long time ago. Any movies that stand out in your memory that were
4 particularly interesting?

5 LB: You know when you're a kid growing up during and even the years after
6 World War II, they had all these patriotic John Wayne, "The Sands of Iwojima", "30
7 Seconds over Tokyo". Pretty propagandized. Obviously highly patriotic. The enemy
8 was always depicted as inhumane, sub-human creatures. As far as picking out a
9 particular movie or something I don't know that I could do that. Of course, "Gone with
10 the Wind," when you're a kid you see that. A depiction of the Civil War and so forth.
11 So, no I don't specifically remember it. Once again the most influential books and
12 movies in my life as far as really influencing that kind of an outlook on who I am and so
13 forth were the top several were really not war novels. I think another thing that kind of
14 influenced me was my mother's family. She grew up on a farm south of Saint John,
15 Kansas that her grandfather had homesteaded in the 1870s. It was the same house. The
16 same piece of land that they originally homesteaded on the Homestead Act, a timber
17 claim. I used to go out there a lot in the summer because I loved the solitude. I loved to
18 ride on the tractor with my uncle who lived at home there. Eventually I worked out there.
19 I was out there in the summer of 1950. They took a newspaper that was kind of an area
20 newspaper. It was called the Hutchison Herald. It's now called the Hutchinson News.
21 And when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950 I remember even as an 11 year old
22 kid, I can remember the day that that happened and the map of Korea on the front page of
23 the newspaper. Then with every successive newspaper everyday you'd see that
24 shrinking, shrinking, shrinking as the North Koreans pushed the South Koreans and the
25 Americans back down into the Pusan Perimeter. Then the Inchon landing and so forth. It
26 was a fascinating thing to me to read the newspaper and see what was going on. I
27 suppose that being early exposed to World War II and the Korean War [early in life] and
28 the kind of excitement if you want to call it that. It was kind of an influence and peaked
29 my interest to a certain degree.

30 SM: Was that something that you could talk with your parents about? Current
31 political events and activities?

1 LB: Oh, Yeah. I was always really interested in Foreign Affairs and historical
2 events and so forth. My parents had both been to college. My mother had taught grade
3 school. My dad only had one year of college. He was a successful, intelligent, ambitious
4 person who was very successful in his retail career. He was also a hell of a good guy.
5 His interests weren't quite down the same line as mine. He was very interested in his
6 business and focusing on those professional kind of things, but yeah we could talk about
7 those things. I always have had, even as a kid I remember reading avidly about things in
8 foreign affairs and things in other parts of the world. I guess I 've been adventurous and
9 kind of a little bit of a dreamer because I visualize myself being in exotic places doing
10 adventurous kinds of things. That was one thing I look back on my military service.
11 People who never had that experience, and I sure as hell wouldn't want to wish the
12 experience of war on anybody, and even though there are things about it that I wouldn't
13 want to have to do it again, I wouldn't give that up for anything. Let's face it. When I
14 was 27 years old. So, I was a little older and a Captain in the Army. Older than some of
15 the kids who went over there 18, 19, 20 years old. Even at that age some people don't
16 understand that when you're involved in something like that at a young age they don't
17 understand how formative it is. It defines who you are. Therefore I suppose that if on
18 my dying day if someone were to ask me "how do you think of yourself"? I've been a
19 college professor and I've been a very successful college professor. Even though I teach
20 at a small obscure community college, I was the first distinguished faculty award winner
21 in the history of the school and things like that. I think I have a knack for that. That
22 probably fits my personality perfectly. I was a businessman for a long time in the family
23 business. I was not particularly happy in that, but we did well. Then I was an Army
24 officer for six and a half years and then for three more years in reserve until I just ran out
25 of time couldn't do it any more. But if somebody said, "in your heart of hearts how do
26 you see yourself"? I see myself still, not by choice just by definition, I still see myself as
27 an Army officer. I've told people this. It's kind of funny. I think I'm a patriotic guy and
28 all that kind of stuff. Although as you get older you become a little more cynical. But I
29 tell people, you know the thing about the Army was that for six and a half years I never
30 put on that uniform whether it be jungle fatigues out in Vietnam or starched fatigues back
31 at some post or your more dress uniform, khakis or TWs or what have you- I never put

1 that uniform on without really feeling good about myself. I mean I was proud to put that
2 on. My dad, who'd been an enlisted man in the Air Corps, when I was commissioned in
3 the Army he was really proud of that. Really proud. He's dead now, but I do remember
4 how proud he was of that. My parents thought that was a big deal. Growing up on an
5 Army post an Officer kind of had that status that they as enlisted people didn't have. It
6 was sort of a sign I think. This is just another indication that we've arrived; my son's an
7 Army officer and that made me feel good.

8 SM: Yes, sir. It's a very interesting point that you're making. In the United
9 States in America there tends to be this desire and this drive. The responsibility of each
10 generation to make sure the next generation is better off. Was that a driving force at all
11 in your family?

12 LB: Well, there's no question about the fact that it was a driving force for my
13 parents. My mother grew up, she grew up in the Depression in the Dust Bowl Days and
14 all that stuff. Her parents were prosperous farmers. They owned a number of tractors
15 and they owned quite a lot of land even though they did everything a farmer did back in
16 those days in addition to growing wheat and whatever else. They raised chickens and
17 hogs and cattle and everything else. They were pretty prosperous. My dad grew up on a
18 hardscrabble 248-acre farm out in the flint hills of Kansas. Way out in the country from
19 the little town of Eureka. His father died of cancer when my dad was like 15 or 16. He
20 and his brothers, he had four brothers and my grandmother ran that farm. This was
21 during the Depression. My dad hunted cottontail rabbits to sell 15 cents a piece. Two for
22 a quarter. I remember how he used to talk about that. Just to get a little money. Had to
23 drive 18 miles to school. Lived in Eureka sometimes during the winter with his aunt and
24 uncle who were almost like parents to him. My dad was a driven man because he wanted
25 to rise above those rather humble beginnings and be somebody. His brothers were
26 educators. They wanted him, [to be, also but] he was in the shoe business. They wanted
27 him to follow them. He didn't want to do that. He worked in shoe stores and then came
28 to Dodge City and opened up his own shoe department and then expanded into a six-store
29 chain of businesses. My dad had that drive, there's no question about it. My dad went to
30 from those rather humble beginnings to be among the elite of the town. I'm not talking
31 about as a snob. He just wanted to be one of the people who was one of the shakers and

1 the movers. He became the president of the Chamber of Commerce. A respected and
2 well-liked man because my dad was a good guy, a well-liked person in the community.
3 There was no question about his aspirations. Joined the country club that was a big deal
4 to him. Those type of things, built a new house in the up-scale part of town of which he
5 was very proud. Yeah. I don't think there was any doubt about it. I would also like for
6 my children to have things better than I. I've lived a good life, I'd like also for them to
7 have a good life. I want them to be happy with what they're doing, not so much from an
8 economic standpoint because I don't maybe have the same drive for that as my dad had
9 because I always grew up in a comfortable surrounding whereas, he didn't.

10 SM: As you were growing up did your dad ever indicate that he wanted you to
11 follow in his footsteps in the family business? Was he letting you do what you wanted?

12 LB: I worked down there some in the summers. But, it wasn't the kind of work I
13 enjoyed. I'm an outdoors person and I like to do more, as a kid, more manly kinds of
14 things. So, I worked on farms and construction jobs. I worked at a Mayrath machinery
15 company, which made hay bale loaders and grain augers and things like that. It was a
16 miserable, miserable job. I worked there for the experience. I wanted to be outside and
17 do manly kind of work. He [my father] never did put any pressure on me at all. But I left
18 the Army in 1968. I got back from Vietnam in 1967. Left the Army in 1968, not because
19 I didn't enjoy the Army because I loved the Army. But because as an infantry Captain-
20 they came down from the Pentagon when I was at Ft. Knox and said ok guys here's the
21 deal. Infantry captains, here are your scenarios for the next few years. You're in
22 Vietnam, you're at home, you're Vietnam, you're at home, you're at Vietnam before you
23 get a stabilized tour. I'd done, I thought, a pretty decent job when I was there. It wasn't
24 necessarily I was afraid to go back to Vietnam, but I knew the hell that my wife had been
25 through and my parents, too. Because unlike other wars when you watch that damn thing
26 on the 6:00 news every night. I knew when I was safe. As everybody who's been there
27 knows in combat or in a wartime situation, the majority of the time you're probably about
28 as safe as you were at home. Maybe not quite, but you're not in extreme danger. It's just
29 those certain times when hell breaks loose that you're in tremendous danger. But I knew
30 when those were. To them it was constant. Frankly I just didn't want to put them through
31 that again. I didn't like the idea of having to move my family repeatedly. My wife was a

1 girl who'd grown up in a really stable family situation. Even though she never
2 complained about it, I knew that moving around and going through that again wouldn't
3 be fair. I just didn't want to put her through that. So I resigned my regular commission
4 and transferred to the reserves and came back to Dodge City. I joined the family
5 business but not because my dad had put any pressure on me. As a matter of fact the
6 retail business can be a dog eat dog thing. I think had it been a peacetime situation I
7 think he would have said, boy just stay in the Army. I probably would have. It wasn't
8 just necessarily fear of going back to Vietnam. It was the instability of my rank and my
9 branch at that time. You just met yourself coming and going to and from Vietnam. I
10 don't know if in a five-year period anybody ever actually went to Vietnam three years,
11 every other year unless they kind of volunteered for it, but that was the projection.

12 SM: When you were in school, when you were going to college at the University
13 of Kansas, in your ROTC classes was there a heavy emphasis at all on military history?

14 LB: We did have a course in military history. But I think just one. There wasn't
15 a real big emphasis on that. The typical ROTC courses and now, Lord, it's been so long I
16 can't remember what they were. You had some courses in small unit tactics. I just ate
17 them up. In part because I always looked forward to going to those classes. First of all,
18 because those two officers in particular that I had were such role models, inspiring people
19 and good instructors. They made the class interesting. I kind of like the structure of the
20 military and the discipline and the things that they command and when they walked in to
21 the room everybody stood up. They were just outstanding kinds of people in every
22 respect as far as I was concerned. Not only the fact that they wore the uniform and were
23 Air Borne Ranger and all that kind of stuff. They were trim and athletic and decisive, but
24 because essentially you knew they were good people. You also knew you didn't cross
25 them. You didn't challenge them at all. They were in charge of military discipline and
26 yet they had that rapport that a good officer has with the enlisted people or the people that
27 are under him. There's a line you don't cross. There's a rapport that develops there
28 where they respect you and after the respect is established they also come to like you.
29 Those guys were like that.

1 SM: Was there anything else from your ROTC experience that you took away
2 from it that was a good learning experience that was important for you as an Army
3 officer?

4 LB: Well, of course ROTC summer camp, when I was down there at Ft. Riley,
5 Kansas. Some people look back at their ROTC summer camp experience and laugh
6 about it and so forth. I can up to a point. We had a tactical officer who was a captain, an
7 old Captain. I mean back in those days before the Vietnam War really got going you had
8 old Captain's. This guy had been around. He was an armor officer. He carried a riding
9 crop. This guy was just mean. He was mean. Captain Wallace. Whereas, other people
10 had, he made our lives hell. He really did. That was a tough experience, but it was
11 probably good for me because it toughened me up. Later on when I went to Ranger
12 school and some stuff, like that even though I'm not going to try to equate Army ROTC
13 summer camp with Ranger school by any means, it was a very hardening, toughening
14 experience. It was a good experience. It was essentially a good experience. Even
15 though we were worn out all the time and so on and so forth. I can look back on that now
16 and say boy that was a good experience in my life.

17 SM: What was your first impression when you went ahead on active duty went to
18 Ft. Knox to your armor course. What were your first impressions of your active duty
19 military experience?

20 LB: Like any brand new Second Lieutenant, I suppose, you go to Ft. Knox and
21 even though you've been through ROTC and ROTC summer camp and you know the
22 rudiments there's a butterfly in your stomach. This is a whole new world out here. So,
23 you're apprehensive because the Army is, harsher may not be quite the right word, but
24 for a new guy coming on to a post you're unsure of yourself. But it was good. We lived
25 in New Garden Apartments. This huge apartment building with these efficiency
26 apartments for these young officer's who'd come in there. One of those deals where you
27 pull the bed out of the wall. You've got a kitchen, a living room/bedroom, and a
28 bathroom. My wife- we were married by then with all the other young married officers.
29 During the day I don't see how she kept from going nuts, because there just wasn't any
30 space in there and so forth. But once you kind of got over the initial apprehensiveness of
31 now I am an Army officer and now I'm on this post and I'm new and I'm unsure of

1 myself and I don't know what I'm doing. I'm going to do the best I can. Well, then once
2 you kind of get into the feel of it, so you're comfortable in that environment, then it was a
3 good experience. Then we're going to go to Hawaii. Even though we were a couple of
4 kids who'd never done anything like that, certainly that was an adventure and we were
5 looking forward to that.

6 SM: So you knew very shortly after you got to Ft. Knox that you were going to
7 the 25th Division?

8 LB: Well, actually I think I probably I knew I was assigned to the 25th division
9 even before I went to Ft. Knox because those were part of my orders. Back in those days,
10 I don't know what it's like now, if you were a Regular Army officer and a Regular Army
11 Second Lieutenant; you normally got your initial choice tour of duty. They tried to send
12 you to the place you wanted to go. I think it was probably so you'd have a positive
13 experience and continue in the Army. That was my first choice and I got it.

14 SM: When you arrived there and started your training how much emphasis did
15 they place on when you're talking armor you're talking World War II. I was curious if
16 that early if there was any talk about other theatres of war?

17 LB: I'm going to put it this way. That's been a long time ago so I can't
18 remember for sure. I don't remember. That would have been in 1962 and I don't
19 remember there being any discussion about any type of counter insurgency, anti-guerilla
20 type things. This was all a European scenario with your tanks ramming around out there
21 and so forth. I remember one day near the end of the class where they'd take us out there
22 and you're the platoon leader and you've got a tank platoon or a recon platoon. Which is
23 much more complex because you've got your scouts. I don't know what they're
24 organized like now TO&E. You had your scouts and you had your tank section. You
25 had your infantry squad. You had your mortar squad. You had a combined arms team.
26 They're scattered all over hell's half acre out there in front. You have to learn how to
27 coordinate those troops that you can't see. Five tanks, that's no sweat, but when you go
28 to a recon platoon that's a whole other ballgame. That's probably the best training that
29 an Army officer could ever have. First time as a recon platoon leader because he's
30 leading a combined arms team and those people are scattered all over and you've got
31 your own fire support. Tanks, you've got infantry, scouts the whole business. When we

1 were down there I remember the days that we went out there and we were recon platoon
2 leaders. All a bunch of squirrely young Second Lieutenants. It would just be a fiasco.
3 You know guys couldn't remember where all the stuff was. They couldn't see
4 everything. TAC officers would just go bonkers with us because we screwed everything
5 up so bad. I learned to do that when I was in Hawaii. Boy that was a good experience.
6 Jiminy Christmas that was a good experience there.

7 SM: Well, at Ft. Knox at the armor basic course how much of an emphasis and
8 I'm sure it was probably discussed in training, issues like prepositioning and poor
9 positioning field points. Not out running your logistics lines. Not out running your
10 infantry support. Were these types of things do you remember were they discussed
11 frequently?

12 LB: I'm sure that they probably really touched on those things. I remember
13 communication classes and having to deal with the radios and all that kind of stuff.
14 Probably like any young Second Lieutenant who's in a combat branch, you want to know
15 about the meat and potatoes of how to run your rifle platoon or your recon platoon or
16 your tank platoon. As far as that mundane stuff like preposition fuel supplies and don't
17 outrun them, when they come to that stuff, your mind wanders. That's not what you want
18 to do. So, I don't even remember. I'm sure we had classes on that, but that's a lost topic.
19 I remember some of the tactical kinds of stuff that we dealt with, but as far as that kind of
20 stuff, blah.

21 SM: What do you remember about the tactical aspects?

22 LB: Just how on paper to deploy your tanks. How to deploy your recon platoon.
23 Infantry, I went to ROTC summer camp where we did all these, get in position and get
24 your base of fire going, your mortars and then you have platoon attack and all that stuff.
25 So, I remember those types of things. I remember them well, because those were the
26 things we would concentrate on in ROTC summer camp and to a certain degree in the
27 classroom setting too. Map exercises, stuff like that. I just ate that stuff up. Maps were
28 always just fascinating to me. I think that because of that and I don't want to sound
29 arrogant here, but I could read a map like when I went to Vietnam in our battalion I
30 became the S3 air after I'd been a company command for a while. The battalion
31 commander, was the third one I had. He was not my favorite of the bunch. He couldn't

1 read a map worth a hoot. When we would get in the helicopter and fly around why, I
2 always knew where we were and he didn't have a clue, so he depended on me. I like the
3 map exercises and things of that nature. Those are some of the things I remember off the
4 top of my head.

5 SM: In your training at Ft. Knox, it's typical land nav, of course, is ground land
6 nav where you have a compass and you're either walking or running. In armor school
7 did they have an armor based land navigation course? Of course a big difference when
8 you're riding in a vehicle at high speeds sometimes, maybe slower. It's a very different
9 experience? Did they train you?

10 LB: I'm sure they did and I don't remember. I remember the, what is it where
11 you run from point to point to point on a compass? What do we call that thing? It's on
12 the tip of my tongue and I can't think of it. I don't remember doing that in an armored
13 vehicle and all that kind of stuff. No, I don't. They probably did but I just don't
14 remember it.

15 SM: What kind of tanks were you trained on at Ft. Knox?

16 LB: M-48s primarily. Yeah, M-48s. Then when we got to Hawaii in the
17 armored cavalry squadron we had the M-41 Walker Bulldog a kind of a light tank, .76
18 mm gun. Pushing obsolescence at that time. You know at that time and place it was an
19 appropriate vehicle for what they wanted to do.

20 SM: How much did they train you on gunnery while you were at Ft. Knox?

21 LB: I remember going out, being the gunner on an M-48 and firing a tank gun
22 and all that stuff. So, we had some of that. We fired live ammunition and so on. I think
23 being a tank gunner, you can take all the marksmanship training on the rifle range, but
24 until you really learn and it takes a while. Until you really learn to hold your breath and
25 squeeze that trigger and keep your eye on the target, so that when the rifle discharges it
26 takes you by surprise. If you don't do that you're going to flinch. I went through sharp
27 shooter maybe fired expert, but I didn't know how to fire a rifle until one day I went on
28 the rifle range, near the end of my tour at Scheffield Barracks. By that time I had
29 transferred infantry and they put me in an infantry battalion for the rest of my tour, which
30 was only a month or so. I was in competition with some guys who knew how to shoot
31 and I didn't want to embarrass myself so I really had to focus. That day I learned how to

1 fire a rifle. I mean I learned if you had your rifle zeroed on a known distance range and
2 they put that target out there at 300 meters you put the elevation and windage in there.
3 You lay that thing on the bull's eye and squeeze that trigger you could hit that damn
4 bull's eye from 300 yards as long as that round took you by surprise so you didn't flinch.
5 Boy that was a revelation to me. Now, back to tank gunnery we never had enough
6 experience training at Ft. Knox to really learn how to fire that gun. You know you fire
7 and you've got your cross hairs on there and then you see where the round lands on the
8 target and then you miss probably a little bit. If you had then you moved the spot on that
9 down to where the cross hairs were and fire again. But we didn't fire enough rounds to
10 really develop any kind of tank gun marksmanship. They would just expose us to it.
11 After all we would be tank commanders not gunners.

12 SM: So, more familiarity training?

13 LB: Right.

14 SM: What individual rifle or pistol training did you receive at Ft. Knox?

15 LB: To be honest with you I remember very well when I was in ROTC going
16 down and firing the M-1 at Ft. Leavenworth in ROTC summer camp, firing the M-1 and
17 the BAR, the 3.5 inch rocket launcher. We had to do all that kind of stuff. At Ft. Knox,
18 we probably had some but I don't even remember it. I can't answer your question. It's
19 just lost.

20 SM: They had personal individual weapons on the tanks, didn't they?

21 LB: Well, you know as a tanker you usually carried a caliber .45 pistol and then
22 they had that caliber .45 grease gun on there. Which was kind of an interesting weapon.
23 I never saw anybody fire that thing in combat or anything like that. I remember you go
24 out to the range. We had to go out to the range and fire that thing. The muzzle velocity
25 on it-it was an effective weapon for close hand fighting, the muzzle velocity on it was so
26 low that actually you stood there and a lot of people just don't believe this. But after you
27 stood there and got your eyes acquainted you could actually see the round going down
28 range. You really could. You could really pick up the round going down range. It took a
29 long time to adjust your eye, but pretty soon you could just sort of see that streak. You
30 couldn't do that with any other weapon, but that .45 caliber grease gun, submachine the

1 muzzle velocity was so low that it didn't have very good range. It was for close hand
2 fighting, but that's essentially it. Of course, you got your machine gun on your tank.

3 SM: That was Coax 762?

4 LB: .50 caliber.

5 SM: Oh, .50 caliber ok. Now the grease gun was it easy to handle when it was on
6 automatic?

7 LB: Yeah. It was a weapon made of simple stamped out parts. It would buck
8 like the thunder. It had a tremendous kick to it. So you really had to hold it down. I
9 don't care who you were, it's just something to spray an area with. It had such a kick to
10 it and firing automatic you're just going to splatter rounds all over. But that was
11 essentially the purpose of it I guess.

12 SM: When you left your armor basic course, did you feel prepared to tackle the
13 world of armor out in the real Army?

14 LB: No. Not really. All you'd done was just being acquainted with the basics
15 and I suppose most any young officer would say that when he came out of his basic
16 course he knew just enough not to make a complete fool of himself the first few weeks or
17 months of being a platoon leader you know. Before you learn to be a platoon leader you
18 don't want to be a platoon leader in the basic course. At least, I don't know what it's like
19 now. But not then. You were familiarized; you learned to be a platoon leader by being a
20 platoon leader in a line company or a line troop or something like that. That's where you
21 learned. That's where you learned to be an officer. You had enough training that you
22 could put on the appearance of being an officer in these other schools and through your
23 ROTC and all that kind of stuff. You learn to be an Army officer by practicing on the
24 job. That's the way I felt about it anyway. I remember the first time I stood out in front
25 of my platoon. I went over to Pohakaloa training area, which is over on the Big Island.
26 They were out there training and I went over to join them. Here we were out in Hawaii
27 this area [training area] between to extinct volcanoes. Lava flows, craters, stuff like that,
28 it's like a mountain moon in Hawaii [at Pohakaloa]. Up high, it gets cold there at night. I
29 remember standing out there on a dusty street in front of my Quonset hut of my platoon
30 and talking to them about who I was and everything. You're nervous and hope to hell
31 you don't make a complete idiot out of yourself. You've got to depend on your platoon

1 sergeant to kind of help you along. My platoon sergeant was a hell of a soldier, but he
2 was hard headed and I was hard headed so we clashed sometimes rather than building a
3 rapport. He told me one time that I was the most hardheaded Second Lieutenant that he'd
4 ever been around. He and I used to go nose to nose, but I learned a lot from him. Then
5 later I moved on and took over another platoon. Then he and I came to be much more
6 respectful on a friendly basis because we weren't in the same deal where our hard
7 headedness locked horns. But I learned. I learned on the job, just like most everybody
8 else does.

9 SM: A couple of interesting events occurred. Especially the year that you were
10 there at Ft. Knox. I assume that you left after October of '62? When did you leave?

11 LB: No. Actually I went to Hawaii in August of 1962. So, I went to Ft. Knox I
12 believe later part of April or May of 1962.

13 SM: So, actually just shortly after you arrived in Hawaii of course the Cuban
14 Missile Crisis hit. Do you remember hearing about it? What was the atmosphere like the
15 25th ID?

16 LB: You know, once again that's a question that I can't answer. I teach the
17 Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember it and yet, at the time. The thing that I remember in
18 Hawaii more so than anything like the Cuban Missile Crisis and of course in those years
19 we were all Cold War years. We saw ourselves. I really mean this. I try to emphasize
20 this to my students in class. They grew up in such a different world I don't know if they
21 can really understand this. I'm not answering your question directly, but how people who
22 grew up in the early '60s and were part of this real at least to us, perceived real threat of
23 Communism. This was something that we have to stand up to. Back in those days when
24 they had the draft and I think this is tragic for the country- for the country now, because
25 we don't have a draft I think it's too bad. When I was in high school they pretty well
26 knew they were going to have to face the possibility of military service. So, as a result of
27 that some people said that was just kind of part of your life. The possibility of military
28 service. You usually joined, go ahead and got it out of the way or you went through
29 ROTC or you maybe didn't want to you joined the National Guard or the Reserve. So in
30 American society, in civilian society coming out of WWII and all that kind of stuff and
31 even into the '60s people were familiar with the military. It wasn't some distant alien

1 kind of out of the way kind of thing. I think some of my kids in my classes at the college;
2 they have no concept of what the military is. They don't know people who've been there.
3 If they do well, these are guys who joined for some weird reason. Therefore the
4 knowledge, the understanding, the feel for military life. We're losing it in American
5 society. I just think that is really too bad because that wasn't the case with me. Now, ok
6 you asked me about the Cuban Missile crisis off I go on one of those tangents. I don't
7 specifically remember that event specifically when I was in Hawaii. I do remember
8 Berlin and West Berlin surrounded by East Germany and the contingent of troops we had
9 there. All that to me I remember was a focal point, the flash point that could potentially
10 cause us a lot of problems. Even though when I was in Vietnam, Vietnam was heating up
11 when I was in Hawaii rather, Vietnam was heating up. Eventually from the 25th division
12 they'd asked for volunteers to go over there [Vietnam] and be door gunners for a
13 helicopter unit and so on. People from the cav squad could go over there. Maybe for 90
14 days and come back. Wow. That kind of a situation. So, we did send door gunners to
15 Vietnam. You could volunteer to do that.

16 SM: What time period was that?

17 LB: Oh, as I recall that would have been a little bit later on '64 probably into '65
18 when they asked for volunteers to go over to Vietnam and be door gunners for helicopter
19 units. That's probably when the helicopters were mostly Sikorsky banana boats with the
20 twin rotors. Boy you talk about it [scary]. Every time you get up. I used to get these
21 helicopters from division aviation company. They'd do training for my with my aero
22 rifle platoon because we hadn't got on our contingent of helicopters yet. It was all on
23 paper, but we hadn't gotten one. So, we had to add their resources to do exercises and
24 learn how to do helicopter stuff. As I look back on that now I remember one day we
25 were flying along and one guy auto rotated and set it down in a pineapple field because
26 some warning light had come on. Here's all this red dust and I thought, "My God, I hope
27 this guy's okay," and then I could see the rotor were still turning and everything was ok,
28 but that was a shaky piece of equipment. That was an advanced idea in the primitive
29 state of development I'll tell you for sure.

30 SM: I didn't ask at Ft. Knox, but I would like for you to discuss it at Ft. Knox
31 and then 25th ID. How many live fire exercises did you guys have?

1 LB: I remember going through live fire exercises, if I'm not mistaken during
2 ROTC summer camp. I think we probably did one at Ft. Knox. If we went through live
3 fire exercise with 25th Infantry Division, I don't remember. We went through the jungle
4 warfare-training center out there, which was good training. The training I thought we
5 received when I was in the 25th Division was good training given the fact that training
6 areas were around Oahu and around Scofield Barracks were limited. You didn't have
7 great stretches of terrain that you could get out and roam around on. That's why we
8 loaded our tanks and personnel carriers and sailed to Pohakaloa because it's a wider area
9 that you could train in. But as fast as specific kinds of live fire exercises in Hawaii we
10 may have done it. I suppose we probably did I just don't remember for sure.

11 SM: I want to discuss jungle warfare training. One quick question about just life
12 in Hawaii generally. What was the relationship like between the American soldiers and
13 the Anglo-Americans and the native Hawaiian population?

14 LB: I think pretty good. I think pretty good. I don't remember that there were
15 any particular problems. Sometimes the Anglos would refer to the Hawaiian as
16 pineapples, that type of thing. Of course the people of Hawaii, there's been a military
17 presence there. Pearl Harbor Naval Base, Army to such a degree that that's one of the
18 main economic mainstays on the island of Oahu, that and tourism. As far as there being
19 friction or fights I think that the Hawaiian people were very much used to the military. It
20 was just a part of their everyday life. They'd grown up with that. It wasn't any big deal
21 to them. There wasn't any particular resentment or anything like that. I don't remember
22 that at all.

23 SM: Of course, you were in the military not just at the height of the Cold War,
24 but also the height of the Civil Rights movement. How did that effect the military and
25 did you see any changes over time? Especially for the first few years where you were in
26 25th ID.

27 LB: When I was in the 25th Infantry Division we had a number of Black soldiers.
28 I don't remember there being any difficulties there. I think the Army has really been in
29 the forefront for upward mobility for disadvantaged groups. I think that's one thing that
30 American society just doesn't understand; that the military has always been out front. If
31 you want an opportunity to be somebody you could get it in the Army or the military

1 service probably before you get it in any other place else in American society. I look at
2 that with a certain degree of pride. I really do. I think that's a wonderful
3 accomplishment. I think that even in the '60s if you were a Black soldier you did your
4 job for instance, that was not a big deal now. I will tell you this. After I got back from
5 Vietnam and I was stationed at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. At that time they were putting a lot
6 of emphasis on basic training. Where as in years before basic training company
7 commanders might have been Second Lieutenants or First Lieutenants. In 1968, '67-'68
8 they put a lot of emphasis on sending combat experienced officers to basic training
9 battalions so that they would have the benefit of combat experience. I was at Ft. Knox. I
10 remember I was there when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I thought the wheels
11 were falling off the country. I was concerned. Many of the soldiers that we got were
12 draftees and we got them from Detroit, being close by. I don't know but it seemed to me
13 that the racial relationships in Detroit must be the worst of any place in the country. We
14 had Black kids come down there who had never been around White people to any degree
15 before. They were suspicious. They were somewhat hostile given the racial tension in
16 the country at the time. I can remember one of the first things that I'd say in my briefing
17 to the new troops as we filled. We called it filled with new trainees. We started basic
18 training and I get up there on the stage by that time I was back from Vietnam. I was an
19 Airborne Ranger, combat infantry badge all that kind of stuff. I'd stand up there so they
20 knew they were talking to somebody who had some experience. I would tell them, forget
21 this business about race and color. It doesn't make any difference to me. You're not
22 Black, you're not White. You're the color of the uniform you wear. I think and a lot of
23 my Drill Sergeants were Black Drill Sergeants. They were good soldiers. I do remember
24 that race was a problem we had to address and deal with. Although I don't ever
25 remember it as something that we could not overcome and deal with as well.

26 SM: While we're on the subject, I'm sorry were you going to say something else?

27 LB: I don't know, maybe this is the purpose of this whole business. I think that
28 one of the things that I can remember in my Army experience that stands out is an
29 accomplishment. We had a Black kid from Detroit who was in our company, one of our
30 trainees. He was big. He was handsome. He was physical in that he was a dominating
31 physical presence. He was trouble, trouble, trouble. His Drill Sergeant, platoon

1 Sergeant, couldn't really handle him. He was a Black Platoon Sergeant and he [the drill
2 sergeant] couldn't handle him. The guy was causing trouble and so he wanted me to talk
3 to him. By then I was back from Vietnam, totally confident in my abilities and all that
4 kind of stuff. When I used to go out to visit the troops I would always carry a big stick.
5 Just a walking stick type thing. I had that stick lying on my desk. The First Sergeant
6 who was the best First Sergeant I ever had in the Army, Sergeant William Wilkerson. He
7 and I still send Christmas cards to each other every year. That's been going on now for
8 30 years. You don't miss sending a Christmas card at Christmas. God, he was a good
9 First Sergeant. I liked him. He was my right hand. He was sitting there. He was in there
10 when I'm interviewing this kid. This kid came in and I just ate his butt up one side and
11 down the other and used the stick to emphasize points on the desk. Almost like, he didn't
12 say anything, but he wondered if I was going to use it on him. He was sullen. I told him,
13 I said, "look at me, look at me". So he looked me in the eye and I gave him hell. I told
14 him "you get out of line again and you're going to go to the stockade." I said, "I want
15 you to look at me." He looked at me. I said, "Let me tell you something." I said, "You
16 know, you don't realize this, but you have leadership skills. People do what you want
17 them to. You run that platoon up there and you're using it right now to cause Sergeant
18 Williams trouble." I said, "Do you understand what leadership skills you have?" I said,
19 "Look at the first Sergeant over there. Look at those stripes up and down his arm. I said,
20 "You know the way the Army is now in a couple years you could be wearing stripes.
21 You can be somebody. You've got skills. You can be a hell of a soldier. That kid
22 looked at me sort of like that was something that never had crossed his mind." I said,
23 "You've got your choice. You can be somebody and make something of your life, you
24 can go back home one of these days to Detroit wearing your uniform with stripes on your
25 shoulder, on your arm. You could be somebody because you're a leader." Within a
26 week, the platoon sergeant said, "I don't know what you told him." My first Sergeant
27 said, "Sir I really liked the way you talked to that kid." Platoon Sergeant comes down
28 and a new drill sergeant comes and said, "I don't know what happened because that guy
29 took over. He took over and when you walk in that bay, the floors are clean and his boots
30 were shining. Anybody in that platoon dare get out of line had to deal with him." This
31 guy had leadership ability. When he graduated, I remember that was one of the most

1 rewarding things about my career. He went on to AIT, this kid. Advanced Infantry
2 Training. One time they had a break and we had a new class and we were out and he
3 came back. He came back and he was wearing a Cadet or whatever acting NCO patch on
4 his uniform up here. His boots looked like black pools. He was every inch a soldier. He
5 came back just to kind of let us know, you guys did something for me. He didn't come
6 right out and say thank you for telling me that, sir. He was sort of like a changed person.
7 I liked to think that maybe in that particular case I turned somebody's life around. I hope
8 so.

9 SM: That's a great story.

10 LB: Yeah. Good story. One of the really rewarding things in my life. I'm not
11 kidding. I hope to hell that he went on and made something of himself. I hope he didn't
12 go to Vietnam and get killed. That kid had the opportunity to be one hell of a leader.

13 SM: The jungle warfare training center. How long did that training last and what
14 was involved?

15 LB: All units in the 25th division had to go out to this jungle warfare-training
16 center, which was out in the boondocks at the foot of the Koolau mountain range. I'm
17 not sure right where. It was the mountain range that runs the length of Oahu on the
18 windward side. It was at the base of those mountains. You had to go out there. You
19 were usually out about a week. It wasn't anything that I remember as being terribly
20 strenuous. You had the typical types of training survival kinds of skills. You did the
21 slide for life thing only instead of the pulleys and the cable you had a rope and a guava
22 stick that was carved. The way you slowed yourself down was you twisted that stick as
23 you went down the rope. It was more primitive. They fix you up a stew with
24 grasshoppers floating around in it. Stuff like that. You were out there and you were wet.
25 It rains a lot there and you could be fairly miserable. I don't remember that as anything
26 particularly strenuous. It was just a good experience to go out there in the jungle and
27 roam around out there at the foot of the mountain range and so forth. Every unit, since
28 we were in the Tropic Lightning Division, the division was probably slated to be the
29 reaction force to any flash points in the more tropic-jungle type atmosphere. Everybody
30 had to go through that jungle warfare training center. I think you had to go through there
31 once a year, annual kind of training.

1 SM: Did you ever go through any kind of other specialized training?

2 LB: Yeah. One of the things I do remember. I remember especially in Hawaii
3 we had to go through POW training. You were POWs and they put you in this camp,
4 which they copied off the Korean experience. They had these guards a lot of them
5 Hawaiian or Oriental who were obviously U.S. soldiers but of Asian descent, wearing
6 Chinese padded uniforms and stuff like that. By golly, I tell you what, I remember that
7 deal was a very realistic thing. They tried to make it realistic because it was pretty harsh.
8 Not that anybody was physically abused or beaten but sometimes you wondered if that
9 wasn't coming. I think the Army really put a lot of emphasis on it because after the
10 Korean War there was a lot of dissatisfaction expressed about maybe the conduct of U.S.
11 soldiers in a prison camp situation. Be able to resist the kinds of pressures and brain
12 washing and stuff. I think in Korea there had been a number of them who'd caved in and
13 signed those propaganda tracts and so forth. That was a point of emphasis at the time. I
14 do remember that specialized training. I also went to CBR school. Chemical Biological,
15 Radiological Warfare. I think it only lasted a week or ten days. One of the things I
16 remember most about that, outside of the gas chamber, was putting a droplet of mustard
17 gas on the back of your hand and the blister showing up there in a short period of time
18 and having to give yourself a shot like you do with the atropine syrette. Not to push air
19 and the needle comes out automatically. Screw in there that big damn needle, you stick it
20 in your leg yourself. Giving yourself a shot, even for a tough guy, is not the easiest thing
21 in the world. One of the things I remember most about that was we were sitting there in
22 class one day and the NCO who was running the class came in and said "Gentlemen,
23 your president had just been shot." That's the day that Kennedy was assassinated. Of
24 course, everybody who was alive remembers what they were doing the minute that they
25 got that shocking news. I remember that in particular. So, CBRE school, jungle warfare
26 training center. That POW camp experience. After I was an aero rifle platoon leader and
27 had some great experiences there we'd go to Pohakaloa for our annual training test. This
28 is where the squadron was really under the gun. Squadron commander, efficiency report
29 and evaluation depending on how he performed. One of the things he had us do, we
30 didn't have any helicopters but they trucked us. Simulating helicopters, my aero rifle
31 platoon was supposed to go behind enemy lines and go across those damn lava fields and

1 establish a roadblock. Down one of the roads where the tanks could not get off one
2 because it was a lava field. So, we established this roadblock and when the squadron
3 attacked and then these guys got piled up there because we were holding them. We
4 theoretically wiped out the whole group. My platoon got a lot of applause because we
5 contributed to that. Pohakaloa was an interesting place to go to train. Some people liked
6 it, some people didn't. It was like the mountains of the moon. It was the damndest
7 terrain you've ever seen. It was also good experience. It would be cold up there at night
8 and hot during the day. So, when you went out you wore Long John's in the morning
9 because you'd freeze you butt off if you didn't and field jacket and all that kind of stuff.
10 When the sun came up it would bear down on you and then everybody's peeling off all
11 this stuff. You're covered with that lava dust. You couldn't see even with goggles. But,
12 at night we had a little Quonset hut for an officer's club. We'd go up there and build a
13 fire in the fireplace and play liar's dice and cards and sing. It was a wonderful
14 experience. I relate to this and this is probably not the kind of stuff you're looking for.
15 My squadron commander in the 4th cav that I had was a guy by the name Colonel Guy K.
16 Troy. He was a good man. He was a little flamboyant. He liked to keep the old cavalry
17 tradition alive. Troop, hell we were all tanks and all that kinds of stuff. He would troop
18 the line and have reviews on horseback. That kind of stuff he liked to do. Cowboy kind
19 of stuff. One night we were over there for the annual training test, I think. We'd finished
20 and we'd passed and gotten all kinds of good reviews on what we'd done. So, we went to
21 the Officer's club and were just having a great time celebrating and so forth. People
22 probably had too much to drink and we were singing these old Army songs and so on.
23 There were a couple of Second Lieutenants. I was a First Lieutenant. Couple Second
24 Lieutenants one was a West Pointer, one a kid from Minnesota and they had too much to
25 drink and they left the Office's Club, which had big double doors and a wooden stairway
26 that came up to them. They left and went down to the motor pool and confiscated a gun
27 jeep. What they told the guards who were on duty, I don't know. They got a .30 caliber
28 machine gun out of the weapons room, loaded the sucker up with blank ammunition, put
29 it on the pedestel mount. Drove up to the officer's club. Everybody's in there singing
30 and carrying on. I had just left to go back to my BOQ because I was tired. When I was
31 up there I could hear them singing the old cavalry song. "Around her neck she wore

1 yellow ribbon”, you know. “And when I asked why her the hell she wore it, she wore it
2 for her lover in the U.S. Cavalry. Cavalry.” You know how they sing that song. Then I
3 heard the roar of this engine. Well, what these guys had done was they drove, these two
4 Second Lieutenants, drove this gun jeep up to the officer’s club. Up the stairs. One
5 jumped out, threw those double doors open, drove that gun jeep into the Officer’s club
6 and opened up with this .30 caliber machine gun with these blanks. Bap, bap, bap, bap,
7 bap. You could hear the shell cases hitting the floor. The sound of that. Guys diving
8 under tables. I mean beer bottles crashing. When I heard this long burst of machine gun
9 fire I thought my God some NCO has gone berserk. Because I’d been an officer if they
10 didn’t close that NCO club sometimes could be pretty rowdy. I thought some NCO’s got
11 drunk, gone berserk and killing all the officers. I heard this burst. Then there’s this
12 absolute dead silence. I think that these two Second Lieutenants after that they realized
13 oh, my God what have we done? Here’s all these other guys on the floor and everything.
14 Colonel Troy, he gets up out of there he looks at this. He’s just stunned. He looks and
15 sees these guys standing over there. Of course, this is the moment of truth and then he
16 just bursts out laughing. Because to him, you see, he thought this is just the way a couple
17 of good Second Lieutenants in the cavalry ought to act. They never got into any trouble
18 at all for that deal if you can believe it. I’m sure he said don’t ever do that again. Pretty
19 soon I’m sitting there and here’s this stunned silence after this machine gun burst. My
20 God should I get out of my bunk or what? I wonder what I ought to do. Then pretty soon
21 I hear, “Around her neck,” they were all singing. It was wonderful. It was great. Those
22 are some of the things I remember about the Army. People who haven’t had that
23 experience they just have no idea what they’re missing. They haven’t got a clue as to
24 what they’re missing.

25 SM: So, it sounds like morale was pretty high in the 25th?

26 LB: It was great. It was great.

27 SM: Let’s see. CBR training. I’m curious how the issue of the atomic
28 battlefield, the nuclear battlefield was addressed in both your armored training and then
29 whatever training you received when you arrived with the 25th ID?

30 LB: Once again, it’s been a long time ago. At the basic course I don’t remember
31 except your tank is going to give you some protection against radiation, blast, the heat all

1 that kind of business. AT CBR school I remember more of the chemical aspect of that
2 rather than radiological warfare because at that stage in the game they're either going to
3 teach you how to take protective measures and so on. When I went to the career course,
4 part of our training at the Infantry Officer career Course was to become a nuclear
5 weapons employment officer. You had a particular number added to your MOS to show
6 that. There you get into the nitty gritty of airbursts and stand off distance and half-life
7 and radiological decay. The two different types of materials and how they'll shield you
8 from radiation. You learned that extensively at career course, but over in Hawaii as far as
9 atomic warfare and stuff like the training we got I don't think that was a real point of
10 emphasis. I don't think they were anticipating it. We were probably weren't going to
11 run into anything like that. Like everything else they give us some lip service and we did
12 pass something. I don't remember at least it being a big point in my training. Even
13 though in our cavalry squadron my best friend was the Davy Crockett platoon leader. We
14 had the Davy Crockett, which was a tactical nuclear weapon. Everything he did was
15 hyper secret, you know. That Davy Crockett thing. He was a Davy Crockett platoon
16 leader. We had that in our cav squadron.

17 SM: Wasn't the Davy Crockett the platform that basically you'd fire that missile
18 but I understand the blast radius of the missile was greater than probably the speed of the
19 vehicle to get out of the blast radius. Is that true?

20 LB: I don't know whether that's true or not. In other words you're saying if you
21 were a Davy Crockett platoon leader were to fire one of those things you could kiss
22 yourself good-bye along with the other people. I can't answer the question because I
23 don't know. Even though he was my best friend, that stuff wasn't just confidential it was
24 secret material and he was sworn to secrecy. They kept that baby really under wraps. He
25 couldn't tell you anything about it and I didn't press him on it. The Davy Crockett thing
26 was such a big secretive sort of thing that even though we had one in our squadron we
27 didn't know anything about its capabilities because it was all under wraps.

28 SM: Your time again at the 25th ID, what kind of support was there? Especially
29 did you guys have any problems with maintenance and getting the parts that you need to
30 repair your tanks and things like that?

1 LB: I think we had prescribed load list. You always had to make sure that all that
2 stuff was up to date. Yeah. I think we'd have tanks and stuff that we're down because
3 we'd have to wait for parts. I don't recall that it was a great problem. You know how
4 supply sergeants and stuff like that are. They always found ways. Those guys have their
5 own network. It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. I suppose it still is. If you needed
6 something they had contacts outside of the normal channels that they could get that stuff
7 from. If there was a big emphasis hey man, we need this tank and we got something
8 wrong. They're going to find someplace somewhere to scrounge that up. The Army
9 tried to discourage that because they wanted a want list, a need list so we'd tell them
10 about what's breaking down and what are the parts that are needed. Put it through the
11 channel, wait for it so that we can know this, but those supply sergeants they knew they
12 had their own underground system of getting that stuff. I don't ever remember that it was
13 something that we just had a lot of tanks down or personnel carriers. We had M113
14 personnel carriers. Of course, that, to me was one of the greatest vehicles the Army ever
15 made. So damn reliable that you just go anyplace, do anything. I don't know the Army
16 ever made a better vehicle than the M113 armored personnel carrier. That was a great
17 piece of equipment. We just never had any trouble with it.

18 SM: You went to Vietnam in 1966? Is that correct?

19 LB: Right.

20 SM: Did you go directly from 25th ID?

21 LB: No. When I left the 25th infantry division my three-year tour of duty was up
22 I was still a First Lieutenant. I transferred to infantry and had only been in the infantry
23 about a month. I left the Fourth cav when my transfer came through and was assigned to
24 the 14th infantry. It was just down there a short period of time as the weapons platoon
25 leader. Then I had orders to go to the infantry officer's career course, which is very
26 unusual for a first Lieutenant to get those orders. I was going to go to airborne school
27 first. So, I went to jump school, which was a great experience, and then I went to
28 infantry officer's basic or infantry officer's career course. Roger Donlan who was here
29 [at the conference at Texas Tech] was one of my classmates. All of us knew [we were]
30 either coming or going to Vietnam, knew those who were coming back knew they were
31 probably going to turn around and go [again]. So, we were all set for Vietnam. There

1 were two classes. Career Courses 121 and career 2. I guess it's the advanced course
2 now, but they called it the career course. Probably some 400 captains for the most part. I
3 was promoted to captain while I was there. I was probably the junior person in the whole
4 damn class. That was the finest group of people I've ever been around in my life. Bar
5 none. Don't care who you want to talk to about college professors, business people. I
6 don't care where you go that's probably by far the most outstanding, dedicated, patriotic,
7 idealistic, committed group of people that I've ever been around. I mean people of this
8 generation don't realize what the impact was for idealistic people when Kennedy had
9 when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your
10 country." Those kind of things just were so meaningful, I think, to people in my
11 generation. When we went to Vietnam, and this is the ironic thing about it. I think one
12 of the things that a lot of people don't understand is that when we went to Vietnam I was
13 willing to go. This was my thing for my country. Therefore when I left for Vietnam,
14 your mental image of yourself is it is heroic. People I don't think can go into war and
15 risk their lives if they don't have at least internalized seeing themselves doing something
16 heroic and that they are sort of heroes. I think that group felt, we're the group. We're the
17 good guys. We're the ones who are going to go save the world from Communism.
18 We're willing to make that commitment and proud to do it. Then you know, I'm jumping
19 ahead here. Then as the war progressed and progressed and the public gets tired of it and
20 then all this kind of stuff. All of a sudden you look around here and you see these war
21 protestors and all this kind of stuff. It's sort of like when you go to the ocean and you
22 stand on the beach and the water rushes in and then it rushes out again and it kind of
23 washes the sand out from under your feet and you're sort of staggering around and you're
24 saying something undercut here. Something's wrong. All of a sudden here the good
25 guys have become the bad guys and the bums have become the ones who are in the right.
26 I'm telling you it was the biggest betrayal of commitment. I think if there's bitterness
27 among Vietnam War Veteran's it's not toward the Vietcong and NVA so much as it is
28 toward the people back home who turned their heroic image of themselves into
29 something else. I think the worst thing that the Vietnam protestors ever did was to wreck
30 the heroic image that the soldier had of himself before he went to war. I think that's one
31 of the things that was wrong with the Army in '69 and '70 and so forth. The soldier

1 wasn't able to see himself as a hero going out to do something heroic. By God when
2 you're going into combat if you don't have that image of yourself I don't know what the
3 hell you've got. You've got morale problems. You've got big problems. The anti-war
4 movement undercut the soldiers own heroic image of himself. Now that's just Larry
5 Burke's philosophical, psychological interpretation of things, but I tell you what I think
6 there's really something to it. I think if a lot of Vietnam Veteran's have trouble adjusting
7 and have problems underneath because there's still that seething resentment of the fact
8 that here I was going to do something heroic and these other people made me out to be
9 the bad guy. They were the ones who didn't have the guts to go and do their job.
10 Psychologically when a soldier comes back from war there's got to be something very
11 soothing, very healing about a parade where he walks down that street and gets the
12 acclaim for his heroic sacrifice. As Vietnam Veteran's, we never got that. Somebody
13 needs to do really a psychological study on that issue alone because I think it's a factor. I
14 think it's a factor. I get emotional when I talk about that.

15 SM: Thank you sir. This will end the first interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the
16 21st of April.

17 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the
18 7th of June, 2001 at 1:40 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Burke is in
19 Dodge City, Kansas. Sir, why don't we go ahead and pick up with a discussion of your
20 infantry training and if you would go ahead and describe how that started and the courses
21 that you went through and what that training entailed?

22 LB: Ok, when I first went into the Army I received regular commission. I was
23 commissioned as an armor officer. I went to armor officer basic course at Ft. Knox,
24 Kentucky. Went to 25th Division in Hawaii. I was with the 3rd squadron, 4th cavalry. It
25 was a great experience. In my duty there one of my jobs there was to be the aero rifle
26 platoon leader in the air cav troop. I enjoyed that experience so much that eventually I
27 decided that I would transfer to infantry because I liked the infantry better than I did the
28 tanks and all the maintenance and the headaches you had with that. So, I transferred to
29 infantry and eventually was sent to Ft. Benning, Georgia after I finished my tour of duty
30 in the 25th division after three years where I was going to the infantry officer career
31 course [at Ft. Benning, GA]. Kind of surprised me because I really hadn't been an

1 infantry officer very long and I didn't anticipate going into career course, which at my
2 age at that time was kind of a plum deal. You usually were a little older. I was the only
3 First Lieutenant in my class as I recall. I was the youngest, junior officer in my class of
4 400 Captains and Majors. But before I went to the infantry officer career course I went to
5 airborne school, which was a great experience. I enjoyed it. It was physically
6 demanding, but not that bad. Jumping out of the airplane is something I'll always
7 remember. It gives you confidence and so forth. So, that was a good experience and I
8 got those jump wings. I can remember being very proud of that experience and getting to
9 wear the glider patch on your cap and all that. Then I went to the infantry officer career
10 course, which was a 9-month course. I guess they call it the advanced course now. They
11 kind of bring it back and forth over a period. They called it the career course. That's
12 what it was when I went through. This was in 1965 and 1966. After a couple months I
13 was promoted to Captain or a month or so I was promoted to Captain. I felt more at home
14 then since I was now equal I think with most guys there. The 400 people in two different
15 classes that were going at the same time. Probably in my opinion [and I've said this in
16 talks and stuff that I've given] they were finest bunch of people that I've been around in
17 my life. This is 1965. The Vietnam War is heating up. This was a dedicated patriotic,
18 idealistic, outstanding group. I don't ever remember being around a group of people that
19 were quite of that quality. They were really wonderful people. They were some ornery
20 types in there and so forth, but as a group they were outstanding. Roger Donlin was my
21 classmate. He won the First Congressional Medal of Honor in Vietnam. Ed Rubio was
22 also a classmate of mine. He also won the Congressional Medal of Honor post
23 humously. He was in the same division first in command [I was in Vietnam]. Anyway it
24 was a great group of people. Primarily a classroom experience, nine months, just a
25 regular semester. I mean a regular school year. We studied everything from nuclear
26 weapons and appointment to battalion and brigade staff and command and map exercises
27 and stuff that goes with it. When I finished that experience at Ft. Benning, I got my
28 orders. My wife was with me down there, my baby daughter. We lived at Custer
29 Terrace. We had good social life with our friends there. But everybody knew everyone
30 was going to Vietnam when they graduated. So, we just waited for the day when we got
31 orders. We got our orders, why sure enough everybody was going to Vietnam except for

1 the ones who'd just come back from when the course started and some of them went
2 back. So, you know stiff upper lip and had a party and went about our business because
3 it wasn't something that we weren't expecting. I had, for reasons that I'm not really sure
4 I can explain to this day, I volunteered to go to Ranger school. I received orders to go to
5 Ranger school before I went to Vietnam now. Back to back, that's kind of a stretch.
6 Ranger school then going to Vietnam is pretty tough. I sent my wife and daughter, they
7 went on back up to Kansas to live with her parents while I was going to Ranger school
8 and I was going to get a 30-day leave and then go to Vietnam. So, sent them home and
9 went through that hellish experience. I've never experienced anything quite like it in my
10 life. It was the toughest experience of my life. It was tougher than my Vietnam
11 experience in many respects. As a matter of fact, when I left Vietnam if somebody told
12 me on my last day of Vietnam, "Well, here's your choice Burke- you can either go to
13 Ranger school and you could finish Ranger school or do an extra two months in Vietnam.
14 I would have said "son, put me through Vietnam because I can't do that [Ranger school
15 again]." Because Ranger school was a great experience. I think I did well in there. I
16 believe I finished second in my class. But it was kind of a once in a lifetime deal. I think
17 it something you could do one time but I don't know if you could do it again or not for
18 some exception you had to. It was demanding and tough and I don't know. I could go
19 into all kinds of details and tell all kinds of Ranger stories, which I'm sure you've heard
20 before, about never getting any sleep, being completely exhausted and going to sleep
21 standing up until your knees buckled, having hallucinations, fighting among each other,
22 people steal from each other because you're so hungry. But you still have to cooperate to
23 get the job done. It toughens you. It's the most mentally and physically demanding
24 experience that any person could probably go through. I don't know, I guess the Navy
25 Seals have a course of training that's maybe as tough or tougher. I don't know how it
26 could be much tougher than Ranger school. I went through the first phase at Ft. Benning.
27 The first three weeks at Ft. Benning, the next three weeks up in the mountains of North
28 Georgia, which is an absolutely God awful nightmare, traveling at night, traveling
29 through all of it. Climb those mountains, cross the dead fall and barking your shins. It is
30 just beyond my ability to convey to people what that was like. Then we'd go to the
31 Florida phase, three weeks of jungle training down there. I guess I was fortunate that I

1 went through Ranger school in May, June and July, which was in warm weather, which I
2 could take much better than cold. When I went to the jungle phase, they'd had kind of a
3 draught down there so the swamps weren't the highest, but we were in water all the time.
4 But at least it wasn't up to our necks. But I made it through that experience. I guess I
5 could say that out here in a little old airstrip on Eglun Air Base, because that's where the
6 Florida phase is. When we graduated there was this bunch of guys that had weathered
7 the storm. We had a bunch of Air Force guys coming through because they were training
8 to defend their bases in Vietnam. They'd drop like flies. That made it hard to stay with
9 things, because it's easier to stay with it when everybody else is staying with it. People
10 start dropping and stuff like that it's hard for you to keep going, but we did. I can
11 remember standing on that Air Base the day we graduated. It wasn't an Air Base it was
12 just a strip out there in the jungle. Nobody was there but us and a few dignitaries. They
13 played some music over a loud speaker, we stood out there a bunch of mosquito bitten,
14 sunburned, haggard scarecrows in fatigues with nothing on them, no rank or anything.
15 The guys came around and pinned that Ranger tab on your shoulder with a safety pin. I
16 guess I'd have to say probably that when I look back on that, that was probably the
17 proudest day in my life that I can remember as far as any accomplishment just getting
18 through that.

19 SM: How long was the total course?

20 BL: Nine weeks.

21 SM: Nine weeks.

22 BL: Yeah. You know, you learn all this hand-to-hand combat and they train you
23 in all that kind of stuff. Survival techniques and you took a compass course in patrolling
24 and small unit tactics. But, primarily it's an endurance test to show you [how much you
25 can take], they seem to want to put as much pressure on you, mentally and physically as
26 they can. To as closely approximate a combat situation as possible, without being shot at.
27 So, you are trained in this physical and mental strain and stress. They do it purposely. I
28 came from a background where I'd never known what hunger was before. You go to
29 Ranger school and you know because they're burning more calories off than the food
30 that's going in and you're just famished and ravished for food all the time. I know they
31 do that purposely so you have that experience. You get short tempered and you fight

1 among each other and so forth. But they tell you you've got to cooperate to get the job
2 done. One of the things that I remember vividly about our training was doing a survival
3 training one day and they were talking about how to live off the land and various kinds of
4 animals you could skin and eat and so forth. They had this little Ranger cadreman there,
5 who was a buck sergeant about 5'6" a little guy with the Napoleon complex and all
6 muscle. He was holding a gunnysack. He was the assistant instructor and the guy said,
7 "Rangers if you can't find any other food, you can eat snakes," and so on and so forth. He
8 said, "The first thing you've got to do is kill and gut the snake." He said, "Demonstrator,"
9 a guy that was the demonstrator reached in this gunny sack and pulled out this big, long
10 bull snake, thing must have been about four feet long. Bring him around there. He said,
11 "Now Rangers, you've got to take off this snake's head first." So, this buck sergeant bit
12 the head off of this live snake. He pulled away, guts running down his mouth. I thought
13 to myself, "God, are we going to have to do that?" Kind of toughened us through that
14 experience. I think everybody that was sitting there was just dumb struck. He spit the
15 head of the snake out and then gutted it and skinned it. That guy isn't a human being,
16 he's an animal. But I remember thinking that day that I wasn't tough enough to be a
17 Ranger. I was going to have to quit. I decided I would finish that day and then I was
18 going to quit the next day. When the sun went down I thought that I wouldn't be able to
19 make it one more day. Then the day after that I said to myself "well, I'm going to go one
20 more day and quit tomorrow." That's the way I made it through Ranger school. You
21 always hear things about that. Take it one day at a time and that, but as hard an
22 experience that was if you had two weeks in there, I still got seven weeks to go. You just
23 can't think like that. It's just stretching it out too far. So, you just have to do it one day
24 at a time. I wasn't just kidding myself, I really meant it. I said, "Ok, I'm going to finish
25 this day and I'm going to quit tomorrow." Of course, if you quit ranger school, obviously
26 it's going to wreck your career, but that's the way I made it through. I was successful at
27 it. I was the XO of the company. The company commander, was the honor graduate. I
28 think I was the runner up. So, I think I did a good job when I was there, but it was a
29 tough experience. I made it by doing it one day at a time.

30 SM: How many people started in your class?

1 LB: You know, I wish I could tell you that. I can't tell you that. I just don't
2 remember.

3 SM: Do you remember how many graduated?

4 LB: A lot more than finished. I don't remember how many finished. But the
5 majority of the Army guys finished. It was just that they washed the Air Force out of
6 there just right and left because they didn't know what they were getting in to. So they
7 dropped like flies. Most of the Army guys made it. All of them didn't get the tab. You
8 know there were a few people who finished Ranger school and went through all that hell
9 and don't graduate with the tab. So, they finished the training, but they don't get to wear
10 the tab and they're not Ranger qualified.

11 SM: Why don't they get the tab?

12 LB: Well, because they didn't maybe pass enough patrols to qualify. You have
13 to pass a certain number of patrols that you're the patrol leader of to pass the course. I
14 know one of my friends in Hawaii was a West Point graduate and he was a pretty good
15 officer and he'd gone to Ranger school and been all the way through the whole damn
16 thing, and never got the tab. It embittered him for life. I think probably had a very
17 derogatory effect on his military career from his mental outlook, but he didn't get the tab.
18 Yeah, it'd be tough. You know I could talk Ranger stories from now until doomsday.

19 SM: Well, now this is part of the experience though.

20 LB: But it was quit an experience.

21 SM: Yeah. Now you mentioned earlier, I don't know how much of this actually
22 happened in your class, so I want to clarify. Were there actually incidents where people
23 were literally stealing food from one another?

24 LB: Well, I'll tell you this story. When I was in the mountain phase on six day of
25 patrol, it was a nightmare of epic proportions. For the first three days, the longest we ever
26 stopped and the longest period I got any sleep was 45 minutes. Now a lot of people don't
27 believe you can do that, but that's one of the things Ranger school to show that you could
28 do this. That's the God honest truth. The longest we stopped in three days. During that
29 period of time they give you these, they weren't C-rations. You get these long range
30 reconnaissance patrol rations, but you've go to heat the water and pour the stuff in there
31 to make it stew or something. We'd stop and if we had time to eat, maybe get out our

1 canteen cups and heat our canteen cup up and try to warm the water up and try to get it
2 warm. By the time it'd get hot, well they'd say "saddle up and off you'd go." So you
3 were just eating on scraps and stuff here and there and God you're just famished because
4 you're just burning a tremendous amount of calories. Well, we finally got to I don't
5 know the fifth day or something. We got to this mountaintop back behind on the enemy
6 lines theoretically we were supposed to infiltrate by the enemy lines. They'd come
7 together on this mountaintop and we'd resupply it. Carry up whatever ammunition they
8 needed depending on what it was. When we got there we had to climb to the top of this
9 thing. When we got up there the patrol leader pulled me and put together some other
10 guys out and said, "take everybody's canteen and go clear down to the bottom of the
11 mountain where there was a spring to fill everybody's canteen." Well, hell I didn't want
12 to do that. I was tired like everybody else, but you've got to do what you're told. So, I
13 got about four of us, five of us and we gathered everybody's canteens together and went
14 down the mountain. We go down the mountain to the bottom of the stream. We were
15 going to be resupplied. We were waiting for C-rations. We got down to the bottom of
16 the stream and we came to this jeep trail along this creek. A light bulb kind of went on
17 and I said I can't imagine in this particular period of time they're really going to-they
18 were going to resupply us by helicopter. I said I bet they couldn't spare any helicopters
19 to do that. I bet you they pre-positioned some supplies around here. As we walked
20 through the weeds between the road and the stream to fill the canteens we came across all
21 the C-ration cartons and cases. Every C-ration packet had a candy bar and we were just
22 absolutely famished for sweets, for sugar, burning all those calories. In best Ranger
23 fashion we sent security down the road one way, one guy went down there to give us the
24 word, another guy went down the other way and left secured. You know the three of us
25 went through the C-ration cartons, which were destined for the whole group and pulled
26 out every damn candy bar that we could get our hands on. Ate until we were stuffed.
27 Stuffed our pockets with the rest of them and said put the things back up so it didn't look
28 like anybody had been in there. Filled the canteens and went back up in the mountain.
29 When we got up there, we were feeling pretty good because we were loaded with sugar
30 form those candy bars, everybody wondered why we were sort of feeling pretty good.
31 Then we'd go off in the weeds and eat another one. Then when they delivered the C-

1 rations finally, the guys opened their C-ration cartons and look in there and the candy
2 bar's missing. "Hey, some son of a bitch stole my candy bar". We just sat there with
3 grins on our faces. That's not the only example. I tell you what, if you leave a candy bar
4 laying around some place or something, it'd be gone. You're kind of transferred back- I
5 don't know what Ranger school is like now, but your transported back to kind of an
6 animal instinct stage. The idea is to see if you could be reduced to that situation and still
7 carry on a mission, which proved to you was that you could do it. Most people didn't
8 think that you could put up with that much hardship and still function effectively, but you
9 can. That's the purpose or one of the purposes of Ranger school. You're reduced to such
10 a stage that if you see a candy bar laying there. I don't know whether I'd just absolutely
11 steal it but I guess that's what we were doing when we took the candy bars out of those
12 cartons down there. Stealing from somebody else, but we didn't give a damn about it at
13 that time. So, I guess if I'd got caught- maybe I shouldn't be telling this story (laughs).
14 But there are things you just don't care about. So, anyway that's the example. You know
15 there's all kinds of stories. You go to sleep standing up. Your knees will buckle. It was
16 amazing. It was really amazing.

17 SM: Well, how much time did you have between graduation and going to
18 Vietnam?

19 LB: After I graduated from Ranger school my wife flew down. She'd flown back
20 home with my daughter. She flew down and we had our car down there, so we drove
21 home together across the southern part of the United States. Traveled along the southern
22 coast, went to New Orleans. Spent time together then we went to her parents and my
23 parents. I had a 30-day leave. My parents were staying with my baby daughter, my wife
24 and I [were staying with my parents]. My parents took us on a trip to the mountains
25 where we had a vacation. After that was over with I got up put on my uniform, load the
26 stuff in the car my dad drove me to the airport, said good-bye to my wife and baby
27 daughter, mom, younger sister got me up [and my dad drove me to the airport] and flew
28 off to Vietnam. That was in August of 1966.

29 SM: August of '66?

30 LB: Yes.

1 SM: Now, what did you understand was happening over there when you were
2 getting ready to go? How much, like for instance were any of your Ranger instructors
3 Vietnam Veteran's? Were they talking about that at all?

4 LB: I tell you the truth, the Ranger instructors, as far as the Ranger cadre at that
5 particular time, you were nothing but dirt beneath their feet. There wasn't any discussion
6 about what it was like to be in Vietnam. In other words, there was no discussion of
7 equals. They were talking down to you. This is what you've got to do and so on and so
8 forth. I don't remember any of that. I 'm sure there was probably some discussion about
9 Vietnam during the training and so forth, but I don't remember them saying let's have a
10 heart to heart talk here. This is what you're going to be exposed to and so forth. I don't
11 remember that. If there was I don't remember it. Of course, during the Career Course
12 most of the map exercises were still kind of set in Europe and so forth in a conventional
13 sense, but we did have some counter insurgency training and so forth during that to
14 prepare for Vietnam. When I went to Vietnam in 1966, you know it was early in the war.
15 Meanwhile, they were issuing bumper stickers, "Win in Vietnam." Trying to mobilize
16 public opinion behind the war. Inspiring John Paul Vann came down and talked to our
17 class, very inspiring guy. After he'd left the Army and was working for some
18 government agency over there. Are you familiar with who he is?

19 SM: Oh, yes sir.

20 LB: And other speakers came down and of course, yeah we were all prepared to
21 go to Vietnam. We were gung-ho and we felt like it was a crusade against Communism.
22 You know I'm a part of the Kennedy generation, "ask not what your country can do for
23 you, ask what you can do for your country. Pay any price; bear any burden in defense of
24 liberty." Those types of things were very real kinds of things. Not today, but in the
25 generation that I was part of [they were]. Even though he wasn't president in 1966,
26 obviously Johnson was, but we went off to Vietnam. Sure we were going to win and
27 convinced it was the right thing to do. When I was there in 1966 and 1967, God there
28 wasn't any doubt in my mind. There was no question about it. As far as the government
29 [of South Vietnam], they had been pretty unstable after Diem was over thrown and
30 you've got the Cong. The turnover that came in '64 and '65 lasted until Ky and Thieu
31 sort of stabilized things. Whether you liked them or whether you don't they did provide

1 more effective government than they'd had after all that instability for some time. We
2 could see that stability taking place. We were fighting the big boys, the Viet Cong and
3 the North Vietnamese who were starting to show up. Basically let the government come
4 and take care of pacification while we shielded those populated areas and so forth. I had
5 no question in my mind [that we were winning]. It was difficult.

6 SM: Oh, I meant to ask you about Ranger school. Do you remember how much
7 weight you lost?

8 LB: I've never been very big. I mean as far as weight. I probably weighed 150
9 or 155 pounds. Maybe 155 pounds when I went to Ranger school. I don't know what I
10 weighed when I came out of there. All I know is that I've seen pictures and I remember
11 one day when I finally got in off that six day patrol, we got in early in the morning. We
12 traveled all night to get back. By then the operation was over there. We went to take a
13 shower. That was the only day I can remember specifically having time off in the
14 mountains. It was that specific memory that day in the mountains when we were able to
15 go inside the barracks and take a shower and go to the mess hall and eat a full-blown
16 meal. After I got out of the shower, after I'd been traveling all night I went in to shave
17 and as I looked in the mirror I thought my God, what's the matter with my cheek? It's
18 just sticking out there. Then I realized that my cheeks were all sunken, my cheekbone
19 was just sticking out there. Just because it was hollowed out. I lost weight. I don't know
20 how much weight, but I lost some weight then. I've seen pictures of me after that and
21 I'm skin and bone. I never was very big as far as weight is concerned. Skin and bones
22 [after Ranger School].

23 SM: Just wondering. Ok. You mentioned counter insurgency training, how did
24 they cover it in terms of I guess reading materials things like that? What did they have
25 for you to go over to help prepare you for counter insurgency warfare in Vietnam?

26 LB: I wish I could answer that question more specifically. If I had time to think
27 about it I might. We had of course counter insurgency textbooks that were Army kind of
28 manuals that we used. We had people come talk to us. We had a reading program of
29 books that they wanted you to read. You could write a paper about this and that and so
30 forth. I wrote an article, which was published in Infantry Magazine because I won the
31 General George C. Marshall award for excellence in professional writing when I was

1 down there. My article was published in Infantry Magazine in September 1966. But it
2 was an article about conventional warfare during World War II and small unit action-
3 Germans versus the Russians, which illustrated principles of the war. It wasn't about
4 counter insurgency. There were books being written and I can remember reading
5 Bernard Falls books about Street Without Joy and Hell in a Very Small Place. I'd read
6 those before I went to Vietnam. But right now my memory is faded as far as the specifics
7 of counter insurgency warfare. We covered it in class, but it wasn't prominent in the
8 Career Course training. But it wasn't like all of a sudden that became the primary thing
9 we were studying down there. I think probably still a lot of our training and probably the
10 bulk of it in truth was still conventional, European style warfare.

11 SM: Yeah. Did you find it reading Bernard Falls books and I guess some of the
12 other books that maybe you don't remember as clearly as Falls, did those help you when
13 you arrived in Vietnam?

14 LB: Oh, I think in a general way they helped in that they kind of cloud the mind
15 for preparation for the French presence had been there. I was just kind of fascinated with
16 the French presence and the French part of the war. All those old forts, the ARVN
17 occupied them at the end of the French war. I've just kind of been a bit of a history buff
18 all my life. It just really kind of fascinated me. These various plantations and things, this
19 French colonial architecture and the buildings and so forth. But as far as the preparation
20 for what to expect from the standpoint of warfare, to a point, sort of give you an idea of
21 what war was like for the French. Of course, it was a similar experience to what we had.
22 We had helicopter resources of course. But still I think it was beneficial, no doubt about
23 it. As far as you know, how you react when somebody starts shooting at you I don't
24 specifically remember that I used any examples out of my reading. But you know how
25 that is, those things happen. You may respond automatically based upon you're your
26 training.

27 SM: It's instinctual.

28 LB: Yeah, instinctual. And you don't necessarily think to your self, well this is
29 what happened. This is the way they did so maybe I'm going to do something like that.
30 Although, I'm sure that figures in to the whole business of how you respond. Somebody
31 would say that yeah the training that I had and certainly Ranger school training, it was on

1 security and all those types of things in Vietnam. That whole thing goes into preparing
2 you and making you perhaps more effective when things start happening. I don't care
3 what anybody says. Ranger school, there's absolutely no substitute for experience. Got
4 to have experience. You only get experience by participating in those things. I had a
5 battalion commander and platoon leaders who in those first few experiences that they
6 had, might have screwed up because they didn't know what to expect. As a result, got
7 people killed and officers got relieved. In the first infantry division, Jim Peterman
8 showed up. General Hollingsworth and General Rodgers and I'm telling you boys if you
9 screwed up then you were out the door. If you'd made a mistake and cost people lives
10 even if it could have, they were ruthless. Some of those mistakes were made by people
11 who were good officers, good people. I'm sure they'd served the country well in
12 peacetime, but they made a mistake. Officers are trained to perform in combat and if you
13 didn't come through during combat then all that other stuff isn't much. Experience is
14 such an important matter. Once I became experienced, just like everyone else, once you
15 get experienced you become confident you become a hell of a good company
16 commander, but until you get your feet on the ground and feel confident with that you're
17 sort of struggling along. During that struggle and long time something bad happens to
18 you and you foul up, why you could get killed or you could get disgraced or let you go. I
19 felt they had some people that had. It was not just a matter of not being good people, just
20 inexperienced and not responding right and correctly to the situation. I had a battalion
21 commander, one of my battalion commanders was relieved but he was a good man. But
22 he was relatively inexperienced and he screwed up an operation and got some people
23 killed. The next day they found us a new commander who wasn't nearly the man he was.
24 I liked him [the man who was relieved].

25 SM: Now, the commander that was relieved how long had he been commanding
26 and had he made mistakes like that before?

27 LB: Oh, maybe three weeks to four weeks, probably not more than that.

28 SM: Was this the first major mistake he had made that cost people their lives?

29 LB: Yeah, I think so. This was his first. He was kind of an excitable guy. But
30 this is the first major operation he led us on. War zone C over there, Michelin Plantation,
31 an awful place to be. This was a dangerous situation. What happened to him wasn't

1 something that couldn't happen to anybody else. We were out there in the middle of the
2 night floundering around trying to get to a landing zone, to a clearing where we could set
3 up in our defensive position to be resupplied. Because of the delay, because of snipers,
4 ambushes, his own command group getting hit. We didn't get in there until after dark,
5 it's a wonder we got in at all. My company's following and supporting Charlie
6 Company. It got dark in there. Going through warzone C, in the middle of that place in
7 the middle of the night was as dark as I mean you can't see your hand in front of your
8 face. Literally I had all my guys grab the web gear of the guy in front of you and hang on
9 because I didn't want to lose anybody out here. The first guy in my company grabbed the
10 last guy in the Charlie Company by God don't let him go. I mean I was just terrified of
11 the idea of us being stuck out there, lost by ourselves. We finally got to the night
12 defensive position, which the battalion commander and one company had reached before
13 us. Turned out to be from the air it looked clear but it was elephant grass, 12 feet tall.
14 They got in there first and here we are floundering around trying to get there by following
15 the compass, through the jungle in the dark. The Charlie Company commander was Bill
16 Mullin who later became a brigadier general and won the Distinguished Service Cross.
17 He was a hell of a soldier and he led us in there. All my company was doing was
18 following behind him. We got in there, but the battalion commander had built a big
19 bonfire to provide some light so we could see where it was. The brigade commander
20 who was Sidney Berry later became General Sidney Berry. He was supposedly the best
21 brigade commander in Vietnam. Later on was the ADC for the 101st airborne. That book
22 *Rip Cord*, which I reviewed for the *Journal of Military History* here a while back, is
23 essentially about their defeat up there at Firebase Ripcord in 1970. Anyway, Berry was
24 our brigade commander and he was a hard-nosed man. When we finally got to the
25 clearing, everybody got together finally. Berry said, "I expect you'll be attacked
26 tonight." This clearing wasn't very big. We'd lock arms and tramp that elephant grass
27 down and dig foxholes. I tell you what, we were so jammed in there that you couldn't
28 take a step without falling into a foxhole. He thought we were going to get hit because
29 we were in the middle of one of the worst areas for the VC in Vietnam. When first light
30 came we fired a mad minute into the jungle all around there in case they were attacking
31 us right then, nothing happened. We saddled up and started moving out of there. After

1 we'd moved down the road here a couple hours, Berry flew in and I got a call -my
2 company was in lead at that particular time. As we came to a little open area, I remember
3 a helicopter landed behind us and the column was halted and we got a call for all the
4 company commanders come back to the command group so I went back there. There
5 was Berry with a new battalion commander and a new executive officer. Shook hands
6 with Colonel Huff, who was our battalion commander and Major Fox who was our XO,
7 who hadn't even been on the ground, it wasn't his fault. They were saying they're
8 downcast and they'd been relieved. Loaded them up in the helicopter and shipped them
9 off. Got a new XO and a new battalion commander right there on the spot. Bang. I
10 think the primary thing was that we'd been delayed and slowed down getting through
11 there because of these snipers and the casualties suffered by the command group. They
12 actually kind of ambushed because they got cut off and parted companies. They were
13 supposed to provide security and in the confusion in the landing zone they got separated.
14 As they were wondering through the jungle there, the battalion commander was trying to
15 get the XO [who was overhead in a chopper] to get the battalion commander, by throwing
16 smoke grenades an azimuth to follow so he could join up with Bravo company because
17 his command company was out there by themselves. As it turns out, he [the commanding
18 group] was out in front of everybody. [What got Huff in trouble was this... When the
19 battalion command group landed at the beginning of the operation the previous day, it
20 had gotten separated from Bravo Company. They were supposed to accompany Bravo
21 Company, but missed connecting with them.] When they finally got squared away and
22 said ok, this is the direction you need to go to join up with Bravo Company. That
23 compass azimuth that they followed took them to a little road through the jungle there,
24 which was obviously a VC road. He [the colonel] was inexperienced too. He was going
25 in the right direction; he was in a hurry and he told his guys let's go. Let's use this road.
26 They tried to warn him, he wouldn't listen. The company ran into a VC claymore along
27 the trail and they [VC] blew it clean away. Killed some of them. The rest of them had
28 delayed getting them out of there. [Evacuating the casualties delayed them]. Anyway,
29 they finally joined up with Bravo Company and make it to the landing zone. Because of
30 the delay and because of what he'd done there, the brigade commander thought he was a
31 meathead. In fact, relieved him there on the spot. So, those things happened.

1 SM: Yes, sir. Well, let's take a step back real quick. When you flew over what
2 was the atmosphere like on the aircraft?

3 LB: You know, I have some opinions about this. I'm not a psychologist. I'm a
4 historian, not a psychologist. You fly to war in a PanAm 707 because that's what it was
5 Boeing 707 with stewardesses and all that kind of stuff. It's almost a surreal experience.
6 It's almost like you're going on vacation on this jet plane with these other guys. They all
7 know they're going into war, but they don't know what to expect. Here, you've got these
8 stewardesses waiting on you and everything. You know, there's a few lewd remarks and
9 cracks and so forth but most of us had some respect. It's a long flight. You get there and
10 I remember we landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. Middle of the night, after
11 midnight file down off that airplane, this is August and it was like walking into a sauna.
12 It was so hot and humid and it had that mildew smell that permeated Vietnam because it's
13 so damp. Look out there and see tracers going off and going through the sky and you
14 look out there and say, "Whoa!" because somebody's engaged in a firefight out there.
15 When reality sets in you get on this bus to take you to your quarters, wire screens over
16 the windows to keep VC grenades and stuff out, escape from reality really sinks in there.
17 If I may digress here for just a second, going to war that way is not so bad. Although, I
18 think a slower route can kind of prepare you mentally for the job at hand. I think that's
19 ok still. But I tell you I think the Army and the Armed Services should take a look, and
20 maybe somebody has, psychologically at how troops responded after World War I and
21 World War II when combat was over they essentially returned on troop ships. Where
22 they might be two or three weeks at sea with people with same experience. Have this
23 period of time to decompress, get thing off their chest and talk about things. Sort of share
24 experiences when the transition is more gradual. You had people that went through the
25 same thing with you. I think that the Army should seriously consider whether this is a
26 good thing or not. I remember you come in out of the jungle, you come in from the bush.
27 You get your gear together you fly down to Bien Hoa or wherever it is and process out
28 and maybe it takes you one or two days and then you're on an airplane and boom, there
29 was Denver, Colorado just like that. I wanted to be there. I wanted to be home quick. I
30 wanted to get home as soon as I could, everybody does. But, I'm no sure in the long run
31 that's psychologically the best way to handle somebody. I don't think you have time to

1 come down from that experience. Military service should take a look at that. I'm not
2 sure the soldiers decompressed that quickly. I think it's almost like you've just come
3 from Vietnam, you come out of the jungle and two days later or three days later, you're
4 in San Francisco or Denver, Colorado or wherever it might be. I think that that
5 sometimes is not a good thing. Do you follow what I'm saying?

6 SM: Oh, absolutely.

7 LB: I think the transition is too abrupt. A guy doesn't have the time to adjust.
8 You need to give the soldier time to adjust.

9 SM: Right.

10 LB: I mean I don't know that it bothered me specifically but I was glad to see my
11 wife. If somebody said, "Well, you want to take two weeks to go home on a cruise ship
12 or you want to fly to Denver?" Well, of course I'm going to say get me home. But, I'm
13 not sure that's the best way to handle it. Ok, I diverged.

14 SM: No, that's a very interesting point, very interesting point. What do you
15 remember most about arriving in Vietnam? When you got off that plane?

16 LB: I remember the heat and the humidity, the smell. I guess when I think about
17 Vietnam, the smells that come to my mind, you know how the sensory organs, senses can
18 trigger all kinds of memories and so forth. The thing I remember about Vietnam is the
19 heat, the humidity, the smell, that swampy, mildew, wet smell. Plus the whole country
20 cooked with charcoal. Charcoal smell, not like you charcoaler in your backyard, but I'm
21 talking about charcoal, the smoke smell permeated the country. Those things cross my
22 mind. I guess I remember the blackness, the smell the heat. My first impression was the
23 pressing heat. This is just really hot. After we processed in we were put on a truck and
24 we left Tan Son Nhut to go to Di An, headquarters of the "Big Red One". I remember
25 that we hadn't even been issued weapons yet. We go up this road through this country
26 side, it's startling green country side. Rice paddies and peasants working out there with
27 the water buffalo and I didn't even have a weapon. Of course, I was in the truck with a
28 guy, riding shotgun with an M-60. I thought man, this doesn't feel like security to me.
29 Passing the game and there's a bend where the first division crossed there. Mission too
30 difficult for the second. It was too great. I remember that very clearly. Then I remember
31 when we got there and were processed in and told G-1 very distinct. He said gentlemen,

1 rural air subdued insignia. Insignia would be the subdued variety. If you can handle it
2 you can get it off there. Regular insignia get subdued insignia but he said you will not
3 subdued. So, the Big Red One division shoulder patch was red we got black. Black was
4 a symbol of not to subdue the red. I always remember that. I had pride because it was a
5 hell of a lot. Anyway, those were a couple things I remember about coming in. [We
6 arrived and went through the gate, which had a sign with the division motto: "No
7 mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Duty First." When we processed in, the G1
8 met with us and told us we were to wear subdued ensigncies. But he said, "Gentlemen,
9 you will not subdue the red in the division patch of the Big Red One." The red in the
10 division patch would not be subdued. It showed the pride of that division of that division.
11 It made me proud to be part of that unit.]

12 SM: What kind of briefings did you get? When you arrived in country you were
13 processing in and also when you arrived at the first infantry division?

14 LB: You know Lord that's been 36 years almost. I'm not sure that I can really
15 answer that specifically. I know we were briefed. I know that there was an aura about
16 the First Infantry Division at that time. Everybody knew it was a hot shot. General
17 Depuy was the commander and he'd been Westmoreland's G-3. He was able to pick and
18 choose. The word was that the G-1 screen records were outstanding you didn't
19 understand or if you didn't except it. They'd bounce back and listen to their outfield. I
20 think that's probably true. So, you know you were proud to be in it, but you knew it was
21 a tough outfit. You knew that if you had a reputation he'd just chop you loose if you
22 screwed up like my battalion leader. So, you had a little extra pressure on you. My first
23 briefings as far as preparation, there were briefings I can't specifically remember them
24 now. Then I flew up to Phuc Vinh, which was the home of the First Brigade. I was
25 going to the first battalion, second infantry. Reported over there, met the battalion
26 commander. I can't remember a long period of preparation for officers. I mean they'd
27 spend like a week in Di An going through some kind of a jungle school or anything like
28 that. I can recall half of them just pretty much just plumed out there after being
29 interviewed by Colonel Berry. Sidney Berry the brigade commander, a hard man. Good
30 brigade commander, had been there a while. I remember that and I remember being
31 interviewed by Colonel Prillaman, my battalion commander. He also later became a

1 Three Star general at the helm. A big, tall guy, who just recently died. I was impressed
2 with him. When I got there I remember that I was going to become the headquarters
3 company commander. I wanted a rifle company, but there was none there. So, the
4 headquarters company commander was not quite due to rotate. So, I was kind of put in
5 charge [of the rear elements] for 10 days or so, just kind of get my feet on the ground and
6 get some odd type jobs to do. Our battalion went out on a road clearing operation.
7 Colonel Prillaman was on R&R so the XO Major Clark was commanding the battalion.
8 It was routine usually, but there was six weeks of clearing the road from Phuc Bien to
9 Long Binh and supply up there. [The road clearing operation was routine, we did it every
10 six weeks or so, cleared the road from Phuoc Vinh to Long Binh so supplies could be
11 brought up]. Charlie company patrol went a little bit too far out and got into some rubber
12 and jungle out there. Found a major base camp and they got pinned down and Charlie
13 company, had to go bail them out. Charlie kept the guys in trouble. The whole battalion
14 brigade the whole division was engaged. They'd stumbled on to a base area of Phu Loi
15 battalion which was the main force Viet Cong in III Corps area near Saigon. Had a
16 bunch of phantom like soldiers and they had a knock down, drag out confrontation. I
17 remember being back in base camp listening to those transmission over the radio for any
18 kind of frantic excited transmission to the guys. Thinking my Gosh, because here, I'd
19 just gotten here. Knock down drag out, heavy casualties for us and of course it blasted
20 the Phu Loi battalion. When they [our troops] came back in, Major Clark was killed
21 shortly thereafter anyways. The XO was acting battalion commander was killed that day.
22 I couldn't think of a guy that switched with me from here. Wasn't of course, that's what
23 it seemed like. I wasn't even part of it. The guys came back in, got evacuated out of that
24 stuff. I mean Napalm and stuff on their uniforms, blasted with Napalm that hadn't
25 ignited and splashed on them in some cases. Just missed, dropped the stuff too close. I
26 can remember looking at those guys, as I wasn't quite part of the group yet. Had I been a
27 part of it, standing back looking at it, thinking about one day I'll be part of this group and
28 share the kind of experience that they'd had. But anyway, I guess it was. I was made the
29 headquarters company commander and the battalion commander Prillaman was kind of
30 an innovator. He told me, he said ok I know you want a rifle company, I don't have one
31 available to you right now, but here's what I'm going to do. He said I want you to

1 organize what we were going to call headquarters field company. The recon platoon will
2 be yours. He said the radar section and the anti-tank section, stuff that had no application
3 in Vietnam, but was part of an infantry battalion of that time, we are going to reorganize
4 that. He said we'd make a rifle platoon out of those men. Said we'll have a demolition
5 section, a tunnel rats and so forth. I'm going to consolidate all the .81 mm mortars from
6 the various companies into battalion mortar platoon. So, that would be headquarters field
7 company. When he gives them a fourth number element [this new organization would
8 give him a fourth maneuver element]. Had the recon platoon, rifle platoon made up of
9 those conglomerate groups. A demolition section, tunnel rats and then I'd have the
10 mortar sections, a mortar platoon. We'd call it headquarters field company. That was
11 what I commanded when I was in Vietnam. It was a little smaller than the regular
12 company. But, we could perform all kinds of missions and we did. We acted essentially
13 as a fourth maneuver company. So, I organized it and I was credited for that in my
14 efficiency report and so forth. This was a pretty effective organization.

15 SM: What were your first impressions of the unit in terms of morale and combat
16 effectiveness?

17 LB: Good, very good. Prillaman was a hell of a battalion commander. He was
18 experienced, he was confident. He was a good man. He was a no-nonsense guy, had to
19 be like that. Still, he was easy going enough that he didn't put the fear of God into you so
20 much right off the bat. Our battalion radio call sign was Dracula. Every unit, of the first
21 infantry division radio call sign started with D. That's obviously a violation of radio
22 security, but nobody cared least of all Depuy because we never changed those things. I
23 think Depuy didn't want them changed because he wanted the Viet Cong monitoring our
24 radio transmission to know when they were in contact with First Infantry Division. So, in
25 all the time I was there and I think for a long time after that the first battalion, second
26 infantry was Dracula. Because of that, troops and this sounds childish, but wars are
27 brought by kids, and the troops took off on that. We had those mottled canvas
28 camouflage covers over you helmet. We stenciled the bat sign on there. You know like
29 the bat signal from old Batman comic books. You know the thing that flashed in the sky.
30 Do you know what I'm talking about?

31 SM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

1 LB: We stenciled the bat signal on the side of our helmets on our camouflage
2 covers. You know, Colonel's jeep was the bat mobile. His helicopter was the bat plane.
3 Back at camp we had a little officer's club. It was just a small Quonset hut, painted
4 everything black inside, called it the bat cave. We wore scarves. We wore black scarves.
5 Like a Boy Scout scarf. He got permission to do that. Had one back and ordered 1 slash
6 2. He'd been an [ARVN] advisor on a previous assignment. He said he knew that the
7 South Vietnamese wore towels around their necks to keep stuff from getting down the
8 back of their uniform when they're crawling through the stuff, brush. Well, he came up
9 with the scarf, but I know what that was for. That was for practical reasons. Just to give
10 something to make us different. Give us a symbol, a signal hey this is an outfit that's
11 different from the rest. We wore that scarf with a lot of pride. It was hot and you know
12 the troops would get teased and get in fights about it and stuff like that sometimes. When
13 I asked people about it, but it was symbol of unit pride. It was excellent. Still have that
14 [scarf] in my drawer at home. Take it out every year when I teach my Vietnam War
15 course at Sherman. So, it was good morale. A very effective combat unit. Good
16 company commanders, good battalion commander, good XO. My executive officer, well
17 he was the one that was killed, but I'm not talking about him. What I meant to say was
18 my S-3. The S-3 in my battalion was Colonel Harry Summers.

19 SM: Oh, wow.

20 LB: Yeah. So, Prillaman became a three Star General. Summers wrote probably
21 the best book about Vietnam that I know of, a very famous commentary from an S-3. To
22 be totally honest with you, I know Harry Summers died recently and I was shocked to
23 hear that. He was an effective S-3, but he worked his way up from the ranks. He was
24 head of a company. A little bit of a crude, had rough edges and stuff like that. At the
25 time, not that he wasn't an effective soldier, because he was a very effective soldier, but
26 if somebody said well, in 10 or 15 or 20 years from this period of time, this man was
27 going to be known for writing this very insightful book. Normally I wouldn't expect that
28 out of him. He had a lot of brains. So it was a great outfit. General Hollingsworth, you
29 know my brigade commander, Sidney Berry somebody called him the best brigade
30 commander in Vietnam. General James Hollingsworth, assistant division commander a
31 decorated man became a three Star General, a legend. I mean the guy is a legend. Men

1 and troops worshiped the ground he walked on. The officers feared him, but they also
2 thought that because when the chips were down he was going to be right there and be
3 pulling out all the stops. General Bernard Rogers became a four star General and he took
4 command [NATO commander later on]. The second half of my tour I was a division
5 liaison officer to the II- Field Force Headquarters. I briefed those generals every night.
6 They got to know me. Rodgers was from Kansas and then Depuy, then later General
7 Hay. So, it was a really outstanding gathering. It was group of shooting stars. I don't
8 know, I took off on something you said and I'm wandering way away from it.

9 SM: Oh, that's ok. Well, if you could describe for me where in the scheme of
10 things your unit fit, especially a place in a specific village or base area in which you
11 worked. And of course I guess the mission that you were tasked with in turn. What was
12 the primary area of responsibility and primary mission there?

13 LB: Ok, well we were the first battalion, second infantry part of the First brigade
14 of the First division with headquarters at Phuoc Vinh. Phuoc Vinh is north and a little bit
15 east of Saigon, Long Binh that whole complex. It's up at the edge of War Zone D. It's
16 connected to I think Highway 16 runs up there. It's just a gravel road. War zone D is
17 just this vast, immense amount, you've got jungle out there to the east and to the north,
18 there was practically nobody there. It had been once kind of a small French rubber
19 plantation Phuc Vinh had. French village and the rubber trees. We had our tents set up
20 in the rubber and so forth. But to say what our primary mission was, it just depended on
21 what the division wanted. Because Phuc Bien was your basecamp, but you spent very
22 little time there. We were hither and thither. One of the first operations when I went on
23 was down to Bien Hoa, this is after that big fight that we had in August where I told you
24 we had a knock down, drag out fight with the Phu Loi battalion. The unit was pretty well
25 beat up there. We were giving kind of a plum job of going down. That's when we were
26 expanding the big complex down at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, that's when I went out
27 there and provided security for the engineers clearing out to build this, expand the base a
28 little bit. So, we played that. Then the next thing we knew, we flew into Phu Loi, which
29 is a little town North of Di An and provided security for a little town called Lai Thu
30 during the elections that were held there. Oh, I guess it must have been the first part of
31 September 1966, national election. We provided security so the people would come in to

1 vote and we got into a firefight with a VC squad. This is just down the road from Di An
2 a short ways. We sent patrols out into this patch of jungle about a kilometer square. Ran
3 into a VC squad and had a firefight. So, then the battalion commander sent me with
4 some gun jeeps up to pick up a column of tanks coming down from Phu Loi. First
5 squadron fourth cavalry and I led them into place around this square of jungle,
6 surrounded it. There it starts going off to my left. They were so close to going down the
7 jungle trail I hoped we didn't hit a mine with a half a mile of tanks and personnel carriers
8 behind me in a jeep. I was in a jeep with one-gun jeep out in front of me of course a
9 point man. I can remember this was my first combat experience and I can remember air
10 strikes going into the jungle so close to us that bombs would go off and you could hear
11 and just feel the concussion of the bombs hitting the side of your face. When they
12 dropped Napalm we could feel the heat of that. It was really close, a little too close. We
13 got the tanks into position there and trapped the enemy. We didn't get anything out of it,
14 the VC probably got away some of them. That was the first I guess you could say,
15 combat experience. As soon as we started firing [in the middle of the night someone
16 started firing], they started shooting at each other because we had the thing surrounded
17 with .50 caliber machine guns going off and the tracer going over your head. I was
18 behind a big tree rounds were hitting between branches and leaves and I remember asking
19 myself "Burke, how do you feel about this?" I can honestly say it was quite exhilarating
20 to me. I could feel this adrenaline rush and it was great. I know it sounds stupid, but that
21 was my response. Of course that's behind a big tree, but I asked myself, "How you feel
22 about getting shot at here?" Nothing this exciting had ever happened to me. It was just
23 this adrenaline rush. Of course later on I had a first hand experience with what those
24 bullets will do to you. So it'd be that kind of a thrill then. That's what my first response
25 was. But anyway back to your main question, there was a village west and south of
26 Phuoc Vinh in a populated area, but there was a big patch of jungle up in there that we
27 knew VC operated out of. This village, probably a lot of VC from that area came in and
28 out of that village and we sealed and searched it one time. Those kinds of operations try
29 to catch the VC, but the major operation I remember when we went into that same patch
30 of jungle, which we call, the Ong Dong Jungle on a big operation on October the 2nd.
31 Was my worst day in Vietnam. You talked about enemy and specifically about combat, I

1 described that because one of these days I'm going to write a book on that because it was
2 engraved in my mind. Part of the operation was to pass across our front with the
3 Vietnamese or the South Vietnamese and we were so damn [?] of this area, which was
4 base camp. [We went into the Ong Dong Jungle at night to set up ambushes along the
5 northern edge of the jungle while the ARVN swept across our front. Our job was to
6 ambush any VC filtering out to the north]. But unbeknownst to us we bypassed their
7 base camps at night because you're following a compass in the dark. We were the ones
8 who got the hell, but that's another story. That was one operation. We went up to Lai
9 Khe one time to provide basic security for the big brigade base camp up there and
10 patrolled out of there, and the contact east out of Lai Khe. So, we provided security.
11 From there we went to Quan Loi, which was a big French rubber plantations up by the
12 Cambodian border near An Loc, provincial capital of Binh Long Province. And had
13 numerous operations out there, we were base security and operated out of there. We [did]
14 patrols and sweeps and stuff through the rubber and the jungle, medical civic action
15 patrols into the rubber worker's villages out on the edge some of which were VC villages.
16 It was a beautiful place. There was a golf course up there built by the French, a
17 swimming pool, clubhouse, tennis courts and here you were being surrounded [by rubber
18 and jungle] this whole thing on this ridge. Out below this ridge were big French villas.
19 I've written a short story, which is currently being published about one of my Quan Loi
20 experiences. And it was just almost like this idealic setting in the middle of the jungle.
21 Almost surreal. You'd be around this area where all this 100 square kilometers of rubber
22 plantation in the center here around Quan Loi. You'd go out to the side and here you've
23 got a swimming pool, which the French would allow us to use once a week. The troops
24 could actually swim. Just like you're in the middle of no place in this jungle but you've
25 got that village setting with a swimming pool and your troops are there fighting a war and
26 yet you get to go swimming once a week. So the contrast was unbelievable.

27 SM: Yes, sir.

28 LB: There were still some French people living up there. The Doc and I got
29 invited to a Frenchman's villa down there one night. Spent the evening speaking French.
30 I could speak French back then. Doc could speak it wasn't even a Frenchmen at Di An.
31 It was just very unusual experience. But, anyway we operated out of there and finally we

1 were pulled out of there because of Operation Attleboro, December of 1966, the 25th
2 division had gone into War Zone C, I think 199th Light Infantry brigade went in there. I
3 think they were operating with the 25th Division went into War zone C up around the
4 Michelin plantation around in there and just got hammered. So, the First division was
5 sent in there, it was Operation Attleboro. By this time we had a new battalion
6 commander a man named Colonel Huff. We went into an operation. We conducted a
7 heliborne assault into this clearing and of course it was. We had this deal that led to the
8 battalion commander's relief. This was a major operation, search and destroy into a bad,
9 bad, bad jungle area which was full of Viet Cong base camps and so forth and rotated in
10 there, helicoptered in there and set down in there and amidst the confusion that's when
11 the battalion commander got separated from the rest of the battalion. So, we searched and
12 destroyed through that thing and finally got to the landing zone patrolled that night with
13 the fire. Snipers, ambush sites, claymore mines being thrown at you. It was an
14 experience. A major operation. We got out of there ok. On their way out the next day
15 before the battalion commander got relieved we were bypassing the stuff you could see in
16 the jungle, hooches and supply stuff. I remember I sent some guys and you had to be
17 careful of booby traps in a deal like that. If it blew some of them up it took the battalion
18 commander got you... (recording gets cut off)

19 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the
20 12th of June 2001 at approximately 1:40 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock Texas and Mr.
21 Burke is in Dodge City, Kansas. Sir, why don't we go ahead and begin with a more
22 specific discussion of your Vietnam experience and if you would go ahead and lead into
23 your first contact with enemy forces as a commander.

24 LB: Ok, of course as I said before I was assigned to the First infantry division,
25 the Big Red One. My battalion was first battalion, second infantry. It was commanded
26 by Lieutenant Colonel by the name of Richard Prillaman who later became a Lieutenant
27 General. My brigade commander was Sidney Berry. Our brigade headquarters was at
28 Phuoc Vinh, up north of Saigon kind of a little east to the edge of War Zone D. When I
29 first got there, my battalion, before I was even assigned a job, the battalion got in to a big
30 fight during a road clearing operation in August of 1966, which was a knock down drag
31 out affair. In which we, I say we the battalion suffered heavy casualties. Colonel

1 Prillaman was on R&R. His XO was killed in that operation. A friend of mine, Bill
2 Mullen won the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions there. Anyway, after that
3 operation was over the battalion came back in and when Prillaman came back there was
4 not a rifle company commander's slot open. So, he gave me the job of organizing the
5 headquarters company into headquarters field company. Steve, I can't remember
6 whether I talked to you about this last time or not. We used some of the elements that
7 weren't suitable in the table of organizations for guerilla warfare such as the anti-tank
8 section, the radar section that kind of stuff. We organized those guys and made them in
9 to a rifle platoon. Along the recon platoon was mine. We had a demolition section and
10 they consolidated all the mortars at battalion headquarters level and I had those. We
11 called this whole entity headquarters field company and they were smaller than a rifle
12 company but it gave him a fourth maneuver element. I went and commanded that. I can
13 say in effect it was essentially a rifle company with a little organization it was a combat
14 unit, a maneuver company. The first contact we had we were providing I can't remember
15 whether I told this story or not, providing security for elections at Lai Thieu, a little town
16 outside of Di An. We got in this firefight and one of the patrols went out there into a
17 patch of jungle. The company, battalion commander sent me with some gun jeeps to pick
18 up a column of the First squadron, Fourth Cavalry coming down to surround this area. I
19 think I told this story previously Steve? Do you remember that?

20 SM: Yes, sir. I do. I didn't know if there was anymore detail.

21 LB: All I can remember is the first contact I think I told it before so I don't want
22 to take up a lot of time with except in the middle of the night after we had that thing
23 surrounded, why these track vehicles had their .50 caliber machine guns on a pedestal
24 mount, M-113s and the tanks. Somebody started shooting in the middle of the night and I
25 didn't know whether there was VC inside there or whether it was somebody getting
26 trigger-happy. But anyway we opened up all the way around that thing. Essentially what
27 was happening was we were firing at each other because we were only about a kilometer
28 or a kilometer and a half apart. I remember lying there behind a big tree and watching
29 the tracers going overhead and whistle overhead and hit the tree and so forth and how
30 exciting it was. It was just an adrenaline rush. Did I tell that story? It doesn't make any
31 difference. It's the honest to God truth, the first time I was under fire I sort of paused

1 there so I could see this tracer slashing overhead, zipping through the leaves and
2 everything. I said “Burke how you doing?” And I could say just like one of these, “God,
3 this is incredible.” Just this tremendous adrenaline rush. It’s so exciting. I don’t want to
4 sound like I’m trying to be- I wasn’t doing anything heroic. I was behind a big tree. It was
5 just that in my naivety it was just incredibly exciting. I remember what a thrill it was.

6 SM: Now, when you moved in to support this election, provide security did you
7 encounter booby traps. Other problems?

8 LB: Not in that area we didn’t. Later on we would run into those things, but in
9 that area we didn’t.

10 SM: How did you evaluate the population, the Vietnamese population in terms of
11 its friendliness towards Americans?

12 LB: Of course, you know as an American from a different culture and not
13 speaking the language it’s easy probably to not really have a very good grasp of where
14 they were coming from. First of all, I want to say I always liked the Vietnamese. I liked
15 the people. I know some Veterans don’t have that feeling. I did. I liked them. That’s
16 who we were there for. My feeling was, I had good feeling about them. They seemed to
17 be friendly enough to me. The places where we were I didn’t encounter a lot of
18 animosity and so forth. I did certainly not outward. We used Vietnamese people who
19 worked for us on post and things like that. Boy, I thought they were nice people so I
20 liked the Vietnamese. It appeared to me that they were amenable to us being there. I
21 think that in some cases they appreciated us being there. That’s obviously my opinion
22 but they also made hellacious enemies. But that was my observation, that was my feeling
23 at the time.

24 SM: Did you have an interpreter with you at all while you were in that particular
25 area?

26 LB: Not at this particular time that I recall. Of course, we were outside of the
27 town, so we didn’t really see everything going on. We were just out there to provide
28 security. But that was really kind of a minor thing, that whole business. I guess I can tell
29 you some things to give you an idea of some of the operations we were on. I sent my
30 wife back a map, I probably shouldn’t have done this, but I marked some places on there
31 so she’d have an idea what was going on and where we were.

1 SM: I'm sorry. One more quick question about the security you provided in that
2 area. Was this a joint operation with Armed Forces, Vietnam, the Army of Vietnam?

3 LB: At that particular time I was new enough and I don't think I really
4 understood exactly the whole thing. Obviously the Vietnamese national police. I'm sure
5 there were ARVN units there. Maybe regional forces and so forth to provide some
6 security too. We were actually positioned outside of town. The town was on the Saigon
7 River, Lai Thieu is. We were out of town to the east. It's on the east side of the river.
8 So, we were out there in kind of a scrub jungle area. Our job was to keep the enemy, VC
9 terrorists or anybody from disrupting the voting. We did in fact outside of this firefight
10 we go t into there weren't any other incidents that had effect on the voting or anything
11 like that. So, it went pretty smoothly as far as I could tell.

12 SM: Well, what did you end up doing after that?

13 LB: Well, I haven't got time and I'm sure you don't want to hear a laundry list of
14 all the operations we went on. There was one of the operations I remember there was a
15 village that's not too far north of Saigon and up the road from a place called Tan Uyen.
16 Which was at the bottom edge of a stretch of jungle called the Ong Dong jungle. We
17 knew there were base camps out to the north of that. We were pretty sure that this village
18 was a VC village or had lot of VC in it. So, we come zeroing in there on an operation
19 called Huntsville and sealed and searched this village. We didn't prep it with artillery or
20 anything. We just flapped in there and surrounded the thing. Loud speakers and so forth
21 and sealed it off. Then the South Vietnamese troops and so forth came in behind us with
22 "County Fair". There was a medical aid station, dental station all that kind of stuff.
23 Passed out propaganda leaflets and rice and so on and so forth. We did kill one Vietcong
24 who was trying to escape at night. Captured some others. The ARVN went through and
25 searched the village. That was one of the first operations I was on that involved an
26 airmobile assault. I think it was fairly successful to us and we did get some VC suspects
27 and another one questioned about it was killed in the operation. You know you do those
28 types of things. Later on we went to Lai Khe which was to provide security up in there.
29 Patrol out in there where we came across the Viet Cong without really getting into any
30 firefights with them. We had a deal where I sent a patrol out across the open area and
31 they were fired on by snipers along the jungle treeline. So, these guys came back in and

1 the battalion commander and Bill Mullen, Charlie company commander, he and I got
2 together and planned this operation where he was going to take his company out there
3 about 3:00 in the morning and get behind that treeline on the edge of the jungle. Because
4 we knew the VC had watchers that would come down and look at that open area between
5 here and Lai Khe. So if any U.S. units came out the watchers could warn the VC in the
6 rear that we were coming. So, he got his guys out there in the middle of the night, got in
7 position behind there and when it got to be dawn I was supposed to come down with my
8 company and we were going to be the guinea pigs and cross that open area. When we
9 took fire, Charlie Company would swoop down on them and pick them up. As it turned
10 out, there were VC watchers there because we could see a rice bowl on top of a banana
11 leaves behind the trunk of a tree so where they were laying on the ground. But the
12 watchers were dressed in ARVN uniforms. When they went back up the hill Charlie
13 Company didn't fire at them because they didn't know for sure whether they were with
14 us or ARVN or what. That doesn't sound like much of a deal, but I will tell you that
15 those are typical of some of the things that happened in Vietnam. In the confusion and so
16 forth you miss opportunities. That's what happened. I'll tell you about probably the day
17 in Vietnam that was one of my worst days. This happened on October the 1st and 2nd in
18 1966. Phouc Vinh is, as I say, north of Saigon. It's connected to Saigon and Long Binh,
19 the big base by a gravel highway called highway 16. Highway 16 ran through War Zone
20 D, some rubber plantations and that Ong Dong jungle that I was talking to you about
21 before. Every so often, periodically we had to clear the road from Phouc Vinh down to
22 Long Binh or down to the secure area so that we could run supplies up there. Because
23 even though they flew a lot of stuff in on those artillery runs and so forth you were more
24 efficient hauling them by truck. The road was closed, mined and ambushed, so we had to
25 do these road-clearing operations periodically. We set out to do that. But, this operation
26 was called Operation Little Rock. It was under the guise of a road clearing operation and
27 we did clear the road. But before the road clearing operation started we swept into an
28 airstrip on the northern part of what's called the Ong Dong jungle north and west of Tan
29 Uyen. Set up for the night in night defensive position. They wanted it to look like it was
30 regular road clearing operation, but the plan was that east and a little bit south of us
31 ARVN units from Tan Yuen south would sweep through this An Dong jungle going west,

1 which we figured had base camps in it. We would be in position on the north edge of
2 that. We would establish ambush patrols and so forth and ambush any Viet Cong that
3 tried to come out. So, my company was given the job of leading the battalion in. This
4 was the biggest responsibility I'd had up to that particular period of time. So, we got up
5 at 0330 and got ready. We moved out before in the dark. Before we moved out that
6 night I had sent my long range reconnaissance patrol guys from my recon platoon to
7 establish ambush positions along the road that we were going to move down in to the
8 jungle and rubber there to ambush any VC that might come in there and ambush us. We
9 started out, it was pitch black. We moved down the road and then turned into this other
10 road through the rubber that basically led into the jungle. Like I said, I was in the lead. I
11 would stop periodically at various places where I had these ambush patrols set up. I'd
12 radio ahead of time because I'd seen friendly fire. You know you get excited blow your
13 claymore mines at your own guys. I picked these guys up one by one without any
14 incidents. There was a trail leading into the jungle at right angles to the road where we
15 were following. That was the one we were following into the jungle heading west and
16 then we were to spread out on that trail and set up these ambushes where the Viet Cong
17 theoretically were going to come out from this operation south us. I was scared to death
18 about missing that trail. Because if I had missed it we'd be in a hell of a mess to turn
19 around. But we found it ok. We took a right and we followed this trail into the jungle
20 that had been knocked down by a tank in a previous operation a long time ago. My pace
21 man counted off the number of paces so I knew where we were at. We were in there
22 about 1,000 meters or so. Once we were in there then I radioed back to the battalion
23 commander that I'd gotten us in position and I was so relieved I hadn't screwed up.
24 Because you could screw something up like that. The then battalion commander agreed
25 and we broke down in these ambush patrols. My sector was furthest to the west. The
26 other company's sector was stacked back behind. The battalion commander wanted us to
27 break down into these ambush patrols and then each ambush patrol follow a compass
28 azimuth into the jungle in the middle of the night and set up their ambushes. To be
29 totally honest with you I thought it was a good plan, but I didn't like the idea of these
30 ambush patrols paralleling each other through the jungle, because I'd seen patrols shoot
31 each other up. I told my guys, I want you to lay down along this trail until barely first

1 light. Then I want you to move in there while you've got a little bit of light and that's
2 what we did. We moved in there and we set up our ambushes. The operation, although
3 we couldn't see it, went through the stuff to our front. There might have been a few VC
4 flushed out of there, but none in my sector. Now, unbeknownst to us, we had gone and
5 broken down and gone through the jungle there in the dark to set up these ambush
6 positions we had bypassed Viet Cong base camps in the area that we had been through
7 and enough VC were in there [these camps we had bypassed in the dark]. They could
8 probably turn around and come back out. The bases were apparently further north than
9 the intelligence had indicated and therefore we'd bypassed them. When the operation
10 was over and we got the word to come back out to that trail, then return to our night
11 defensive positions. The VC were in there waiting for us. They had claymores set up,
12 booby traps made of CBUs, cluster bomb units with a little end hanging off trees wire
13 that electronically detonated the stuff. It was just a hell of a mess. The companies were
14 pinned down, taking casualties, snipers and so forth. My company on the western end
15 got all the way back out. My sector seemed to be fairly clear. I got everybody back out,
16 but the rest of the battalion was pinned down in there. A tank had come north from the
17 operation and gone through the jungle and bypassed a base camp right at the edge of my
18 sector. [In the camp was] a big stack of artillery shells which the VC used to make bobby
19 traps. The tank commander reported this to the battalion commander. Colonel Prillaman
20 ordered me to send a patrol up there and blow up those shells. The camp was
21 supposedly unoccupied. So, I sent a Lieutenant, Sergeant first class 8 division guys to do
22 that. Those guys followed that tank trail back down through, which they probably
23 shouldn't have done and they got close to the base camp the VC were in there blasting
24 them with a huge claymore mine. Eight of the ten that I recall were down. I got this
25 frantic call, "We need help. We're hit. We're hit. We're hit." So, I got my company
26 saddled up went to bail these guys out because they were my men. I would have done it
27 for anybody, but obviously they were my men. I can remember how tense that was.
28 Because when you're going into a combat situation. Waiting and moving toward the
29 contact is really scary. So, I can remember a point man would go five or six yards and
30 then kneel down because he was there going right down in the teeth of the ambush site.
31 Actually there was a couple of kids had to kick along to get them up there because we

1 had guys dying. I remember this little rise would come on riding down that trail. I could
2 see that base camp off to the left. There were about I don't know seven or eight of these
3 guys were down scattered on the trail. This was a huge explosion, the mine. One guy
4 had his buttocks just sheared off, big pieces. Another kid by the name of Pennington was
5 buck sergeant and a hell of a good soldier was laying there. His leg was just a mess,
6 pulverized stuff. I don't know if he lost the leg or not, because once they get to the
7 hospital company then you lose contact with them. I don't see how he could have held it
8 [kept the leg]. Another 19-year-old kid had his testicles blown off. Just a mass of goo
9 between his legs. Gruesome stuff. I knew I had to get a base of fire set up there to
10 suppress VC fire coming out of that base camp before we could even treat these guys.
11 So, I motioned these guys up and I tried to get set a base of fire between the wounded
12 guys and us firing through that camp to suppress the fire coming out of there [the VC
13 camp]. Before I could even get that base of fire set up- I always tell this story when we
14 talking to Veterans groups, because I give several speeches. I say the bravest thing I saw
15 in Vietnam came from the most unlikely source. A guy you think would be a hero may
16 not be the hero and some little skinny, pimply-faced guy with glasses may turn out to
17 have a heart of a lion. Anyway this little old skinny kid 5'6" maybe 125 pounds, dashes
18 out in the killing zone of that ambush site before we can get a base of fire set up and
19 starts to treat these wounded guys. Stuff you treat for shock, takes them longer.
20 Probably the bravest thing I saw in Vietnam. Anyway, we got that base of fire set up and
21 suppressed the fire in that base camp. I told my guys to fire low because obviously we
22 were firing into an area, which maybe across the way our guys may be pinned in. I
23 remember that I was checking on this kid, Pennington, with his wounded leg. He was
24 one of my favorite soldiers. He looked at me and he said, "get a dust off sir, I'm dying".
25 But it branded me. [That is just branded on my brain- "Get a dust off sir, I'm dying"]. I
26 got right down in his face, to treat for shock you get close. I got right down in his face
27 and I told him "You're going to make it. We're going to get you out of here". We didn't
28 have any stretchers. The jungle was too thick for medical evacuation helicopter to get in
29 there. So, I had the guys unroll their ponchos. We put them under these guys, lifted
30 them on there on the base of fire supporting us. We carried them back away from there.
31 Then I got a call on the radio. I'm trying to give a situation report, keep my head. Keep

1 cool because this is a pretty tough situation and I'm trying to be cool as a clam and do my
2 job. Think straight and get these guys out of here and so forth. I remember how I'd
3 heard people on the radio in contact, when bullets are flying and you're listening to those
4 radio transmissions it's just drama that you can't imagine. I'd heard these guys [on the
5 radio] breathing hard and they sounded if not panic stricken, they sound like I got to start
6 thinking about it. I'm thinking, I've got to sound cool now. I take a big breath and then I
7 say, "Dracula 6, Dracula 3-4 over". (mocks panting). Then I'd take another deep breath
8 before I'd squeeze the press to talk switch and try to sound as calm and as cool and
9 everything as I could. Then when I left off I'd (mocks panting). I mean the adrenaline is
10 just flowing through you like 90 miles an hour. I got a call and said you know we were
11 firing into one of our other companies [because I'm firing into this base camp]. I told
12 them I said well, I'm trying to suppress fire out of this base camp. I shot in and I don't
13 think we hit anybody, but it's just one of the confusing things that happened. Well,
14 anyway got the guys a good four to six guys on each wounded man and pick them up
15 with a poncho and carry them out of there. The base of fire is covering us from the rear.
16 Then when we get down the trail far enough then we would draw them back. And before
17 we could get out to that trail I would lose two more with heat exhaustion because it's just
18 incredibly hot there. These guys go down we have to drag them out. So, when we finally
19 get back out there why the story's not over yet. The other companies are still some of
20 them still pinned down. The battalion commander gives me the responsibility of clearing
21 the trail or along that trail. I sought to set up a place to evacuate the casualties. And so I
22 established some security around there. Started bringing the medical evacuation
23 helicopters into evacuate the wounded from my company and from the other companies.
24 They're finally getting these guys out of there. I remember Ike Papas from CBS news. I
25 didn't know he was there, but my RT advised me. I look back over my shoulder and
26 there's a camera in my face. In which I thought about me saying this but I never got on
27 Walter Cronkite CBS news. They had to get their blood and guts, and I admired Papas
28 for his courage for being out there, but he misinterpreted what had happened. He gave all
29 the credit to the personnel carriers that they finally sent down there to help get some
30 people out, but he didn't realize how far we'd had to carry the guys out to the road
31 themselves. But, that's ok. He basically panned the group of people [with the TV

1 camera] to basically get their quota of blood and guts on TV. One of my LRRPs gave
2 him the finger and said, "Yeah, LRRP." You know Long Range Reconnaissance patrol
3 guy. Probably kept the thing from making the news that night. Anyway, when we finally
4 after all this mess we finally got everybody out of there. One of the Lieutenant platoon
5 leaders in one of the other company's was killed. They brought out his body on the
6 fender of a tank. They said he's hanging on get a dust off right away because he's just
7 hanging on. So, I had a dust off waiting there. When the tank came in I went over to the
8 fender and helped lift him off there. I'm not an expert but I knew he was dead just by the
9 color of his face. Anyway, we finally got everybody out. They sent these armored
10 personnel carriers down there, down this trail to pick us up. We were going back to our
11 night defensive positions. So, we got on them, everybody got loaded up. There was an
12 Army personnel carrier in front of me, I could take it or the one in front of it. For some
13 reason I chose the one that I got on and then everybody loaded up and we'd take off
14 down this trail. We hadn't gone 200 or 300 meters when all hell breaks loose. The biggest
15 explosions you ever heard landing. Hit that personnel carrier right in front of me.
16 Knocked the improvised tourat off there. Killed the crew commander in there. Jumped
17 off those things into the jungle. I didn't know what the hell it was. This huge sucking
18 sound, artillery fire of some kind. I thought now those are the ambush [can't be VC].
19 They don't have stuff that big. Well, the way it turns out was ARVN artillery firing out
20 of Tan Uyen with 155 mm howitzers firing the wrong coordinates. They were trying to
21 secure a tank that was bogged down in the jungle and they walked that stuff right down
22 the trail there. We finally got it shut off. I'm telling you when you're under artillery fire
23 there's not a thing you can do about it. It's about as frightening as anything could be
24 because when somebody's shooting at you [with small arms], you can maneuver or fire
25 back. But artillery you just hunker down and hope the next round doesn't land on your
26 head. Fortunately, surprisingly no, I didn't have any casualties in my company.
27 Although that track right in front of me was knocked out. After that we finally got
28 everybody loaded back up again. Got that fire shut off. I radioed in and told them there's
29 something wrong here. That's not our stuff. I mean that's not there stuff. That's ours,
30 shut it off. We finally got back out in night defensive position. I had a company
31 formation because you're scared to death you're going to leave somebody behind. But

1 we got everybody out. We got the wounded guys out. None of them died because I
2 didn't have to write any letters of condolence, but I never know what happened. Never
3 knew the history of what happened to them after that because they're transferred to the
4 hospital company, they're taken off your morning report and you lose track of them. But
5 they all survived.

6 SM: So, you didn't lose anybody to kills in your unit?

7 LB: No, in my unit I didn't have anybody killed.

8 SM: Wow.

9 LB: I had these guys wounded.

10 SM: That's so lucky.

11 LB: I did help. There were some dead guys being brought out from other
12 companies and remember, you know this is my first big blast here. I had been under fire
13 before, been in various operations but this was the worst experience I'd had. I can still
14 remember you know that you take these kids who are dead and you wrap them in
15 ponchos because it's bad for morale. Their face is human and everything so I remember
16 we didn't evacuate the dead with helicopters because you don't waste the resources. You
17 keep your resources for somebody's life to be saved. You carry them out yourself. I can
18 remember picking those poncho wrapped bodies of those kids up. You know I still have
19 the feeling. You still feel the warmth of their body coming through that poncho. It's an
20 unusual kind of experience, I'll tell you that.

21 SM: What were the battalion's losses do you know?

22 LB: You know it's been too long ago. I can't tell you. I think I had eight
23 casualties and of course the heat exhaustion but we don't count those as casualties. I
24 think there were probably three or four killed. This is Operation Little Rock. One of
25 these days I'm going to try and contact that center in Washington that keeps all those
26 records and see if I could get more details about operations and orders. I may even tie an
27 account that operation in with my own personal experience and maybe try to write a book
28 on it. I've got to get busy on this if I want to get it done. All the details of that I can't tell
29 you. In my company I think I had eight casualties. But we didn't have any deaths.
30 Anyway, we went back out into our night defensive position and we set up there. After
31 we got out hell, they blew a claymore at the edge of our perimeter. They sneaked that

1 stuff [claymore] in broad daylight. I mean we had guys out there and they were on their
2 toes, but these [VC] guys were pretty slick. The vegetation was thick enough that they
3 could drag one of those things up there and it back off and blow it at you. They blew this
4 thing and it wounded a couple guys slightly. You know those were sorts of things. You
5 got so when you went into places you look for wires and electric wire because of booby
6 traps and that type of stuff. You were always on the alert for that type of thing. I got that
7 little medic after the whole thing was over, put him in for a medal. After it was over I
8 said, "Why would you do that? I didn't even have the base of fire set up there. Do you
9 know how dangerous that was?" This little guy just sort of looks at me funny and said,
10 "Well, sir, I was just doing my job." When I think of heroes of Vietnam I don't think of
11 somebody who had done anything really dramatic. I'm just thinking of some guy who's
12 scared to death but doing his job anyway. That's what he told me, "I was just doing my
13 job". But in doing his job he sure as hell risked his life. I saw some instances of courage
14 in Vietnam, but I don't think I saw anything that beat that. I always like to tell that story
15 because he sure didn't look like a hero, but he was.

16 SM: I was curious, you mentioned before.

17 LB: I might mention to you before I forget.

18 SM: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

19 LB: As far that operation I'm talking about is kind of typical of some of the
20 things that happen to you in Vietnam. You're going into their backyard. They've got all
21 these advantages. They know where they're at, they got their stuff setup and you're
22 moving to try to find them. You're at a hell of a disadvantage there. In this particular
23 instance you know, what do we get? What casualties did we cause for them? Not much I
24 don't think. My company got credit for one VC kill. Because in that base camp while
25 we were getting up there to bail these guys out one of the guys was wounded in the foot
26 was trying to cover the other guys. He saw a VC come up out of the spider hole and he
27 shot him, and he knocked him down into the hole. That's essentially the only VC that we
28 saw. I tell people and they don't understand this. When I was in Vietnam I was never in
29 the desperate situation like where we were threatened to be overrun. You could see them
30 coming at you and all that kind of stuff. I never saw a VC. I mean I didn't see them
31 shooting at us. Hear them shooting at you and claymores going off, but hell you never

1 saw them because of the vegetation. You never did see anybody. You might see a body
2 if you shot it and killed it. But as far as seeing a guy raising up and shooting at you or
3 something, man I didn't. I was in a battalion for six months. Ok, I'm sorry to interrupt
4 your question.

5 SM: Well, you kind of went where I was going to try to lead you. In terms of the
6 use of deception and you mentioned earlier that you had encountered VC and ARVN
7 uniforms. I was wondering if in that major encounter that you just described, your worst
8 day there, if there were tunnel complexes. If they had tried to engage in any kind of
9 fights. What size ultimately do you know was the enemy unit? Did you get an estimate
10 larger?

11 LB: No, we didn't. I'll tell you that enemy force in there might not have been
12 more than 10 or 20 people. That might have been just care takers out there that sort of
13 looked after those camps rather than being a regular enemy unit. Although I don't know
14 that. Because once again they had been alerted when we bypassed them in the dark.
15 They got ready for us to come back out of there. That's when all hell broke loose.
16 They'd be down in the spider holes and so forth. I wouldn't know whether there was 100
17 there or 10. You know? But they had the stuff ready all along that area because this was
18 apparently thick with base camps. Now, my company did go in our sector through an
19 area, which had been a little bit of a camp. They had a water well there and a wheel that
20 you could put a bucket on a rope and roll down there and then wheel it back up if you
21 know what I'm saying. We dropped a grenade down there and so forth. There was
22 probably no doubt there were tunnels underneath there, but we didn't uncover them.
23 Because you know by the time that we got into that whole mess, by then it was not such a
24 matter of destroying base camps. It was a matter of extracting yourself from a hell of a
25 screwed up mess. So, I remember the next day Colonel Prillaman our battalion
26 commander, he was pretty highly thought of by DePuy and so forth. General DePuy
27 wanted to go back in there into the area north of where we got hit really bad. Boy, I
28 remember when I finally bedded down that night worn out because I'd been up since 2:30
29 and been through all that stress I remember thinking I didn't do a lot of praying in
30 Vietnam, but I remember praying that we didn't have to go back into that area again.
31 Because I didn't want to go in there. He [Prillaman] really convinced DePuy the way

1 that thing was set up was just a no win situation for us to go tromping back in there again
2 because they had all the advantage. We didn't. But what the later did then was they
3 cleared that thing out and they took Rome plows and they plowed that whole damn Ong
4 Dong jungle up mile after mile. It just ceased to be a jungle. The latter part of my tour I
5 flew over that area and saw them working down there. They just plowed it down. You
6 know what I mean by Rome plow?

7 SM: Yes, sir.

8 LB: That's what we did. I mean we didn't but the engineers did. So, anyway
9 that was quite a day.

10 SM: Yes, sir. Any idea how many total enemy were killed for the battalion?

11 LB: No. I never saw any statistics on that. So, I can't tell you that. Not very
12 many, not very many.

13 SM: That team that you sent with the Lieutenant, Sergeant First class, the demo
14 team that you sent to blow up those artillery rounds, all of them made it back no
15 problem? Wounded but...

16 LB: Well, yeah we got all of them out of there, yeah. Surprisingly the Lieutenant
17 and the Sergeant weren't wounded and it wasn't because they were hanging near the back
18 of the patrol. It was just the dispersement of the shrapnel. Everybody else got blasted
19 but them. Boy they were two pretty shook guys. Not that they didn't continue to
20 perform and do their job. I mean they were just in shock.

21 SM: Oh, yeah.

22 LB: No. I'll tell you this. I'm proud of the fact that we were able to get up there
23 and get them out. Because it was a bad situation. I'm proud of the fact we were able to
24 save them. Because I'm sure that we did because if one of them had died I'd have had to
25 write a letter of condolence and I didn't have to do that.

26 SM: Right. What did you do after this operation? Did you stay as the company
27 commander of that support unit?

28 LB: Yeah. I stayed company commander of the headquarter field company and
29 then we went on to other operations. We went up to Quan Loi, which is near An Loc.
30 Which [An Loc] is the provincial capital of Binh Long Province up close to the rubber
31 plantation area. Close to the Cambodian border about 20 kilometers from the Fish Hook,

1 that notorious Communist sanctuary. I can remember flying in there and if you don't
2 mind I'll tell a little about it. This was one of the most beautiful places I think I can ever
3 remember being in. The Terre Rouge Rubber Company, a French company had this big
4 rubber plantation 100 square kilometers of rubber near An Loc at a place called Quan
5 Loi. Quan Loi is about four kilometers east of An Loc off the highway [Highway 13],
6 the road leading in there. We went up there to provide base security for that and patrol
7 out of there and conduct operations out of there. Along this ridge was an airstrip, which
8 had been a good French golf course; there were still flagsticks marking the holes there.
9 We'd gouged it out to make a longer airstrip there so you could get bigger aircraft in
10 there. There were French villas all around the base of the ridge in this French colonial
11 style, manicured and flowered. There was a clubhouse with a swimming pool, like a
12 country club setting. They had their own little airstrip; they could fly down to Saigon for
13 a day of shopping and stuff like that. Had their own clubhouse. I mean it was just an
14 idyllic place. It was beautiful place. Just mile after mile like I said of rubber trees there.
15 They'd run this plant [rubber processing] and so forth. Anyway, we went up there and
16 conducted operations out there, medical civic action patrol got into various villages
17 around there trying to, you know, maintain the good relationship with the Vietnamese
18 rubber workers. I wasn't there, but one of our company commanders had a jeep, he was
19 new and he was doing something he shouldn't have been doing. He was running the
20 roads of that plantation to get a feel of the place and he came to a little village named Soc
21 Xien and there's a VC squad laying out there across the road taking it easy. There's this
22 big shocked confrontation and they start shooting at him. He pulled his jeep off into the
23 ditch and gets underneath there and gets on the radio and the battalion has to go bail him
24 out. We get out there and there's a firefight. He and his driver and everybody survived
25 that, but it was about some place where he probably shouldn't have been in. We
26 conducted patrols out to that same village. Two civic action patrols to treat the people.
27 Try to do good things for them. Montagnards villages close by, just various operations. I
28 don't remember that we had any big firefights or any big contacts, but we did have snipe
29 and the various kind of thing that you run into out there. I just remember that [Quan Loi]
30 as kind of an idyllic place. I remember I was on an operation; I took my company out to
31 sweep through the jungle to the northwest. As a matter of fact, I've written a short story

1 that was based on the situation that is going to be published. We were going through this
2 bit [rubber] and this rain and so forth. We came to a road running through the plantation
3 and my point guys go down, just as they got to the road. Here comes these guys walking
4 down the road in black pajamas. You think are these VC? You don't know for sure
5 whether they are or not. Light is dim, it's cloudy and underneath that canopy it's dark.
6 It's a difficult situation and I can remember them carrying something over their shoulders
7 like Vietnamese carried their weapons, they'd put it over their shoulder because they're
8 small people. Don't cradle them [their weapons] like a GI. I'm sitting there with my M-
9 16 on the floor of the tank ready cut loose on them. But I'm not sure whether they're
10 VC or not. I can remember this kind of a war going on within. [Whether to hold off or
11 kill them. The rational part of your mind is saying, "Hold off, hold off". And the animal
12 part of you, influenced by fear, is saying "Kill them, kill them"]. When they get close
13 enough I could see they were carrying axes and not weapons. You know another second
14 or two we would have cut loose and just blown them all away. But I jumped up and said
15 don't shoot, don't shoot because they weren't VC or at least they weren't armed. Thank
16 God that we didn't. I think if I had cut loose and mowed those guys down, as could
17 easily have happened because they looked like Viet Cong. They were just carrying axes.
18 They were woodcutters and stuff. Now they might have been VC, but we didn't have any
19 proof they were. So, you know those kinds of things happened too. One other operation
20 I'll tell you about, which is probably the second worst situation I was in. You've
21 probably heard of operation Attleboro that took place in December of 1966. 196 light
22 infantry brigade went into War Zone C, west of the Michelin plantation, just got kicked
23 around pretty good. 25th division and the 1st infantry division were sent in there to try to
24 exploit that situation. I remember from Quan Loi, we flew our in an airborne assault into
25 the landing zone in the middle of War Zone C, which is really bad. A company was left
26 back to support a firebase, but there was Bravo Company, Charlie Company and my
27 company and we were going to go through that jungle with two axes [of advance]. Bravo
28 Company was going to lead and the battalion command group was going to follow and
29 Charlie Company was going to be another axis just as my company was support for all
30 the Charlie Company. Jump off those helicopters in that confusing mess out there, you
31 know. You think that you know which direction you're supposed to be coming in and

1 everything and you get on the ground and it's mass confusion. But, we got everybody
2 straightened out and Charlie Company took off and my company was behind. We
3 followed this azimuth into this really super thick jungle, triple canopy stuff. And I can
4 hear radio transmissions and somehow that battalion command crew doesn't link up with
5 Bravo Company. And they're out there in the jungle by themselves. So, we were going
6 through this thing on three axis now. The XO is up above in a helicopter and a battalion
7 commander trying to link up with Bravo Company. He's talking to the guy, "pop
8 smoke." "Well, this is where you are." "Well, I can't be here. I'm in front of Bravo
9 Company," and the XO says, "you are?" He said, "This is the azimuth you need to take
10 to join up with Bravo Company." So, we have a new battalion commander, probably just
11 rotated back. He's inexperienced, good man but inexperienced. He's in a hurry. There's
12 a road, a trail well developed going through that jungle in the direction he wants to go.
13 He was inexperienced and some of the guys tried to warn him, don't do this. This is
14 dangerous. They went anyway and the VC hit them with a claymore. Killed one of my
15 men, because he was in headquarters company he was a battalion commander. Wounded
16 Major Harry Summers, you might have heard of him. He was my battalion XO. He was
17 wounded and they had to evacuate him out of there. And to make a long story short the
18 battalion commander was not hit even though he was at the head of the column with
19 black powder all over his face. After that they finally got the guys evacuated and he
20 joined up with Bravo Company and they took off to get to the landing zone, I mean the
21 night defensive position, which is a clearing in the middle of War Zone C. Well, Charlie
22 Company and my company were moving through that thing and then our sector where we
23 kept hitting snipers. We had casualties and then we had to evacuate and then we got
24 delayed. It was just a mess. Mullin the Charlie company commander, he did a great job,
25 but it was just a fiasco. You know, they were constantly delayed and these firefights and
26 all hell would break loose and snipers up ahead. My guys would be hit by snipers, even
27 though that they didn't have any casualties. But because of the delay it gets dark on us.
28 When the sun goes down over there, I mean it gets dark in a hurry. And there we are in
29 the middle of War Zone C. My company following Charlie company and we're out there
30 in the middle of no place. You know I'm saying my God we couldn't be in a worse
31 situation, no matter what. And I have this real fear that my company is going to get

1 separated. I had the first guy in my line grab hold of the web gear on the last guy in
2 Charlie Company I said you hang on the end and don't you let go. I had everyone of my
3 guys grab hold, physically grab hold of the guy in front of them. I mean you could not
4 see, you hear the term you can't see your hand in front of your face. Well, when you're
5 under a triple canopy jungle in that tropical setting like that. I mean you can't see your
6 hand in front of your face. And Mullin, boy he did a hell of a job. He led us, [I'm talking
7 about the Charlie company commander] led us through to that landing zone with a proper
8 azimuth. The battalion commander, and Brave Company had gotten in ahead of us.
9 Well, from the air it looked like a clearing. Really on the ground it was elephant grass,
10 12 or 14 feet high. The battalion commander had built a huge fire in there a bonfire to
11 give us something to guide on. Well, it was a mistake, but he did that thinking he was
12 doing the right thing. We got in there. Had to tramp this elephant grass down by linking
13 arms and tramping in to that. Finally we were able to mash down a clearing big enough
14 to get everybody in there. We started digging foxholes. You've got foxhole on top of
15 each other. This is just a small area. We're in trouble. We figure we were going to get
16 hit that night. Sidney Berry the brigade commander says I expect you to get hit, you
17 better get ready. So, we got all hunkered down in there and you know we didn't get hit.
18 When morning comes we fired a mad minute. I guess you probably know what that is.

19 SM: Yes, sir.

20 LB: Just blast the jungle all the way around you for a minute at first light in case
21 they attack you. We get up, so we're going to move out from that position, rotate
22 company's in the lead. After we'd gone a little while, I think my company rotated to the
23 front. Then the ground opens up a little bit and we come to a little bit more of an open
24 area and I can see back in the trees. We're in a VC base area. There's hooches and stuff
25 like that. I stop and blow some of that stuff. You've got to really be careful because man
26 they always had that stuff booby trapped when they weren't in there. But the battalion
27 commander was in a hurry to get out of there. We didn't really check that out as
28 thoroughly as I thought we probably should have. That's because after all, that's what
29 we were there for. We probably bypassed a bunch of stuff that we could have destroyed.
30 But after we moved on down further down the line, I heard a helicopter move in behind
31 us. I got the word to stop and I was in the lead and so we stopped. All company

1 commanders that are supposed to come back to the battalion command group in the
2 middle of the columns. So, I went back there. Here's Colonel Berry, brigade
3 commander. There's a new Lieutenant Colonel and a new major. We lined up and shook
4 hands with Colonel Huff, our battalion commander who led us on in there and with Major
5 Fox the XO who hadn't done anything but be over head in the helicopter and try to
6 straighten the whole mess out. They'd both been booted. Berry was a hard man, good
7 soldier, but hard man. Huff had lost his head a little bit there, got some people killed. I
8 remember shaking hands with him, he was downcast. He knew his career was over. So,
9 was Major Fox. Lost their men. We had a new battalion commander, he was going to be
10 very cautious. We finally got out of there, but the stories I'm telling you here, Steve, are
11 not the kind of stories you may hear from some other guy. You know in this situation a
12 whole regiment of North Vietnamese soldiers were about to overrun us and all that kind
13 of stuff. I know I wasn't in that kind of a desperate situation. But the situation I was in
14 was being engaged in the jungle with the snipers and the booby traps and the claymore
15 mines and being out in the middle of nowhere. You know lost in the dark. I say lost, I
16 wasn't lost. You know those kinds of things are very memorable to me and that's what
17 the Vietnam War was like for me. I was in some big firefights where you've got just a
18 constant roar. But it wasn't like being in those desperate situations. I mean I could tell
19 you a lot of other stories because I was in other enemy contacts. After that operation I
20 will tell you this. We went to Dau Tieng, which was a town at the bottom of the
21 Michelin plantation. My battalion set up at Bien Cui, which was a little airstrip that had
22 been a French fort out there because Dau Tieng was a French colonial rubber plantation
23 town. Bill Mullin now was the S-3, because for some reason they moved him. So, he and
24 I got together and planned an operation. We were ready to go south of Bien Cui and Dau
25 Tieng and down along the Saigon River, get a company of armored personnel carriers to
26 transport my company down there. I didn't want to think about that next to the woods.
27 My God, where we were talking about going was now close to Boi Loi Woods. I had this
28 big grand operational plan and we were going to go down in there sweep all through that
29 area and search it out. Worked it out with the battalion commander, this new guy he was
30 real cautious. He said, "No, better not go that far." It's a good thing we didn't because
31 we didn't know what we were going into. But we did shorten the operation. Got some

1 personnel carriers, went into the rubber. Probably 5 kilometers or 6 south of Bien Cuy.
2 Then we took a turn to the west and went right to the edge [of the rubber], right where the
3 jungle came down there's a creek running in there. I was going to have my LRRPs, my
4 long range reconnaissance patrol guy, my recon platoon unload them and then have them
5 go in to that jungle and then patrol through there looking for base camps. They would
6 move north out to the road that ran east and west. We'd come back out to pick them up.
7 We came to that place in the rubber, I had all those tracks get on line and face into that
8 stuff so they could cover us with .50 caliber machine guns. We offloaded the rifle
9 platoon to go in there and check the edge of that. Then we sent the recon platoon in
10 there. Well, we got into the edge of that rubber, right at the edge of it. It was in the
11 jungle, probably about 10 yards from the edge of the rubber or so. Then we just ran into
12 stacks of stuff. There were stacks of dried fish in huge burlap bags. We found cans of
13 kerosene. Like in tins, big heavy cans but there was kerosene in them. There were cans
14 of stuff, like 5 gallon cans of stuff there. They had stuff shaped like a bar of soap, it was
15 brown, I didn't know what it was. I felt it, it was kind of grainy. Finally I tasted it, it was
16 brown sugar. In other words this was a supply point for VC moving from Cambodia
17 through War Zone C heading south, going along the edge of this rubber. They ended up
18 along the rubber. You could see where they dug holes back underneath there to protect
19 them from air raids and all this kind of stuff. We collected cans, 5-gallon cans of
20 kerosene and brown sugar. I told my guys to pour kerosene all over the top of these
21 stacks of dried fish. There's no way we could evacuate all that kind of stuff. There were
22 little fishing poles along the creek there. Must have been loaded with fish, had little short
23 fishing poles about a yard long. Must have stuck them in the ground with a hook on
24 there. They [the VC] caught all these fish and dried them. They used it [the fish] to suit
25 the food source. Then we blew it all up, had plastic explosives or C-4 and blow this. I
26 don't know how many tons of fish we must have blown that. We emptied the cans of
27 kerosene, all that we could find. So, we made that part of a fire. I brought back a sample
28 of the brown sugar and kerosene, fishing poles and all that kind of stuff with intelligence,
29 but we blew the rest of it up. I was really surprised that while we were in there we didn't
30 have any casualties because that supply point was booby trapped sure as hell. But we

1 didn't. We destroyed a ton of stuff. I don't know how many tons of fish it must have
2 been. So, that's not a very exciting story, but it was pretty exciting for me at the time.

3 SM: How about weapons cached?

4 LB: Pardon me?

5 SM: Did you come up on any weapons caches?

6 LB: Not on that operation. I heard of this happening and so forth, but I can't say
7 that my company did. We might find an M-1 carbine that obviously been used by the VC
8 after a firefight where somebody lost it or something like that. You know a weapon by a
9 body, but I never was in on operations where we came across a big weapons cache,
10 hundreds of weapons or anything like that.

11 SM: Ok. Let's see. Any other operations that come to mind?

12 LB: Well, you know we were up at Minh Thanh Rubber plantation, which is not
13 too far from Quan Loi, up north fairly close to the Cambodian border, but over in War
14 Zone C. It's a rubber plantation that's north of Michelin and that was a bad
15 neighborhood. We were out in there conducting some operations. I guess I could tell
16 you about one day. Sometimes to people who haven't been there they don't really have a
17 good handle on where you're coming from. When somebody's out there in a dangerous
18 situation, in a firefight, or where their life is hanging by a thread, you're just glued to the
19 radio if you're back behind. Because that's just like you being out there. You're pulling
20 for them so hard that people that don't understand what that's like. That person in
21 trouble becomes you. You know if that's me, what would I want everybody to be
22 focused on? Trying to get me out of there. One day we were at Minh Thanh. Special
23 Forces camp up there. Special Forces ran an operation out of Minh Thanh with the CIDG
24 troops that they had there. That was like I said a bad neighborhood. The operation was a
25 hush hush deal. They were being supported by Air Force. You know there in the jungle
26 you can't bomb those targets without a forward air controller who can mark the targets
27 for you because it's just a mass of green down there. So, the forward air controller would
28 fly a little Cessna or Piper Cub with rockets on the wing and stooging around up there.
29 And talk to the guys on the ground and identify targets. When he'd gotten the location of
30 the target he'd dive down and fire rockets before the jet jockies came in. He'd fire white
31 phosphorous rockets in there and that'd make a big old white puff of smoke and then the

1 jets would bomb that. Because they'd drop their bombs on the smoke identifying the
2 target, you probably know what I'm saying. We always referred to forward air controller
3 as "Mac the FAC". Every one of them to the troops on the ground was "Mac the FAC".
4 F-A-C, forward air control. Mac the FAC. So everybody who was a forward air
5 controller was to the guys on the ground, Mac the FAC. Well, ok we're in this operation
6 and we get a radio transmission that in support of this Special Forces deal, Mac the FAC
7 is down in the jungle. He's crashed. We get in our helicopter, battalion commander and
8 some of the company commanders and staff guys jump in there, where there's nothing
9 going on that day and we fly out there to find if we can see the wreckage and Mac the
10 FAC's plane is hanging up in the canopy of these trees. He didn't hit the ground it was
11 so thick he just crashed into the canopy. Yet he was alive. He had worked his way to the
12 ground because he was afraid the thing might blow up. We couldn't hear the radio
13 transmissions or anything, but we could see the smoke from smoke grenades coming up.
14 So he was alive and that was a problem. Because this is a bit of a bad VC area. You
15 wonder who's going to get there first. Are we going to get to him or are the VC? There
16 wasn't anything we could do except pull for him. So, we just circled around watching.
17 There was a gun ship from Special Forces helping the operation doing the same thing, but
18 nobody could get in there. Well, we were going to have to have a Jolly Green Giant
19 rescue chopper from the Air Force come out there because they've got a cable they could
20 drop down to rescue this guy. So, we stooge around there and wait and wait and wait you
21 know. It's just agony waiting to see if they're going to get there. You know the guy's
22 still alive and so pretty soon here comes the Jolly green Giant, that big old helicopter
23 [make helicopter chopping sound] out there and he hovers over that sight. He drops a
24 cable down there and we were just on pins and needles. It's just like it's you. Pretty
25 soon the damn cable comes up and he's not on the end of it. It's just like you'd died. But
26 then one of the crew goes down on the cable again, you know they've got that seat on the
27 end of it and then that thing hovers and hovers and hovers. You think, my God there are
28 VC down there, he's a sitting duck. Pretty soon, I can hardly tell this story without
29 getting choked up. Pretty soon they pull that cable up and there's two guys, two guys on
30 there. And they got him out of there. I can't convey to you how exciting that was for us.
31 We were jumping up and down and clapping each other on the back and hollering and

1 whistling and carrying on in our helicopter. With no doors on those things, you know,
2 you're just hanging out there. But man, we were so excited. I had no idea who that guy
3 was. I wouldn't know him if he was standing right here. You know it was just like my
4 own brother being rescued. It was really amazing.

5 SM: Yes, sir.

6 LB: A good story. You got time for one more?

7 SM: Of course, yeah.

8 LB: Ok. The Chaplin of our battalion was a guy by the name of Ivan Ives. Just a
9 little guy, sandy headed guy. Didn't have much of a chin. You know what some people
10 might describe as a weak chin. He wasn't a real good preacher, but he was a great guy.
11 The troops liked him. He was braver than a lion. He'd go out on patrols and stuff with
12 the troops just to show he was with them. Well, after Operation Attleboro, we'd been
13 through some pretty tough times and we came back to Phuoc Vinh right before
14 Christmas. I don't know if I told you this, my battalion call sign was Dracula, I think I
15 told this story and how we took the bat mobile. Or little officer's club was called the bat
16 cave. Well, we went to the bat cave. One night we were on stand down. This is, I don't
17 know 23rd, somewhere before Christmas. We'd been under a lot of stress and so forth.
18 We got in there, guys in the lounge got a few drinks and the music was playing and we
19 were all having a good time. It was getting a little bit rowdy and so forth. The Chaplin
20 was usually a good guy, he'd have a couple drinks with you and then he'd leave. But he
21 stuck around this time. About the time the party looked like it had reached its peak, then
22 he rapped on a glass and wanted everybody's attention. "Ok, guys give me your attention
23 here". Well, a few of them they didn't want to stop, they were having a good time. They
24 were unwinding. They were kind of rude to him, you know? He said, "Ok, let's go come
25 on. I've got something I want to show you. Pull up a chair." Well, the guys were pissed
26 at him. They didn't want to. I was his friend I said, "Ok, come on let's do this."
27 Although I was embarrassed for him. I thought the guy completely misjudged what was
28 going on. I thought he was going to give us a religious Christmas program or something
29 like that. But you know he finally got everybody settled down. So, his assistant came in
30 and brought in a screen, a movie screen. He sets up the slide projector. There was
31 muttering and guys were cussing under their breath, "God damn let's get this over with so

1 on and so forth.” He sat down. And so he flashes the first slide and unbeknownst to us
2 he’d written to all our wives and families and had them send slides of our wives and kids.
3 It’s kind of funny, when he flashed that first slide up there and here’s this beautiful girl
4 holding a baby and that whole group just completely sobered up in a hurry. Then he went
5 ahead and he showed a slide of every, now this was for the officers. I know he did things
6 for the enlisted people too, but this was for the officers. He said you know this is
7 Lieutenant so and so’s wife Julie. This is their son Bobby. He was really a great guy.
8 Pretty soon the guys sobered up in a hurry. Then they’re looking for their wife and their
9 family. And then pretty soon, click, there’s a new picture up there. The guy’s would say,
10 “God, she’s a good-looking girl, you know?” I mean not nasty comments, but
11 complimentary kind. You know, he flashes my wife and my baby daughter’s picture on
12 the screen. I always refer to that as the Chaplains Christmas present. That was really
13 wonderful. Obviously very emotional.

14 SM: Did you have regular contact with your wife?

15 LB: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we wrote on a regular basis. You bet. Her letters were
16 very important. Look for mail call everyday. But you know I’ve got myself under control
17 now. I get a little carried away when I tell that story. But when that was over with
18 everybody filed out of there and thanked him. It was a really great thing that he’d done
19 for all of us. In part, because now you got a chance to see the family of the other guys
20 that you’re friends with and they got a chance to see yours. On top of that you look at
21 that and you’re so proud of yours. That kind of thing. So, it was a great experience. It’s
22 something that I ‘ll never forget. He’d gone to a lot of trouble and it took him a lot of
23 time to do. It was great. He was a great guy. Anyway.

24 SM: That’s a great story.

25 LB: Yeah. (tape cuts out).

26 SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the 12th of June.

27 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the
28 21st of June 2001 approximately 2:15 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas and Mr.
29 Burke is in Dodge City, Kansas. Sir, why don’t you go ahead and discuss what happened
30 after Christmas of 1966.

1 LB: I think I said last time that we got a new battalion commander, his name was
2 Colonel Simpson. The company that I was commanding was headquarters Field
3 Company is what we called it because I think I explained that to you. We took some of
4 the elements in headquarters company organization that didn't fit in the jungle warfare,
5 counter insurgency concept and made a fourth maneuver element out of them. It was
6 mine to command. But, Simpson didn't like that. He was very much a by the book type
7 of guy. He didn't like that concept. He wanted me to revert to a typical headquarters
8 company commander kind of the ash and trash type of thing. Of course, you know if
9 that's what he wanted, that's what I'd do. I tried to convince him that we could continue
10 as a maneuver element and be very effective. He offered me a rifle company. Well, I'd
11 already been commanding a company in the field for four months or whatever it was. I
12 told him I'd prefer to stay with headquarters field company. But he did away with that
13 concept. So, I was made the Battalion S-3 Air Assistant Operations Officer. I served in
14 that capacity in a number of operations including Operation Cedar Falls, which is where
15 we went into the Iron Triangle. By that time Bill Mullin, who'd been the Charlie
16 Company commander, winner of the Distinguished Service Cross. He was now the
17 battalion operations officer since Summers had been wounded in Operation Attleboro.
18 So, he was my boss and I worked pretty well with him and we had a great relationship. I
19 think I did him a good job. I know he was a good operations officer. He went on R&R
20 and so I was the battalion operations officer for some time there including a time when
21 some operations around in the immediate area to let Simpson kind of get his feet on the
22 ground. There were relatively minor operations, not too much going on. Then we were
23 involved in Operation Cedar Falls and I had to plan that whole thing, which was great. I
24 mean I'd already had experience doing that stuff in infantry officer career course. So, I
25 wrote the operations officer, the op-order for our battalion operation. Operation Cedar
26 Falls and our business was we were going to block them [Our job was to block the
27 northern edge of the Iron Triangle]. Went in to block the northern leg of the Iron
28 Triangle there because we were going to pin up the VC in there. And I'm sure you are
29 familiar with that operation Haig. He was a battalion commander that took Ben Suc, a
30 village on the west side there, cleared that out. We went in there [Iron Triangle] and
31 leveled, cleared out parts of that and drove trails through there and so forth. Didn't, as it

1 turned out in the long run, eliminate the thing as a VC base. But it was an exciting
2 operation. My battalion was involved in one of the biggest aerial lifts in history. We
3 were all in the air at the same time. I had to plan the whole thing and it went smoothly.
4 Went in there. There were some firefights and some contact, but it wasn't a big knock
5 down, drag out like some people had anticipated because I guess the VC had gone to
6 ground. Underground or tunnels or got out of there before we got in there. So, there
7 wasn't a big body count. It was a significant operation and I enjoyed that from the
8 standpoint of operations and planning the thing and writing the operations order and sort
9 of supervising from the helicopter and all those types of things. I got good experience
10 there. Briefed the generals and so forth. I remember one time I was briefing them [a
11 group of officers and a reporter] out there at the edge of this clearing in the jungle, a
12 reporter from Time Magazine took some shots there. I was standing with my easel and
13 briefing the commander and a sniper shot at us. And everybody hit the ground. A round
14 coming your way has a pretty distinctive sound. He was shooting at us. He didn't hit
15 anybody, but just nicked part of the map. So, that was kind of an interesting experience
16 to have and the Colonel [Simpson] didn't like that. So, the VC had a sniper out there
17 some place who was pot shotting at us and at airborne helicopters coming in and so forth.
18 Colonel Simpson got all bent out of shape about it. Instead of sending the company out
19 there and try to run the guy down. He wanted to bring in airstrikes and everything. I
20 don't know why. We wasted a bunch of ordinance bombing out there from somewhere
21 for a single sniper. But I didn't think it was a very wise use of resources, but I wasn't the
22 commander so I called the stuff in. As soon as we'd blown the hell out of the jungle out
23 there, Simpson took off on some mission and came back in a light observation helicopter
24 bubble. Got shot at by the same sniper. Hit the helicopter. Of course you know he was
25 irritated about that. Then we had to call in a Chinook to evacuate the helicopter. His
26 helicopter had been hit. We called in more artillery and stuff and then when the Chinook
27 came in the damn sniper fired at him, without hitting him. But it was just one of those
28 strange episodes, which is sometimes kind of funny. You know those type of things go
29 on. We were up at Minh Than River plantation for operations, various things like that.
30 Eventually I went on R&R to meet my wife in Hawaii in the later part of January of '67 I
31 think it was. And on my way to R&R I had a friend, that I'd been the executive officer of

1 a cavalry troop that he commanded. I was a cavalry officer and an armor officer before I
2 transferred to infantry in the 25th division in Hawaii, his name was Carl Quickmire. He
3 was working in a USARV G2 shop at Bien Hoa. I was flying out from there or close by
4 so as part of my R&R I swung by to see him. He was a good friend and I'd been his XO.
5 He tried to convince me, because he thought a lot of me. He wanted me to come work
6 down there in the USARV G-2. I'd been out in the field for about six months and so
7 forth. I wasn't anxious to get out of the First Infantry Division, but I did like the idea of
8 the intelligence work that they were doing down there. He told me all about the job and I
9 thought that'd be great. So, they told me they were going to have orders cut for me to
10 come work for them up there. I said well, "I'm not going to "apply" for this job. But, if
11 I'm ordered obviously I'll take it." So, I went on R&R and when I got back there were
12 orders I was supposed to go to USARV. Well, the battalion commander didn't like it.
13 Mullin didn't want me to go, but I said hey, these are the orders. I'm going to go ahead
14 and go. So, I went down to division on my way to process out to go to this new job and
15 the division chief of staff met with me and said we don't want you leaving the division.
16 We need a division liaison officer to II Field Force headquarters. Therefore, they had
17 enough clout in USARV and so forth. They had those orders resanded. I was then made
18 the division liaison officer to II Field Force headquarters. That was my job for the rest of
19 my tour of duty there. Which was great. I therefore had six months or thereabouts seeing
20 the war from a foxhole level. And then I was able to see six months of war from the big
21 picture level. I would fly down to II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh twice a day
22 carrying documents and sitting in on briefings and picking up stuff. Briefing them on
23 what we were doing. Then I'd come back at night and I would brief the division
24 commander and his staff on what was going on in the Third Corps area outside of our
25 own tactical area of responsibility. So I briefed them on what the 25th infantry was doing
26 in the west. And what the ARVN units were doing and so forth. It was a great job and I
27 liked it. I got to know DePuy. He wasn't the commander too much longer after I got that
28 job. But I got to know Hollingsworth and General Bernard Rogers and General Haig
29 quite well because I briefed them for five or six months. They got to know I was pretty
30 good at the job. Those were great contacts and I have great respect for those guys. It was
31 a tremendous job. I think I did that job well too. That was gratifying. The only thing

1 about it was I was out of the combat thing from the standpoint of being on the ground
2 tromping around through the jungle. Sometimes I spent as much as three hours a day
3 flying in a helicopter. Not as a pilot but just a passenger. Gave me six air medals just for
4 flying around. I'm not sure that I can really take a whole lot of pride in having that many
5 air medals. Except when you're flying on the helicopter and you hear them pop, pop,
6 popping at you while you're taking off in one of those things. The pilot barely skids over
7 the top of the tin roof because he's overloaded and you stick your foot out and you could
8 hit that roof if you wanted to. There's considerable risk in that too. But, never the less,
9 that was not an experience that I spent a lot of time talking about. Because that was a
10 staff job that was interesting for me. I think I performed a valuable service for the
11 division, but it wasn't as hair raising as some of the experiences that I'd had when I was
12 in the infantry battalion. So, those are some of the things that I did afterwards. I think
13 that as long as I'm going to ramble around here and tell some stories I will tell you about
14 this story. Maybe somebody in the future would find it interesting. This is a captain's
15 foxhole view of what happened now. Whether this is 100% accurate for the big picture
16 or not, I don't know. But, I'll tell the story. By my battalion, first battalion, second
17 infantry was commanded by Colonel Prillaman, at the time that I'm talking about.
18 Maybe it was Huff, it doesn't make any difference. We were on a road clearing operation
19 and one of our rivals was the first battalion 26th infantry, famous outfit with the First
20 Division. It was commanded by when I was a captain, it was commanded by Lieutenant
21 Colonel Alexander Haig. And Haig was a good soldier, very dashing soldier, good-
22 looking guy and so forth. My own impression, just an impression down here. If it gets
23 me in trouble, so be it, was that he was kind of a glory hound and he knew the right
24 buttons to push. He rode some coat tails to the very top. But that's not saying he wasn't
25 a good soldier. Anyway, we were on this operation. They were a rival of ours. They
26 were set up down the road from where we were. I had duty in the tactical operations
27 center at 3:00 in the morning and all hell broke loose on the brigade command then. Haig
28 was on the radio. Said they were being attacked by big forces of Vietcong. They needed
29 all kinds of artillery and air support and so on and so forth. The VC were crashing
30 through their lines. It sounded like World War III going on over there. They got Puff the
31 Magic Dragon, Snoopy up there. They were dropping flares and mini guns going,

1 artillery blasting over there so on and so forth. You know he claimed they had a big
2 victory in there. It looked like there was going to be lots of body count and so forth. His
3 battalion had held and all this kind of stuff. So, at first light the next morning
4 everybody's gotten breathless with anticipation seeing what the hell happened over there.
5 So, helicopters come fluttering in there right at first light and they go out to look and
6 what they find out there is a bunch of dead oxen that had stumbled into Haig's lines. He
7 thought he'd been attacked by a major force. Probably what it was, if my story is
8 accurate and this is the word that flowed around afterward. I didn't go on the ground and
9 see the oxen, but this was probably a Vietcong supply train pulling carts with oxen and
10 they stumbled into the lines. But Haig thought it sounded like he had a big victory.
11 Therefore, there were some people who I suppose were jealous. There were some people
12 around who didn't like his personality or something. Therefore the people who felt that
13 way got a big chuckle because they thought he'd overstated the case. You know that's
14 one of those things that happened in a wartime situation that you can look back and just
15 kind of smile about. I'm not saying he wasn't a good soldier. I think he probably was a
16 very good soldier. Anyway.

17 SM: That's an interesting story. Did that happen at all in the areas where you
18 worked? For instance, maybe you were in a base camp where animals would happen to
19 stumble into a minefield or into maybe trip a flare or trip a mine off or something like
20 that?

21 LB: Yeah, those things happened, but not real frequently. I think, you know to
22 be honest with you, when we were out in the boondocks there we would probably, even
23 though you try to be stealthy and so we would make enough noise and so on that animals
24 and stuff were taking off. One thing I did was I kept my eyes open for were snakes. You
25 know poisonous snakes were plentiful there. When we'd go in the jungle, particularly it
26 seems like we'd go into areas of rubber, underneath the trees there we'd kill cobras. I'm
27 not talking about King cobras, but I'm talking about cobras five, six feet long. Of course,
28 very deadly. Not bunches of them. But I remember one day we were in an area of rubber
29 trees and there were two cobras killed. So, you kind of always had your eyes open for
30 that kind of thing. When we were back in Phuoc Vinh which was our base, we lived in
31 tents. The tents had wood floors, they built them off the ground. In anyplace there are

1 human beings in an open area like that living, you're going to have rats. The rats usually
2 night runs between the tent liner and the tent. They just run a long [mocks rats running].
3 You just got to where you didn't think anything about it. It was just part of the deal. But
4 usually where there's rats there's going to be some snakes too. I don't know. I don't
5 know what was living underneath the tent, but I do know one day that we were back in
6 camp and one of my friends Larry Walton, who was a battalion staff officer, I forgot
7 exactly what capacity. He was over in battalion headquarters, which is an old French
8 villa across the road from those tents. He walked back in the afternoon over to those
9 tents to get something out of his bunk or something he needed, I don't know. He stepped
10 out on the steps at the back of that tent because back behind here we had washstands
11 where we shaved in the dark in the morning. Then back further were latrines or artillery
12 tubes punched in the ground with screens over them called piss tubes that you could
13 urinate into. He went back out there to take a leak and when he came back from that
14 experience his eyes were as big as saucers. He came walking in and he said, "Captain
15 Burke," he said, "I, I ..." I said, "What's that matter with you?" He said, "I just stepped
16 off the back off the back of that step down there of the tent heading out for those piss
17 tubes and he said I looked down and there was a cobra there." He said, "My God, he
18 reared up and that old hood came out." He said, "Like to scared me to death." I said,
19 "What did you do?" He said, "Well, I just backed up a step into the tent. Because he was
20 still far enough away he didn't strike me." He said, "I went in and got an entrenching
21 tool." You know an entrenching tool is a shovel about three feet long when it's unfolded.
22 He came back out and he was crawling off over there toward those washstands. I said,
23 "Well, did you get him?" He said, "Well, I took a couple of swipes at him." I said my,
24 "God you mean he was crawling off toward the wash stands where we shave in the
25 morning, you didn't get him?" He said, "My God, Burke, do you want to kill a cobra
26 with an entrenching tool"? I said, "Well, I guess not." So, you have experiences like that
27 from time to time. I don't think that's particularly profound war experience.

28 SM: But, yeah. It's just as lethal. You get bit...

29 LB: And yet surprisingly enough I had one of my soldiers get bitten by a snake,
30 but it must not have been poisonous snake because it would have scared the hell out of

1 me. I didn't know anybody in our battalion who got bitten by any poisonous snakes.
2 Although there were sure enough of them over there.

3 SM: Now, did you guys have like internal, within your unit I would imagine the
4 medics had snakebite kits. Did they carry anti-venom too?

5 LB: You know as we sit here and talk about this, that's probably something that
6 you would probably say Oh, boy you better be ready for that. And yet, we were so
7 focused on combat casualties that something like that I didn't even think about, to be
8 totally honest now. The medics may have had. I'm sure the battalion surgeon had it and
9 so forth. They had stuff like that, but that wasn't something that we talked about or asked
10 about. Because that was so far down the line of things you worried about that wasn't
11 something that you concerned yourself with. But there were plenty of poisonous snakes
12 around.

13 SM: How about cats? You guys run into any kind of tigers or anything?

14 LB: Never. No elephants, tigers or anything like that. I never saw any of that
15 stuff. I was tromping through this wild and wooly stuff plenty of times. I mean they
16 could have been out there, but I didn't see them. A lot of times at night, in night
17 defensive position, you hear noises out there. You didn't know if it was VC or something
18 else. A lot of times there's be something wandering around out there. You think that's a
19 pretty good-sized animal but you didn't know what it was.

20 SM: How about rock apes?

21 LB: No. Didn't have experience with anything like that. As a matter of fact, I
22 don't remember even any monkeys or anything like that from where I was. It may have
23 been that they were there. There were a lot of times when you're so focused on what
24 you're doing that there are things that you become oblivious to. Going like on Operation
25 Attleboro going through war zone C. I don't think any monkeys appeared. I might not
26 have noticed them because that wasn't the focus of what you were doing. But I don't
27 remember those things.

28 SM: Which operation did you plan for your battalion again?

29 LB: Operation Cedar Falls.

30 SM: That was Cedar Falls, Ok.

31 LB: You're familiar with that one?

1 SM: Yes, sir I am.

2 LB: A big, big operation in First Division. Also the 25th and 11th ACR I was in
3 there. Tried to flatten out the Iron Triangle, you know wipe it out as a base for the VC.
4 We discovered a lot of rice and supplies. There was a significant “body count” of VC In
5 the operation. But, it wasn’t a knock down drag out, blow out, confrontation like a lot of
6 people anticipated.

7 SM: About how many VC casualties were there do you know?

8 LB: You know, I don’t remember. I’ve got that in one of my books around here
9 some place.

10 SM: I didn’t know if you knew just for your unit? What you battalion’s kill was?

11 LB: I really don’t know. Actually, what we were doing we were in blocking
12 positions along the northern edge. We patrolled into the jungle some and there were
13 some contacts. But we never did get attacked. So, we were just blocking that. They
14 never did come our way. So, there wasn’t any major knock down, drag outs. It was
15 mostly a continuation of the same old stuff. You’d send a patrol out there, you’d get a
16 sniper, or a firefight or a meeting engagement. You know you get some wounded, and
17 maybe you hit some of them and maybe they get some more [inflicted some casualties].
18 That same kind of frustrating stuff that was really the meat and potatoes of mostly what
19 Vietnam was about, at least in my experience.

20 SM: Do you know again approximately how many men in total were involved in
21 the overall operation?

22 LB: Operation Cedar Falls?

23 SM: Yes, sir.

24 LB: Well, the better part of two divisions. I think most of the people in First
25 Infantry Division were involved. Then there were elements of the 25th division involved.
26 The 11th armored cavalry regiment, which got involved also.

27 SM: That’s quite a sizeable operation.

28 LB: Oh, it was big. It was a hell of a big operation. It was one of the really,
29 really big operations of the war. It was January of 1967. Two entire divisions. First the
30 25th. 173rd airborne brigade was in that too. So, it was a big operation. I don’t remember

1 like I said, I don't remember what the body count was out there. It was significant, but it
2 wasn't maybe what we would have like d it to be.

3 SM: I'm curious. The incident you encountered with the sniper. The heavy
4 amount of artillery and the ordinance that was delivered to try to take out this guy several
5 times in a row and yet he persisted, he stayed there and he kept on firing.

6 LB: Right.

7 SM: What did you guys think or talk about? I mean it just seems so emblematic
8 of some of the other issues in the context of how we were trying to fight this war and how
9 the enemy was fighting this war and how the two didn't mesh.

10 LB: Ok, now I'll tell it this way. I thought Colonel Prillaman, our first battalion
11 commander was just a tremendous leader. I thought a lot of him. Colonel Huff was a
12 guy I told you about last time who got relieved. Colonel Huff was a good man. He just
13 got excited and was inexperienced and made some mistakes and was paid big time. I
14 don't suppose he's ever been able to recover mentally from that disgrace. Even though it
15 happened to other people in First Infantry Division. Even at that I thought Colonel Huff,
16 even though he wasn't the commander Commander Prillaman was, well he didn't have
17 the experience that Prillaman did. He was a good man. The next guy we had William
18 Simpson, as a commander he was book bound and ultra cautious. Not an inspiring leader
19 at all. I mean I don't want to knock people in this, because that's not the point. But you
20 know some of the commanders are better than others. He was not as good as the other
21 guys. One of his methods of operation was he wanted all the helicopter resources. God,
22 when he went to the field he tied up helicopter resources from the division. The division
23 commander finally got disgusted with him on it because he was using too much. He
24 wanted all the firepower. My impression was, this is ridiculous. To waste 155 mm
25 artillery rounds out there thumping around when we don't even know where the sniper
26 was. We'd have a general idea where he is. Even brought in airstrikes. I haven't got any
27 idea how many hundreds of thousands of dollars we spent just because some guy was a
28 sniper out there in a spider hole some place. I think what we should have done was to
29 send a patrol out there and lay out there and get a better idea of his location. Maybe
30 knock him off by having a helicopter come in when they're out there in the vicinity and
31 then they got a better fix on him. Simpson told me I want you to get air strikes and all

1 that stuff in there. So, we waste all this ordinance. I know that the American Army and
2 the American military forces used firepower prodigiously in Vietnam to save lives. I
3 don't have any qualms with that. In this particular incident I think it was a terrible waste.
4 I think it was not necessarily because of policy I just think it was that particular
5 commander and I didn't particularly agree with it. But I wasn't in a position to argue. I
6 was an S-3 and that's what he said, so that's what I did.

7 SM: Yes, sir. Were there any other major operations you participated in after
8 Cedar Falls? In the planning stages or anything like that?

9 LB: There were numerous smaller operations that we were involved in. When I
10 was the S-3 I planned an operation that was just outside of Phuoc Vinh there. To kind of
11 help the Colonel his feet on the ground after he took over and called it Operation
12 Oskaloosa because that happened to be the hometown of my wife in Kansas. And
13 various other operations. I guess I didn't tell you about this one. When we were at Quan
14 Loi, which is up north, that rubber plantation not too far from the Fishhook, close to An
15 Loc. An ARVN cavalry troop was stationed at An Loc. The guy who was their advisor
16 was a captain I'd gotten to know. So, he and I got together and planned a joint operation
17 for my company with his armored personnel carriers. What we did was we took my
18 group of long range reconnaissance patrol guys up a jungle road between An Loc to Loc
19 Ninh up to a bridge where there was a little ARVN outpost and dropped them off there.
20 And had them patrol back through the jungle west of highway 13. Can't remember what
21 highway it is, but anyway doesn't make any difference, Thunder Road we called it. Then
22 we went back and set up a night defensive position out there, north of An Loc. H and I
23 fired four-duce mortars out of there with this ARVN cavalry troop. Well, that was in my
24 young, naive and stupid stage. I'm surprised that Summers, the S-3 at the time, I 'm
25 surprised he let us go on that. Because that road up to that bridge north of An Loc was
26 jungle, they didn't have it cleared back on either side of the jungle very good. Growth
27 came right down to the asphalt. I'm surprised the ARVN wanted to go on that. We
28 loaded our troops up on their personnel carriers and headed up that road. We got up to
29 the bridge without any incident but I remember going along there, I thought my God,
30 we're just sitting ducks here. We got to that bridge where this ARVN outpost was and I
31 thought those guys must have a deal with the VC because they couldn't possibly survive

1 out there if the VC really wanted to knock that post off. Then we turned around and
2 came back. We didn't have any contact. So many of the operations you have in Vietnam
3 are operations where you don't have any contact. Yet, it's one of those deals where you
4 look back and you think, sort of like that one over by Dau Tieng I was telling you about
5 that I was thinking about going on. Simpson said no, I don't think you better go that far
6 out. He was right in that particular incident because we were going into a real bad area
7 down there and didn't know it. But anyway you just think about not only what happened,
8 you think of what might have or what could have happened. Had there been a force there
9 waiting for us, they could have blown us out of the water in nothing flat. The jungle just
10 came right down to the edge of the road. You couldn't penetrate into it at all. They'd sit
11 up there with RPGs and stuff like that. Well, they could have blasted us from here to
12 Mars. Would have been a really foolish operation or been some people who paid the
13 price for that including myself and troops with their lives. But as it turned out it was one
14 of those things where nothing happened. Afterward, the LRRPs patrolled down to us and
15 they found some signs of enemy trails and activity out there, but nothing really
16 significant. So, once again it's one of those deals where you go out there, you spend a lot
17 of time in operations in a potentially dangerous situation. But as it works out, it was kind
18 of a dry hole. But there were a lot of operations like that. You go for a couple weeks and
19 nothing happens. Then pretty soon you start to get a little lax and that's when all hell
20 breaks loose. Therefore, you've got to force your troops to really be on their toes at all
21 times.

22 SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on June 21st.

23 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Larry Burke on the
24 27th of June 2001 at approximately 2:15. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Burke is in
25 Dodge City, Kansas. Sir, why don't we go ahead and conclude with our discussion of
26 your in country experiences in Vietnam? If you would is there anything else that you
27 wanted to discuss about serving in country in Vietnam?

28 LB: I'm sure that you know when we conclude this, being that it's been stretched
29 out over a period of time, I can't remember everything that we've talked about. There are
30 probably things that come to mind. But I think I probably have covered the main things
31 that stand out in my mind about the experience. As far, as in country types of things. I

1 would like to say that when I was there in 1966 and 1967, that I felt like the people who
2 served in Vietnam during that period of time, particularly the ones that I knew in the 1st
3 Infantry Division were some of the finest people that I knew, that I had ever run across or
4 been associated with. They were outstanding people. Not just saying good soldiers, I'm
5 talking about good people. I'd also like to say, and this is God's truth, that in my service
6 there, I never saw anything approaching an atrocity. The closest thing I ever saw that
7 was maybe a little calloused was when men of another company in our battalion killed a
8 Vietcong and some of those guys carried a stencil with a bat insignia, I think I told about
9 that since our battalion radio call sign was Dracula we painted the bat signal on the side
10 of our helmet and all that stuff. Some of those guys carried spray cans of paint and
11 stencils around. They'd stencil trees and stuff out in the jungle. Sort of like "Killroy was
12 here," that type of thing. They stenciled this bat insignia on the chest of this dead VC.
13 That's the closest I ever came to anything, I know it wasn't an atrocity, but it was maybe
14 a little disrespectful. I never saw anything, but I thought we used the utmost care in
15 everything we did to prevent the loss of innocent lives. If we were doing a search and
16 seal on a village we didn't prep the area around it with artillery fire. We swooped in
17 there. I thought we did as much as could be done to fight that war in a compassionate
18 way. Now, troops can be crude and they can be parochial and they cannot understand
19 foreign cultures and they can be you know sometimes obnoxious or bullying. But I think
20 basically the people I saw were respectful of the Vietnamese and so forth. I never saw
21 anything abnormally cruel. I'll tell you this much too. I may have been a little naive
22 about this. Probably was. I know there were some people who abused alcohol from time
23 to time in my company and in our battalion, but I never saw any indication of drug use at
24 all. Of course, I realize that happened later, but in '66 and '67 I didn't see it or it was
25 never a problem.

26 SM: How did you feel when you left the country? Did you feel like the United
27 States was well on its way to victory?

28 LB: I had no question about the fact that when I went to Vietnam and when I
29 came home I had no question about the fact that we were winning. I absolutely had no
30 question about that. I thought it was just a matter of time. We were making great
31 progress. We made progress in the time I was there. We'd get intelligence reports of

1 these VC local force guerrilla groups that were coming in. The Chieu Hoi Program, the
2 Hoi Chanhs were coming in increasing numbers. There was even a rumor that went
3 around, and it was a hush, hush super secret deal. The Phu Lou Battalion, which was the
4 main force Vietcong unit that operated in our area, a ghost-like outfit, a hell of a unit
5 phantom-like, never could pin them down, never knew exactly where they were. There
6 was even an operation where supposedly they were getting ready to defect. Nothing ever
7 came of that that I knew of. Supposedly their whole dad gum outfit was going to defect.
8 I don't know how much truth there was in that. That didn't come from the troops in line.
9 That was up at a higher headquarters. I was division liaison officer. It was little stuff
10 floating around there. There may have been something to it. But anyway I don't think
11 there was any question to the fact that we were winning the war then. Unfortunately the
12 tragedy was that in our strategy of attrition we let them have those sanctuaries to operate
13 out of. The Ho Chi Minh Trail and all that kind of stuff. I know we bombed the hell out
14 of North Vietnam, but it wasn't the effective targets that could have won it. I still feel
15 like we could have won the war. I didn't have any question about the fact that we were
16 winning when I came home.

17 SM: If you would why don't you go ahead and describe your trip back to the
18 United States?

19 LB: I'm like every other soldier that left Vietnam. I wanted to get the hell out of
20 there. I wanted to get back home to my wife and family as soon as I could. My second
21 part of my tour there was as division liaison officer. So, the first six months I was out in
22 the boondocks in a line battalion. The second six months essentially I was in higher
23 headquarters. So, I wasn't tromping through the jungle and my life was not endangered I
24 guess I could say like it was the first six months except for the fact that I did so much
25 flying. And you could hear them shooting at you from time to time. I think I mentioned
26 that before. But, I'm not a psychologist but I have a feeling that the Army needs to study
27 the psychology of combat and the decompression from combat. I feel like even in my
28 case and certainly in the case of the 19, 20, 21 year old kids coming out of the jungle,
29 getting on a helicopter and flying down to Bien Hoa and two days later getting on a Pan-
30 American 707 and flying back to the United States, I don't know, I don't think there's
31 enough decompression time. The transition is too abrupt psychologically for you. I think

1 that troops in World War II and so forth that had to return home on troops on troop ships
2 and maybe it took them three or four weeks and they were on those ships with guys that
3 they'd had shared experiences with. They kind of decompressed. They kind of got some
4 of those things out of their system. Here you are in Vietnam, you're out in the jungle and
5 two days later, or three maybe you're on a freedom bird heading back home. The flight
6 takes you however long it was. I can't even remember, 12-15 hours. But that's not
7 enough time. Then bang you're there. It's a whole new world and there's nobody. You
8 have people who are sympathizing with you and people who love you and so forth, but
9 there's nobody there who really has a grip on what your experience has been like. You
10 need somebody to share the experience with. I personally think from a psychological
11 standpoint, and I'm not a psychologist, that the transition is too abrupt. I think that there
12 should be more of a transition time for us troops coming out of the field like that and
13 going back home. You know you ask them. You want to spend a week or two weeks or
14 something kind of going through a decompression period? Of course they're not going to
15 want to do it. But I'm not so sure that what they wouldn't be better off in the long run to
16 do something like that. That's just an opinion. Now, as far as myself, I remember
17 getting off the airplane. I flew into Denver wearing my khakis. I got off the airplane, my
18 folks, parents were there. My wife and baby daughter were there. I can remember
19 walking down that kind of a walkway there. It's really like I paused and said to myself in
20 my mind, mentally, I said, "Burke, how are you doing?" And I hadn't been wounded and
21 physically I was fine. I said, looked at myself mentally and I said, "I'm the same guy I
22 haven't changed a bit." But as the years go by, you know you realize that when you've
23 had an experience like that, it does leave it's mark. And those times when you have to
24 suppress that stuff because you've got to do your job and so forth. Sometimes that creeps
25 back up on you. There were a couple of incidents in our interview when I got emotional.
26 I kind of embarrassed myself. I find myself, the older I get, I have the tendency to fog
27 up. So, those kind of experiences and I'm not claiming my experiences were particularly
28 gruesome I saw some casualties and dead in firefights and all this stuff. I was never in a
29 desperate situation where I really thought I was going to die. Although there were
30 situations that I knew the possibility certainly exists here. So, my experience wasn't as
31 bad as a lot of people's experience. Those things leave a mark on a person. I suppose it

1 depends on who you are and what your personality is and so forth as to the degree. I'm
2 not saying that I'm running out there to claim posttraumatic stress disorder or anything
3 like that. But I don't think anybody that goes through the combat situation and is in
4 combat for any prolonged period of time is ever quite the same. Although he may think
5 he is, he's never quite the same person after that. It's a life changing kind of thing. Not
6 all for the bad necessarily but there's a little trauma involved there. As I think back on it,
7 and I never thought this before. The day of October the 2nd 1966 experience I told you
8 about where we had those guys wounded. A week after that I was pretty much past it and
9 I didn't think much about it. You know you worry about the guys who got wounded and
10 how they're doing and so forth, but as far as it's effect on you, that's your job and you
11 didn't think about it. Now, as I look back on it, I think probably that was one of the
12 traumatic days of my life. It's a life changing experience. So, I don't know what else to
13 say about it except that it's an experience that I'm proud of. I'm glad that I had. Not
14 necessarily an experience I'd like to duplicate but there were certainly a lot of positives to
15 it too.

16 SM: Now, was there any way at first when you returned to the United States and
17 went on with your military career, how did you integrate your Vietnam experience into
18 that aspect of your life, or were you able to? Lessons things like that?

19 LB: When I got back from Vietnam you know I was a combat Veteran. I was
20 wearing the Combat Infantry Badge a Bronze Star with "V", and an Army
21 Commendation Medal with "V", six Air Medals, all that kind of stuff. I mean I was
22 proud of all that stuff. You walk through an airport with your ribbons and your glider
23 patch on your hat and your boots and your ranger tab laced up. Girls looking at you out
24 of the corner of their eye. I mean that was pretty neat stuff. You sort of thought of
25 yourself as a hero. Here's a point, I make this point to my classes. Once again, this is
26 just my point of view, but I guess that's what you're looking for here. I think in my
27 current situation here, not current situation, but my feelings. After the war was over I
28 really didn't have any ill will toward the Vietnamese or the South Vietnamese or the
29 Vietcong or even the North Vietnamese particularly. Yet, they were the enemy and they
30 were to be respected. They could be brutal and vicious and I saw some indication of that.
31 But I didn't have any deep hatred. But actually the strongest animosity that I had was

1 toward the anti-war element at home. Some of the lies and stuff that were told by that
2 crew during the war. I have a bitterness there that's pretty deep. It really is. It really
3 does run deep. And I've thought about this a lot. I think one of the biggest negative
4 things that the anti-war movement and those Jane Fonda's and those types did was that-
5 you know and you might think about this, this might be a semi-original thought- when a
6 soldier goes off to fight a war, he has to think of himself as doing something that's really
7 worthwhile. That is he has to believe that he is embarked on something that's heroic.
8 And I think he has to see himself in his heart of hearts as kind of a hero because he's
9 making a hell of a sacrifice. He's putting his life on the line. I think one of the greatest
10 disservices to individuals that's ever been done, was done by the anti-war movement
11 because that movement ultimately, eventually deprived the individual soldier of his
12 heroic image. When the war began to be protested that much and gradually the soldiers
13 who would want to and have the guts and the courage and at least went reluctantly and
14 did their "duty". And the other guys, they eventually sort of became the bad guys. [It's
15 interesting that the soldiers who went to Vietnam, who had the courage to go, who did
16 their duty, even if they didn't really understand it all- it's interesting that the anti-war
17 protestors who didn't go, who didn't have the guts to go, gradually turned themselves
18 somehow into the good guys and the soldiers who went over there and risked their lives
19 became the bad guys]. It's just mind boggling to me. They sort of became bad guys.
20 The guys who weren't willing to do their part sort of turned and twisted that, twisted that
21 so they were made out to be the moral guys. The good guys. I think in that process by
22 1969, 1970, '71 they had destroyed the soldier's heroic image of himself. They made
23 him doubt himself and what he was doing there and the cause. I'm telling you, boy,
24 when that happens who wants to be killed in a cause that isn't heroic? See what I'm
25 saying? Is that making sense to you?

26 SM: Yes, sir. Absolutely.

27 LB: When they deprive a soldier of his heroic image I think it takes away the
28 basic element of what makes a soldier. I have a fraternity brother and college roommate
29 for a semester at Kansas University who was an Air Force pilot, who was a good friend
30 of mine. He and I pulled; you probably wouldn't understand this unless you had a similar
31 experience, but the Greek Week chariot, Greek Week Chariot race along Jayhawk

1 Boulevard around the Chi O fountain and back. It was a big time, you had to pull it a
2 quarter of a mile. He and I ran for our fraternity in the chariot race. He was an Air Force
3 pilot who was shot down in Vietnam in 1967. He was a POW for six years, for six years.
4 He's a great guy. You know when I think of the sacrifice that somebody like him made,
5 what it cost him. It caused us to drift apart, we didn't know each other for six years. You
6 know I think about that kind of sacrifice, and then you've got this anti-war element. I
7 don't know. I don't know how exactly how I got off on a tangent or where I was going
8 with that thought to begin with. But I've got tremendous respect for people like him. For
9 people that did what he did. Now, I want to address this because I'd be less than honest
10 of I didn't. I suppose that every war veteran that ever live, I don't care what he's done,
11 probably comes home and there's somewhere in his experience there's a sense of guilt
12 about something. I tell you that's psychologically that's a tough deal. Because I don't
13 care who you are, when bullets are flying there's probably things as you look back like
14 maybe I could have done more. Maybe if I had done this. Maybe if I had done that. I
15 think that in my performance when I was a company commander and I was with a
16 battalion and so forth. I can honestly say to myself I think I performed well. I think I
17 stepped up to the plate. I think I did my job in times of crisis. I'm not claiming to be a
18 hero, but I think people who just do their jobs and do it as well as they can, with as much
19 courage as they can muster to step up to the plate are sort of heroes. I told you about
20 earlier when I had these orders to go to USARV G-2. The battalion commander, the guy
21 who I had reservations about from the standpoint of whether I thought he was competent
22 and so forth and the battalion S-3 who I thought was just a tremendous guy, Bill Mullin.
23 They didn't want me to go. But my wife wanted me to go, because she saw I was going
24 into a place less risky. So, I said if the orders come down I'd take the job. I didn't go out
25 and beat the drum for this job. But if these orders come down I'm going to take this
26 position. It'll be good. Wouldn't necessarily be a bad career move. Plus the fact I'm
27 going to do this. Well, it turns out I stayed with the division, but I went to the division
28 headquarters in the division liaison officer position. You know, I'd be less than honest
29 with you if I didn't tell you that every once in a while I have twinges of guilt about that.
30 Maybe I should have stayed with the battalion. I had some friends there and so forth. I
31 hope they don't feel like I let them down because the orders came down, but still you

1 know. I don't suppose anybody who's served in a combat situation like that ever leaves,
2 no matter how heroic his service had been without feeling a little guilty. My service
3 wasn't big time heroic, I'm just saying there may be little bits of guilt left of things like
4 that or other situations where may be I could have done this or that differently. Do you
5 understand where I'm coming from?

6 SM: Yes, sir.

7 LB: Do you have other people that you have interviewed bring this up?

8 SM: The issue of guilt?

9 LB: Yeah.

10 SM: Oh, absolutely.

11 LB: Well, I didn't know but anyway I think and sometimes I look back well, I
12 kind of wish I hadn't left the battalion and maybe that those guys felt like I was leaving
13 them. Anyway.

14 SM: As the war continued continued after you got back to the United States and
15 you continued with your military career, what did you think about some of the water shed
16 events, Tet '68? Johnson's decisions not to run for re-election, Nixon's secret plan,
17 Vietnamization, so-on?

18 LB: Well, you know when I got back from Vietnam I was training basic trainees
19 at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. They decided to put a lot of emphasis on basic training so
20 whereas a battalion might have had a first or second lieutenant be the company
21 commander. Now, they wanted combat veteran's who really could put a lot of emphasis
22 on that. So, I went to Ft. Knox and was in a basic training battalion, which actually was
23 one of the best jobs I've ever had. Some people don't like that kind of stuff. Worked
24 with some great people, very rewarding kind of a deal. But you could see the support for
25 the war starting to slip. You could get trainees who would do anything to get out of
26 going. They'd come up with the damndest stories like, "I've got a bad back". You know
27 all this kind of stuff to keep from going. I was down there, you know, when Bobby
28 Kennedy was assassinated, Martin Luther King's assassination, my God it was like the
29 country was falling apart. That would have been after the Tet Offensive. I still supported
30 the war and I still thought that we had a good chance of winning it. But I could see the
31 turmoil; the controversy and I continued to be a supporter of what we were doing for a

1 long time. I mean, I still believe it was a noble cause, a noble effort. Even though it was
2 flawed. But I guess I can cut through all this by saying that I was out of the Army by
3 1975. I remember seeing the deal with Norman Schwarzkopf, the Persian Gulf War
4 Commander. He had been through two tours in Vietnam. Somebody asked him how'd
5 he felt when he saw the North Vietnamese tanks hammering down the gates of the
6 Presidential Palace in South Vietnam and I remember he said something about I went out
7 and bought a fifth of whiskey, bourbon and sat down and got drunker than a skunk and
8 cried like a baby. I don't know if you ever saw that interview. But I can remember
9 sitting at my kitchen table at home in 1975 and watching this on TV. I felt tears running
10 down my face. It just seemed like, every little deal in the editorial in the newspaper and I
11 just felt it was such a waste of courage and lives and money. And I was bitter about it.
12 Still am bitter. But I guess I can't be too bitter because if I felt that strongly about it I
13 guess I should have stayed in the Army and gone back over there again. Anyway, that
14 was my feeling about it. I don't know if I've answered your question.

15 SM: Oh, yes sir. Yes, sir. In what ways has your Vietnam War experience
16 affected your life since you were in the military? Since leaving?

17 LB: I'm from a Western Kansas town. We're Western Kansas folks. They're the
18 kind of people who always treated Veteran's with a great deal of respect. I've never had
19 anybody treat me disrespectfully in my military service. I've never had anybody spit at
20 me. You know when I hear about that stuff about guys getting spit at I don't understand
21 that. Because if somebody spit at me I would have just knocked the living shit out of
22 them. Excuse my French, but I don't know. Maybe there's situations where you might
23 be intimidated. I can't imagine what it'd be. No one has ever treated me like that. I've
24 always been treated with respect. People know I'm a Vietnam Veteran. I don't hide the
25 fact that I am. And being a teacher and teaching the course, I'm asked to give speeches
26 in various places and I talk to the high school. So, it's well known that I'm a Vietnam
27 Veteran. I went down to Coldwater, Kansas for Memorial Day to address a crowd of 500
28 people in this little town in Comanche County. A guy from down there had made a lot of
29 money came back to this little town in Kansas, retired had spent 90,000 part of his own
30 money to construct some black marble monument in a park right in the middle of the
31 town of Coldwater. They had the name of every Veteran in Comanche County from

1 World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War engraved in
2 stone. Cost him 90,0000 bucks and I gave the address for it. I had people coming up to
3 me afterward shaking my hand, hugging me and not because I was doing a lot of
4 bragging myself that wasn't it. They just knew my experience and I relayed it and some
5 of these things. I had lauded people's courage and dedication and so forth. It was one of
6 the really great days in my life. It was just this last Memorial Day. I will never forget
7 that day. They sent me a videotape of it. They had a color guard from McConnell Air
8 Force Base down there. It was a first class thing. When you get that kind of response,
9 you know, you may say "that was a tough experience and the results weren't always
10 good". It's affected me in various ways. But it was basically good. [I'm glad I served in
11 Vietnam. I'm glad I did my part].

12 SM: What do you think we should take away from that experience collectively as
13 a nation? What are the lessons that we still need to learn from Vietnam?

14 LB: Well, obviously you have to be careful about committing yourself to war.
15 Particularly when things are so confusing. Vietnam, I think the policy containment
16 prevailed. I think there was a definite Communist threat to the world. I don't think it
17 was over blown. Vietnam was a tough place to make a stand there because of the
18 geography and the terrain and open borders and all those kinds of things. I think we just
19 sort of ambled into that thing without maybe really understanding all the pitfalls and
20 obviously we wouldn't have gone into it if we had understood those. But I think, you
21 know, before you commit troops to war you've must have a cause that's pretty well
22 defined and you know what it's all about. That's easy to say but more difficult to carry
23 out. I don't know Steve; you know everybody wants to pull lessons from Vietnam. I
24 suppose you know one of the lessons that a lot of high ranking American military
25 commanders including Fred Weyand drew from Vietnam was don't commit the Army
26 unless the nation is behind the war. You know the Army is an extension of the nation.
27 Without the support of the nation, the Army isn't going to be able to carry out it's duty
28 and do it's job. I think there's something to that. You know at the beginning of some
29 types of interventions and stuff like that sometimes you don't know those things so, it's a
30 difficult thing to draw concrete lessons from them. But I think we just have to be careful.
31 I don't think the government did a very good job of explaining what the hell we were

1 doing in Vietnam. Nor do I think the Army did a very good job of that although they
2 tried. Because it was such a confusing kind of war. When they commit our troops in a
3 situation like that we have to be cautious that, you know, in the long run this is something
4 we can win. I know you never know for sure if you're going to win a war when you start.
5 I'm sure we all thought well, this isn't going to take much time to get this over with. But,
6 I don't know what else to tell you about it.

7 SM: Well, is there anything else you would like to discuss today?

8 LB: Oh, I really don't know that I can put a finger on anything else. I've enjoyed
9 these interviews. I hope they will be helpful to somebody somewhere down the road who
10 wants to review this and hear one guy's experience and one guy's point of view. Because
11 I have studied the war and taught it and experienced it and thought about it and read
12 about it and so hopefully my viewpoints will have some validity- I don't want to sound
13 like somebody who's rambled on about something that his experience led him to believe
14 it was right, when in reality it was not. I think my points are fairly in balance. I try to
15 keep it in balance. Hopefully, there's something there that I can contribute to this whole
16 process and the understanding of the war by somebody in review. I don't know what do
17 you guys do? You make written transcript of these and you keep the tapes for people to
18 listen to?

19 SM: Right, both. We'll type up a transcript and we'll make the audio recordings
20 available as well.

21 LB: I think it's a great project.

22 SM: Thank you. One last question did pop into my mind. Do you think there
23 was anyway we could have won that war?

24 LB: Well, Harry Summers as you know he was my battalion S-3, he wrote that
25 book on the strategy of Vietnam War in context. And there have been some other people.
26 I think early on in the war had McNamara, and Johnson allowed the military to really cut
27 loose it would have been the more human thing to do, to fight a war. Way to fight a war
28 and get it over with, you hit them with everything but the kitchen sink right off the bat.
29 Now, I'm not talking about atomic weapons but get this thing over with. I think if we'd
30 have unleashed a full range of our airpower early in the war and had we been able. I tell
31 you what, with our technology and so forth if early in the war where we'd have sent

1 enough troops there to in effect cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and not have allowed
2 sanctuaries to exist, yeah I think we could have won. I don't think there's any doubt, but
3 that was too late to do that in 1970. Because the support had gone. I think there are
4 strategies that could have won the war. That's my opinion.

5 SM: Ok. Well, let me go ahead and put an official end onto the interview.

6 Thank you sir. This will end the interview with Mr. Larry Burke.